



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Resource Stewardship

Ministry of Transportation and Economic Corridors
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, March 19, 2024
10 a.m.

Transcript No. 31-1-6

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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)
Dyck, Nolan B., Grande Prairie (UC)
Eggen, David, Edmonton-North West (NDP)
Hunter, Grant R., Taber-Warner (UC)
McDougall, Myles, Calgary-Fish Creek (UC)
Sinclair, Scott, Lesser Slave Lake (UC)
Sweet, Heather, Edmonton-Manning (NDP)

Also in Attendance

Boparai, Parmeet Singh, Calgary-Falconridge (NDP)
Dach, Lorne, Edmonton-McClung (NDP)
Ellingson, Court, Calgary-Foothills (NDP)
Johnson, Jennifer, Lacombe-Ponoka (Ind)

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Tracey Sales	Communications Consultant
Janet Schweigel	Director of Parliamentary Programs
Amanda LeBlanc	Deputy Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

Participant

Ministry of Transportation and Economic Corridors
Devin Dreesen, Minister

10 a.m.

Tuesday, March 19, 2024

[Mr. Rowsell in the chair]

**Ministry of Transportation and Economic Corridors
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 Transportation and Economic Corridors for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025.

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

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

Mr. Dyck: Nolan Dyck for the incredible riding of Grande Prairie.

Mr. Hunter: Grant Hunter, Taber-Warner.

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

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

Mr. Dreeshen: Minister Devin Dreeshen from Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

The Chair: Want to introduce your . . .

Mr. Dreeshen: Sure. We can do that right now: Bryce Stewart, my deputy minister, right beside me; Dale Fung, the ADM of financial services division; Tom Loo, on my far right, is the ADM of construction and maintenance division; and Ranjit Tharmalingam is the ADM of capital planning, grants and engineering service division. I have more senior officials behind me if that's okay, Chair: Paul Smith, the ADM for capital planning, grants and engineering services; Dave Peace, the ADM of strategic and integrated services division; and Lynn Varty, the ADM of traffic safety services division.

Mr. Dach: My name is Lorne Dach, MLA for Edmonton-McClung and critic for Transportation and Economic Corridors with the Official Opposition.

Mr. Ellingson: Court Ellingson, MLA for the incredibly diverse riding of Calgary-Foothills.

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

Member Boparai: Parmeet Singh Boparai, Calgary-Falconridge.

Mr. Huffman: Warren Huffman, committee clerk.

The Chair: We have nobody online, so we're good there. 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 transcript of the meeting can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Transportation and Economic Corridors shall be considered for two

hours. Standing order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in the legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(7) sets out 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 two hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Should members have questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please e-mail a message to the committee clerk about the process.

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

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

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 two-hour meeting clock will continue to run.

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

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

I would now invite the Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors to begin your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, thank you very much, Chair and members of this committee. I'm pleased to present Alberta Transportation and Economic Corridors' '24-25 estimates. Budget '24 is A Responsible Plan for a Growing Province, and it is a plan that maintains Alberta's competitive advantage so businesses and industry continue to thrive, innovate, and create jobs. At Transportation and Economic Corridors we play a key role in contributing to Alberta's economic, social, and environmental vitality by providing a safe and efficient transportation system.

I'm pleased to share some of the department's accomplishments, including the opening of the Calgary Ring Road to traffic this past December, several months ahead of schedule and on budget. Calgarians now have access to 101 kilometres of free-flow travel around the city, which means easier, faster commutes and improved travel for industries that rely on this road. The Edmonton ring road, the southwest expansion project, also opened to traffic in late '23, last year. The southwest Anthony Henday Drive was widened from four lanes to six lanes, which will safely accommodate up to 120,000 vehicles a day, helping to reduce congestion in this high-traffic area in the Edmonton region. These are just two examples of recent strategic investments we have completed to improve Alberta's economic corridors by providing vital links to markets in and out of the province.

Our department's three-year capital plan is \$8.1 billion. Of this, \$1.9 billion over three years is for capital investments for the planning, design, and construction of major provincial highways and bridge projects. Approximately 75 per cent of this investment is for existing or planned economic corridors. Most highway

improvements were identified by industry partners to improve the movement of goods and services. Major projects in the province include nearly \$97 million over three years to improve safety and reduce congestion on highway 881 between Lac La Biche and highway 63 just south of Fort McMurray. We are continuing to invest in enhancing our economic corridors across the province, including \$327 million over three years to complete projects such as the highway 3 twinning between Taber and Burdett, highway 11 twinning between Sylvan Lake and Rocky Mountain House, and highway 40 twinning south of Grande Prairie.

We've also allocated \$151 million over three years for 56 engineering projects. Now, completing these engineering projects provides a well-defined scope of work and then construction bids to proceed in our capital plan. In Calgary we are investing in major improvements to Alberta's busiest road, the Deerfoot Trail. Budget '24 includes almost \$524 million in funding for the project over the next three years.

Our total capital investment also includes nearly \$312 million over three years for water management and flood mitigation, including the Springbank off-stream reservoir project, more commonly known as SR 1.

In addition to capital investments in new infrastructure, we are continuing our work to preserve and extend the life of provincial roads and bridges. We are dedicating \$30 million in additional funding over three years to support the replacement of aging bridges across the province. Replacing these bridges will improve travel for Albertans and industry, helping to support economic development and to create jobs. Budget '24 includes \$1.7 billion in capital maintenance and renewal, or CMR, funding over the next three years to rehabilitate key highways. This total includes \$308 million over three years of new funding. This funding supports our extensive network, which is over 64,000 lane kilometres of highway, and we also have about 5,000 bridges and bridge-size culverts in our provincial network.

For highway maintenance Budget '24 includes \$430 million this year. That is a \$28 million increase compared to last year, and it is the highest annual maintenance budget compared to the last five years. Now, approximately one-third of this budget is for winter maintenance activities, including snow and ice control on our highway network. Highway summer maintenance activities include ongoing structural and operational maintenance such as surface treatments and pothole repairs, right-of-way moving, vegetation control, and highway lighting.

In addition to maintaining and improving our highway network, our department's mandate includes supporting municipalities, including critical local infrastructure. The capital plan includes \$4.2 billion in capital grants to help municipalities build much-needed local roads, bridges, water, and transit infrastructure. This total includes \$212 million over three years in new funding.

We are increasing our funding commitment to the strategic transportation infrastructure program, also known as STIP. Budget '24 invests \$111 million in STIP over three years, including \$30 million of new funding. We know that funding through this program is critical to supporting municipalities, and STIP funding always allows smaller and rural municipalities to maintain and improve local roads, bridges, and other key infrastructure.

We are also continuing to provide grants to support municipal water supplies. Water is our most precious resource, and this funding helps ensure reliable access to clean drinking water and effective waste-water services to support Albertan industries and agriculture. Budget '24 includes a total of \$539 million over three years for grants to support water and waste-water infrastructure. This is a nearly \$124 million increase compared to last year. This water grant funding is provided to rural municipalities and is

delivered through three water programs administered by the department: the Alberta municipal water/waste-water program, water for life program, and the First Nations water tie-in program.

10:10

In other grant funding we are continuing to provide support for light rail transit projects in Edmonton and in Calgary. Our total provincial commitment is \$3 billion over multiple years, of which \$1.53 billion is for the Calgary green line LRT and \$1.47 billion is for the Edmonton LRT projects. Budget '24 also provides an extra \$43 million in new provincial funding for Calgary's blue line LRT project. Now, this funding will support the city of Calgary in extending the blue line to ultimately enable connection with the Calgary International Airport.

Our government also recognizes the important role that passenger rail can play in our rapidly growing province, including regional rail between Edmonton, Calgary, and the Rocky Mountains. Commuter rail linking the largest urban centres to their surrounding municipalities and airports is also a priority. Budget '24 also includes \$15 million over two years to support the development of a passenger rail master plan that will look forward decades and identify concrete actions that can be taken now and future actions to build the optimal passenger rail system for the province.

Now, our government is also providing \$237 million over three years to the city of Calgary for infrastructure to support the Calgary rivers district and events centre to help revitalize Calgary's downtown. And we are continuing to provide \$226 million in capital grant funding over three years to support four local infrastructure capital projects in the Edmonton region: the 50th Street grade separation over the CPKC tracks, the Yellowhead Trail improvements, the Terwilliger Drive expansion in the southern part of Edmonton, and the Ray Gibbon Drive project.

Now, together all of these investments in Budget '24 will allow us to maintain a safe and efficient transportation network to support our economy and our high quality of life. I know there'll be many questions from members on specific projects, and I'm happy to go through that. As Alberta Municipalities was here last week and RMA is here this week, we already have lots of communities from all across the province asking about priority projects for them. A really interesting part, that we'll go through with the estimates, is that even though certain years will have funding up and down, really that just goes to show how we pay for progress when it comes to construction projects. So if a project is ahead of schedule or behind schedule, the buckets of funding actually do fluctuate. That'll be a main thing that I'm sure we'll discuss here in the estimates.

I would like to just take this time to thank my team. Bryce has been a fantastic deputy; I dare to say my favourite deputy in transportation. I hope people don't google who the other one was. He's just been great and a solid team.

I just really appreciate your time, Chair and the committee members, and happy to take any questions.

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

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

Who will be speaking first? Member Dach, would you like to share time?

Mr. Dach: I'd like to go back and forth with the minister.

The Chair: You'd like to go back and forth.
Are you okay with that?

Mr. Dreeshen: Yeah.

The Chair: Okay.
Go ahead. You will have 50 minutes to talk.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Chair. Always through you, sir, I'm grateful for the minister's decision to have a conversation about Transportation and Economic Corridors and go back and forth, as we've done in the past in estimates, to shed some light on different elements of the '24-25 budget for TEC. I'll start off by once again also thanking the staff members for diligently working to prepare for this. It's a lot of work to get involved in and ready for today, and hopefully I take advantage of some of your homework and draw some more information out from the information you've prepared.

I'm just going to start off this morning, Minister, through the chair, asking a little bit about public-private partnerships. Now, many Albertans may be surprised to learn that unsuccessful proponents for P3 projects actually get paid by the province even though they weren't successful in winning the bid. For the Red Deer hospital, for example, unsuccessful proponents each get about a \$1.15 million honorarium. Can the minister tell Albertans how much was paid to unsuccessful proponents for all P3 projects under his ministry's purview, including the failed Deerfoot P3 project, the southwest Calgary Ring Road, and so on? It's a standard practice, I know, but it is something that many Albertans scratch their heads about and want to know how much money has been paid for these unsuccessful contractors.

Mr. Dreeshen: No; a great question on P3s. I'm happy to table this to the committee, just a nice map of the Calgary and Edmonton ring roads. I guess I'd characterize it in a different way than my critic. Actually, the successful projects that we've had in these: they were broken up, essentially, into eight different segments, the first two not having P3s on them. Obviously, when a P3 is done – and I think the last one, actually, was done on the ring road by someone I know that the member is very close to. Brian Mason, the NDP transportation minister at the time, actually signed off on the final P3 in Calgary. That was in the southwest in 2016. Obviously, our P3s and the debt servicing have been a success story dating all the way back to 2000, so there are 16 years of very successful P3s when it comes to transportation.

I can go on on the maintenance and the other contracts, but here's just a very simple example of how they've been such a success story. The P3s actually lock in an interest rate for 30 years that, obviously, yes, the province will pay into. But if anybody has had to redo their mortgages or any loans, obviously prime being at 7.2 per cent today and then whatever you have to go on top of that, it is quite a lot. These P3s ranged from a 3 to 5 and a half per cent interest rate and have been locked in for 30 years.

Mr. Dach: Minister, if I may, I don't really need a full education about P3s. I was asking specifically about one practice, paying honorariums to failed bids. That was specifically what I wanted to know about P3s. Like, how much was paid under your watch to failed bidders on P3 projects in your ministry in the last fiscal year?

Mr. Dreeshen: Overall, these P3s have been tremendous savings. Happy to go into the different ones, what we've actually saved on these projects, in great detail. I'd say the southeast Anthony Henday if you were talking about Edmonton: that had savings of \$4 million back in 2004.

Mr. Dach: I was just asking about how much was paid to failed bidders as an honorarium. That was the question. And if you don't have it at hand right now, that's fine. Simply pass it on in writing.

Mr. Dreeshen: I would just say, if I could, Chair, that these are overall projects, so there would be a payment, but then there are also the savings. If I could go through the projects in detail to show that it's not just one side of the ledger that P3s in their complexity have.

The actual, to answer your very specific question, is \$1.5 million for that project.

But on the northeast Stoney Trail there was a \$350 million saving. The northwest Anthony Henday: there was a \$200 million saving. These were all compared to a typical design/build. The southeast Stoney Trail: with the P3, there was over a billion-dollar saving back in 2010. The northeast Anthony Henday: there was a \$400 million saving. These are, you know, just tremendous examples, the six P3s that were used on the Edmonton and Calgary ring roads, of huge savings for taxpayers and the best amount of value for taxpayer dollars.

Mr. Dach: Thank you for that. I was looking more specifically about the honorariums that were paid to failed bidders. If you wouldn't mind, maybe pass that on in writing if you're not able to have that right now. I've got a tremendous number of questions, and we've got lots of information to shed light on, and we want to carry on. We have limited time.

Mr. Dreeshen: Mr. Chair, I did answer his question about the \$1.5 million.

Mr. Dach: That was for the one. All right. Thank you very much.

We'll move on. I want to talk, Mr. Chair, about the slow down, move over regulations that have come through the minister recently and been implemented. I know that Bill 5 had Slow Down and Move Over, requiring vehicles in all lanes to slow down and move over when an emergency vehicle or a maintenance vehicle was parked on the side of the road with lights flashing. Now, since the change, though, the minister arbitrarily decided that only the lane closest to the stopped vehicle, maintenance vehicle, or emergency vehicle would have to slow down and move over.

Since that change has taken place, contrary to Bill 5, which wanted all lanes to move over, three tow trucks have been struck in collisions, and two tow truck operators were seriously injured. The third received less serious injuries. But their association wants to know how this alteration to Bill 5 was justified. I'm asking the minister, through the chair: what reference and data caused the minister to ignore the unanimous vote of the Legislature in support of Bill 5 in 2023 and independently order that only vehicles travelling in the lane next to a shoulder-parked roadside maintenance or emergency vehicle had to slow down and move over? First of all, what information did you have? What did you rely upon in making that decision contrary to the unanimous vote of the House?

10:20

Mr. Dreeshen: Mr. Chair, in the estimates we actually have \$1.47 million that went into the extensive public education campaign for Slow Down and Move Over. If you saw the flashing lights, the move over campaign, that was this department highlighting the harmonized rules. That was something that we heard a lot about, whether it was maintenance workers, tow truck drivers, police, fire. Anybody that actually is a roadside worker and does their job on the side of the road wanted to know that there were harmonized rules, that if you're driving up on any flashing lights, you don't have

to try to differentiate in the middle of the night what type of vehicle that is. You would treat them all the same so that there wasn't any confusion.

That was a big part of that campaign, to make sure that everybody was aware that regardless of what type of roadside worker, they would be treated the same, which is a 60 kilometre speed limit if you have to drive beside that roadside worker or moving over to the adjacent lane to be able to go the posted speed limit. We wanted to harmonize the rule, to take away that confusion for motorists.

When it comes to snowplow safety, we actually introduced a new fine, that if anybody tries to pass a snowplow driver unsafely, they can actually get a \$243 fine and three demerits. That was something, after talking with snowplow drivers – I think about 40-plus accidents a year were happening with unsafe passing of snowplows. That's sometimes hitting the back of the truck, sometimes hitting the blade of the truck, and obviously doing damage to the truck.

Mr. Dach: Related to this, while you're on the topic, sir, if we could talk about enforcement measures regarding Slow Down and Move Over. You're talking about enforcement measures passing snowplows and increased fines. What enforcement measures have you now got that people who break the Slow Down and Move Over regulations are faced with? What fines and penalties are there?

Mr. Dreeshen: As I was saying, we set the rules, so this public awareness campaign, making sure that people know how to safely pass a roadside worker. That's what we do within Transportation and Economic Corridors. On the enforcement side, that would be Public Safety and, I'm sure, a question better suited for their estimates.

Mr. Dach: Right. Well, I certainly wanted to find out what fines and penalties there were.

The tow truck operators' association and the Alberta Fire Chiefs Association certainly prompted me to ask this question about the Slow Down and Move Over regulations, that don't require lanes other than the lane most proximate to the shoulder to slow down and move over. They campaigned to have other lanes, all lanes, slow down and move over. You've contravened that and now implemented just the one lane slowing down and moving over. That's why I wanted to know how compliance is being monitored and also how safety is being monitored subsequent to this change. The Fire Chiefs Association . . .

Mr. Dyck: Point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Point of order.

Mr. Dyck: Chair, I don't believe this is relevant to our budget estimates. I'm looking at Standing Order 23(b). The member opposite is asking a line of questioning which is well outside the scope of this committee. I believe this because he's talking about public safety. This is not enforcement. That is under a different ministry. I would love to be able to get back to the matter at hand, the estimates for Transportation and Economic Corridors.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. I don't believe this is a point of order. The Member for Grande Prairie is wildly out of touch with the discussion here at hand. I'm looking at the Transportation and Economic Corridors business plan, and right at the bottom of page 145 it says, "Safety and Security," so I think that talking about highway safety and security is well within the scope of our meeting today. This isn't a point of order, and the member should be allowed to continue his line of questioning.

The Chair: What I'd like to say is that I don't mind looking back in time for things to build context to a question that's relevant to the budget or the business plan, but if you could identify the page number if you're doing that, like, if you're building context from past stuff and moving on and therefore referring to this page.

Mr. Dach: Certainly, Chair, I should have done that in the very first instance. I was referring to estimate line 3, traffic safety programs, on page 229.

The Chair: We'll carry on, but just try to do that from this point.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, sir.

I was just about to finish that section. Suffice it to say that the Alberta Fire Chiefs Association and the tow truck drivers' association are rightly concerned with the regulatory changes that arbitrarily were adopted by the minister and are going to be monitoring enforcement as well as the accident rate that occurs as a result.

Let's move on to graduated drivers' licences, Chair, if we could. I'm wondering: now that the holders of the graduated drivers' licences are no longer required to do a final road test, how is driver and traffic safety being monitored postimplementation? Can you provide data, Minister, through the chair, that verifies that all the changes that were made to the graduated driver's licence system have not jeopardized public safety? Be specific if you have data. I know that it's recently been changed, but the public is rightly concerned about no longer having this final road test being done and are worried about safety being jeopardized on the roadways.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you. To be specific, on page 229 of the estimates, if you look at 3.1, traffic safety services, that perceived drop in funding actually highlights the GDL program. Obviously, the change that we made, actually freeing up about half a million Albertans to not have to go take a second GDL: that shows that ramp-up of services. Then, obviously, as GDLs are now being removed from licences, that's where you see that saving. That has been a wildly successful story, and I guess I would challenge the premise of your question, that somehow our roads are unsafe or that people are concerned about the safety of that GDL change. We made it that the holder of a GDL licence actually had to have two years free of any accidents and also of demerits. I don't want to judge anybody's driving habits in this room, but these half a million Albertans were probably the safest drivers out there. But there was a bureaucratic red tape of having to have a GDL licence or having a second test, where they had to take money out of their own pocket and waste their own time to try to get a second road test.

Mr. Dach: Through the chair, thank you for that.

I realize that you did it to save money, but the public is rightly concerned about removing that final road test as a means of confirming that the driver is actually a safe and well-prepared driver. How are you monitoring that? Are you actually monitoring the accident rate of those that are no longer required to take that advanced road test?

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, I guess I'd put it this way. The 500,000 GDL licence holders: they could have actually gotten a full-on class 5. We found that statistically only about 35 per cent of Albertans would bother to actually go get a full class 5, not because they were unsafe but because they thought it was bureaucratic government overreach and didn't make any sense or probably because they maybe came from Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Prince Edward Island, or Quebec, where there is no secondary class 5 licence and thought this was just extra government overreach. No, I think it's a wildly

successful program. I don't know if you've had constituents or folks write in to your office saying how happy they were about a government red tape reduction initiative that actually benefited people.

Mr. Dach: Through the chair, Minister, actually, the complaints I've received were concerns about public safety because they didn't have to take the test.

Let's move on, if we may, through the chair, to another highway traffic matter, and that is excessive speed. Now, Minister, I believe you had an RFP issued by the province just before the last election related to increasing the speed limit to 120 kilometres per hour on sections of highway 2. If this occurs, what are the plans to support enforcement? I'm referring to the business plan's key objective 2.5 on page 149, traffic safety.

Mr. Dreeshen: A great question. Maybe you don't spend as much time on highway 2 as I do or some of the other members, but we actually have stats showing that, I think, 85 per cent of motorists on highway 2 are going 120 or more. I think that when you look at the design of highway 2, like many highways across the province or even in other jurisdictions, it is actually designed in a way that you have motorists wanting to go that 120, 130 because it's naturally designed and built for that speed. That is something that we're obviously going to look at and review. There are certain sections that would need some improvements, obviously. If you have too many on- and off-ramps or too much different flow of speeds going into a certain area, having a higher speed rate is a traffic safety concern.

10:30

Mr. Dach: All right. Through the chair, in a related question to that. As we've known – you've been aware, I'm sure, as minister, that a higher speed creates in collision situations greater injury, greater property damage, and greater death statistics. If indeed you did decide to go through with this, what studies have you done to show what anticipated increase in collision damages, injury, and death would result in the increase of this 10 kilometre-per-hour maximum speed limit on sections of highway 2?

Mr. Dreeshen: Again, I would say, you know, yes, the member is right that speed multiplies your problems when you're driving on the road, but I think this is something that we are looking at. We're reviewing to see where there are certain segments that we could increase the speed limit.

Maybe something a little closer to home to the member is even the ring roads in Edmonton and Calgary. They're designed very well. They have a posted speed limit of a hundred. That is something that we're also considering as well to know what keeps up with the natural flow of traffic, that, actually, people are driving at a safe rate but also something that they're comfortable to do with modern-day cars, with the safety features that they have and just their natural inclination to drive at certain speeds that the road is actually designed for.

Mr. Dach: Through the chair, I wonder whether or not you're doing the cost-benefit analysis and what the demand is for this. I fear that it is another arbitrary decision that you are heading towards without the demand coming from the public for this increase in speed. So I wanted to know what the outcome was of the RFP that you issued just before the last election. Is there any response from that?

Mr. Dreeshen: It's something that we're currently reviewing. And, as I said, we're looking at other stretches of highway where this

would make sense, doing an RFP and doing a study. Again, I would challenge the member's quip about doing things arbitrarily. We have lots of engineers, we have lots of traffic safety experts who are looking at reviewing this. So I think it's a little dismissive to the folks that have been working on this to say that it's somehow arbitrary.

Mr. Dach: Thank you. I certainly endeavour not to be dismissive, Mr. Chair. Through the chair once again, a related question just quickly. Excessive speed: you mentioned that people tend to exceed the speed limit, Minister. Regardless of the maximum being 110, they go faster. But there are also incidents, and an increasing number of incidents, where there's absolutely insanely excessive speeds being recorded by some people, and people are again being caught. Now, are there any enforcement changes being planned to try to cut down the number of really excessive speeding incidents that we see?

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, in the Traffic Safety Act we do have rules stipulating that anyone travelling over 50 kilometres over the posted speed limit will have, you know, very harsh penalties. A vehicle being towed: that is something that's pretty severe.

But, again, when it comes to enforcement, that's very important to make sure that we have enough police out patrolling in areas to make sure that they can catch excessive speeders because, as I mentioned before, speed always multiplies your problems. If you're going 160 on highway 2, that's too fast.

Mr. Dach: Right. And through the chair to the minister: this is exactly why some municipalities and residents are looking to actually reduce the speed limit on Alberta highways going through their communities.

Number one is Leduc. I recently was at the leadership conference for Alberta Municipalities and was seated with officials and elected representatives from Leduc who indicated that they have sought to get from your ministry a reduction in the speed limit to 90 kilometres per hour for the highway as it proceeds through Leduc, from south of the overpass as you come north to close to the turn-off to the Edmonton International Airport. As you mentioned, many of them have many exits and off-ramps and on-ramps. Apparently, there are 24 exit ramps and entrance ramps along that stretch of roadway from Edmonton International Airport to the southern overpass in Leduc. They are concerned about the congestion and public safety there. Once again, referring to the business plan, key objectives, traffic safety, 2.5 on page 149, Mr. Chair. I sat with those elected officials, and they were looking to have that speed limit reduced from 110 to 90 in the interest of public safety through their community. Is that something that you have received? Are you aware of this? Is it on your radar? No pun intended. Are you looking to consider a reduction in the interest of public safety?

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, through you, Chair, I can do the member one better. Actually, we've lowered the speed limit to 80 kilometres due to the 65th Avenue interchange at Leduc by the Edmonton International Airport, due to the construction that we're doing to build the overpass from downtown Leduc to kick across highway 2 into the airport. But as soon as that construction is completed, it will go back to 110 kilometres an hour because highway 2 is Alberta's main economic corridor and we want to make sure that we have an efficient flow of traffic. Obviously, safety is a major concern, but we also have to make sure that we have an appropriate highway network that can move goods up and down our province, so once that construction is complete, we will see the speed limit going back up.

Mr. Dach: I understand. Through the chair, obviously, you'll know that elected officials and government officials locally in the county don't make these pleas to your ministry lightly, requesting a reduction in speed limits, so I'm sure they will be sorry to hear that your intention is to disregard their concerns and maintain the 110 kilometre per hour speed limit through Leduc.

The same thing may be said for people who live in Canmore because there are calls for the reduction of the speed limit on that roadway from Bow River to the park gate to 90 kilometres per hour to match that speed which is the required limit in the park for similar reasons. It's congestion, and there are many on-ramps and exit ramps and entrance ramps there going into and out of Canmore. Also, from a standpoint of noise as well, it's pretty close to the highway. I'm getting the same type of complaints from residents in Canmore, who wish to have the speed limit reduced on that section of roadway. Is that your similar response to them?

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, I would say that we actually have many requests coming in from municipalities for speed limit changes, sometimes to increase, sometimes to decrease. Obviously, as other construction projects are built or our communities are expanded, we look at it as a case-by-case basis. I think that's something that we always take internally and review, and we do sign off on ministerial orders for speed limit changes all the time. But I think that is something that we just review with the municipalities and we take the time to go through, understanding their local concerns, again, overlaying that with our provincial road network.

As I mentioned in my speech, we have 64,000 lane kilometres that we need to maintain and make sure that they're effective for goods transporting across this province as well as to keep Albertans safe.

Mr. Dach: All right. Thank you, Minister. Through the chair once again, your answer was clear on that. I'll be conveying that to those communities.

I want to move on to a pet peeve of mine, and I think many of the committee members may share this concern, Mr. Chair, perhaps even yourself. It involves, if I can explain it correctly, making, on an entrance ramp and an overpass going onto, say, the Henday or even the Yellowhead and Deerfoot Trail as well in Calgary – quite often the roadway has been designed so that you have to make a left-hand turn across traffic to get onto the merge lane to get onto Deerfoot, for example, and I think off the Trans-Canada. Many of the ramps in Edmonton on the Henday have been designed this way, and I believe it was done to save money because it's cheaper to do it rather than building a second merge ramp just to merge as you normally would or normally expect to on a right-hand turn going onto the highway.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe this was done to save money, and it's been a long-standing practice, and it's frustrating because in the government strategic plan, page 13, and the business plan, key objective 1.1, page 148, talking about bottlenecks and eliminating bottlenecks – there are some serious traffic bottlenecks being created trying to get onto the Deerfoot, especially during rush hour because of the left-hand turn requirements. It's a public safety issue as well because you're making a left across traffic that should have been avoided had the roadway been designed in the first place to have a merge that went underneath and a right-hand turn.

Let me put it this way. Highway 3 twinning is happening over eight stages and a number of years. Is it possible at this early stage for the ministry, Mr. Chair, to design these on-ramps and off-ramps and cloverleafs without requiring left-hand turns across traffic to get onto the entrance of the freeway because it's antiquated and I think you're cheating out to do it that way. Albertans deserve a

properly operating cloverleaf system of entrances and exits. What say you?

10:40

Mr. Dreeshen: Actually, it's going to be weird saying this, but I agree with you. That is something that, obviously, the design and the flow of traffic, we want to make sure it is in an efficient way.

Another thing that we're looking at, too, and other jurisdictions, especially with higher populations. As we're growing by hundreds of thousands of new Albertans every year and our population keeps growing, we are looking at traffic patterns and traffic flow. The fact that some of these intersections now with more of a steady stream of vehicles: what does that do to congestion? I know in certain U.S. states they actually have a – it's a metering system to go on to a highway. So you essentially have any on-ramps going on – I'm sure in Calgary on Deerfoot, when you drive down Deerfoot, you'll see 50 or 60 cars coming in a train all merging onto Deerfoot all at once, and that just affects all lanes of Deerfoot, and slows it right down. In certain U.S. states they'll actually throttle that or temper that flow of traffic coming on to Deerfoot, so that only a couple of cars go at a time. So it doesn't, you know, disrupt the whole flow of the of the main highway.

There are obviously other jurisdictions that we look at to see how we could improve our traffic flow as our population grows. I think your idea of making better designs, others, to make sure there's a better flow of traffic coming onto our highways is a great point.

Mr. Dach: All right. Thanks. Through the chair to the minister, talking about bridges. I know that bridge conditions are a big concern to the public as well as the ministry. Can the minister tell Albertans the current percentage of Alberta bridges that are in very poor, poor, or fair condition?

Mr. Dreeshen: Great, great question. If you go to estimates on 230 and 231, there is the \$120 million for bridge construction projects under 10. Then, in 11, there's the \$120 million on top of that, or the \$30 million – sorry – I should say, on top of that \$120 million for bridge projects. That's a lot of money, and that goes to a lot of big bridge projects, but we do have a lot of aging bridges, and that's just the fact that a lot of them were built 50, 60 years ago. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built a lot of bridges throughout Alberta going up to Alaska, and they're all now nearing their end of life.

I know through STIP we're giving grants to municipalities to help their aging bridges because a lot of their municipal-owned bridges are in the same state as our provincial-owned bridges. As I mentioned, we have almost 5,000 just provincially, and a lot of them are nearing that end of life. So it is something that we are putting more investments into them to make sure that we're not having to see weight restrictions, we're not having to see even bridge closures of deteriorating bridges. It is something that we're taking very seriously, and we're working with municipalities to make sure . . .

Mr. Dach: Thank you. Through the chair, once again on the same topic, Minister, continuing on with respect to bridge conditions. I mean, this is a debt to future Albertans by any other name because it is repairs that need to be done that aren't budgeted for because you have already admitted that it's a bigger project than you're able to fully fix, of course, in one budget. But assuming current funding levels, when does the ministry project that all Alberta highway bridges would be brought to at least good condition? I'd assume that 75 per cent of our bridges are in poor, fair, or very poor condition, according to the Alberta Roadbuilders & Heavy Construction Association, and the ministry's own data supports that claim. This is a huge debt to future Albertans, and I don't think

we're tackling it as a high enough priority. Granted, you're certainly spending, Mr. Chair, a fair bit of money, but how many years would it take to get us to have all our bridges in good condition at current levels of funding?

Mr. Dreeshen: I'd hate for anyone watching this to get the misconception that somehow our bridges are unsafe. If our bridges are operational they are safe. If they have a load restriction they are safe. That is something that, as I mentioned, the \$120 million plus the \$30 million in additional bridge construction, that is trying to make sure that they are being maintained, and they're not having to have any weight restrictions placed on them.

But the member did mention debt and intergenerational debt, and I would like to remind the member that it was his party in four years that actually accumulated \$80 billion worth of debt. If you look at the government's estimates of this year, \$3.3 billion dollars this year is being paid to service the debt that his party, when they were in government, brought in, and the entire budget of Transportation and Economic Corridors in these estimates is \$3.3 billion. Had the NDP never existed, we could have doubled Transportation and Economic Corridors' budget.

Mr. Dach: Thank you for that enlightening diatribe, Minister, through the chair.

Of course, Albertans are shocked. I'm not saying that Alberta bridges are unsafe, but 75 per cent of our bridges are not in good condition, and that's a huge amount of work that needs to be done, and it just never seems to be getting any better over time. Year over year, it seems to me, we're still stuck with that 75 per cent number, and we're not making a lot of headway.

My point was, Mr. Chair, to find out why it's not a larger priority. Granted, you're spending a chunk of money now, but it's not enough in order to make headway, as far as I can calculate. Have you been pushing in cabinet to make sure that we attack this problem? We're looking for people to come here. You talk about economic corridors. The bridges are a vital part of that economic corridor and highway system, yet they're being neglected. It's your responsibility as minister, I would think, to really campaign as hard as you can to improve this priority within cabinet and get more money spent on repairing and fixing our bridges.

Mr. Dreeshen: Again, this is the second time I say this, which seems weird, but I agree with the member, and that's why we are seeing an increase in funding for bridges, as I mentioned, the \$120 million, the new funding for \$30 million in the bridge bundling program, again, thinking outside the box. Actually, I should have mentioned this when it comes to the bridge bundling project. That's working with construction companies that can even do economies of scale where they can build bridge components, stockpile them, then as we go through specific bridges, it's almost like a Lego kit to be able to just piece together a bridge and be able to cut down on the costs. Again, we think if there's a way in which we can bundle these projects together and get those economies of scale and, obviously, do more and repair and replace more with fewer tax dollars – it's something that we've already started on with that \$30 million bridge bundling that's in the estimates.

Mr. Dach: Thank you. Through the chair, are you working as a ministry with ways to involve Alberta companies in this new technology that you just mentioned about component manufacturing for bridges? It's certainly something that we probably could do in Alberta rather than relying on importing steel and components from elsewhere.

Mr. Dreeshen: Yeah. Obviously, in Transportation and Economic Corridors we contract the work out to companies. We don't actually do the building ourselves. Yes, to answer your question. We do work with lots of Canadian companies, large and small, to make sure that they have a chance, an opportunity, to bid on these projects.

If I could point just to the estimates on page 231 on line 11.1, kind of the major maintenance and rehabilitation, you include that \$456 million on rehabilitation projects as well as \$120 million on bridges. That total comes to about \$577 million. You compare that to the 10-year average of those types of rehabilitation bridge projects. The average for the last 10 years has been \$402 million. So that . . .

Mr. Dach: Thanks for that, Minister.

Mr. Dreeshen: If I could just finish this thought, Chair.

Mr. Dach: Go ahead.

Mr. Dreeshen: The \$577 million is actually a 42 per cent increase over the 10-year average. Again, the member is talking about: why don't I advocate more or fight for more rehabilitation funding? A 42 per cent increase over a 10-year average is pretty significant.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Agreed. It is a large increase, but obviously with the number of bridges that need to be repaired, replaced, we need even more investment than the rate that it's currently at.

Let's move to some specific projects, Mr. Chair. Vinca Bridge: I remember driving over this bridge many, many times when I worked in the oil patch outside of Redwater, driving my gin poles, moving blowout preventers and pumps and tanks for the service rigs that I was moving, and I even knew then that there were lots of vehicles that couldn't go on that bridge because it was not rated for that type of weight and high loads. It's good to know that something is going to be happening with the Vinca Bridge, but by the time it's actually completed, I'm wondering if it will actually meet the projected traffic volumes, or will we have to add another lane to it within five years like we had to do on the Henday?

10:50

Regarding estimates line 10, bridge construction projects, on page 230, and in the capital plan, page 8, when can we expect this Vinca Bridge project to be finished? Does that mean we're just in the planning stage now and nearing completion of planning?

Mr. Dreeshen: Yeah. The structural design for the Vinca Bridge was actually completed in '22-23, and the tender for the construction of the Vinca Bridge project can now actually proceed this year. We would ideally see construction starting next year. Budget '24 actually has \$30 million in funding over the next three years for the Vinca Bridge replacement. Obviously, there's the current Vinca Bridge, we're building the new Vinca Bridge beside it, and then we'll carry on from there. That, you know, highway 38 bridge is a very vital, important infrastructure project for the Industrial Heartland and for the province.

I'm happy to hear that the member, having a background in oil and gas – and I maybe wonder why he's on that side of the Chamber. But it is a very important project. Obviously, so many, you know, workers cross there as well as heavy loads with oil and gas products, and when you look at the future of this province to be able to grow and expand, that region is important. The Vinca Bridge is a very key economic corridor development project that we're happy to see construction at least in 2025.

Mr. Dach: Through the chair, I agree with you on the construction going forward being a good thing. I'm wondering, though, if the P3 model will be used for the Vinca Bridge and if in general bridges are built under the P3 model or if they're usually design/build because of the nature of their construction.

Mr. Dreeshen: For the Vinca Bridge what we've done is – it will be a design/build, so what we've engineered. The structural design: what we've done to this point will be a design/build, and when we, again, get more engineering done so there's a better scope of the actual technical work that's going to be done, then, as I said, we'll put it out for tender late this year.

But on this, if I could, Mr. Chair, we've actually had a procurement forum and met a couple of times now with the construction industry to make sure that when we do put out projects, we don't get surprised, kind of a sticker shock of what the department and what we anticipate the project costs should be and then all of a sudden bids coming in way above that from multiple bidders. What we've learned is that there are risk factors that get baked into some of these projects, risk factors being change orders or something that wasn't really defined very well through engineering. Obviously, the scope changes, and then all of a sudden things get more expensive. We want to make sure that we do a lot of engineering up front on this project so that we're very specific in what we actually tender out for the private sector to bid on so that we're in a lot more reasonable space when it comes to that overall cost.

Mr. Dach: Okay. Thank you. Through the chair once again to the minister, I know that you probably want to do a lot of engineering work on this other bridge project that I want to ask about, which seems to have faded into the background a little bit from where it was. The community was really up in arms and demanding the bridge be replaced based on an engineer's report showing it to be near imminent failure. It's the county of Slave Lake Smith Bridge I'm talking about. I'm wondering what emergency repairs have been taken to stabilize the Smith Bridge until the government decides to promote the economic development and oil and gas and forestry opportunities that would be realized by the construction of a new Smith Bridge according to local politicians and residents.

Mr. Dreeshen: Great question. You're all over – good questions, Lorne.

Mr. Dach: Thank you so much.

Mr. Dreeshen: I thought this was going to come from the MLA from Slave Lake.

We do have engineering dollars for the Smith Bridge. We've been working with the municipality. I actually toured it last year before the election to see the bridge strikes that were happening, just the deterioration of not just the bridge structure itself but also the pilings in the river. It is a very important project. It is something that with the engineering we're hoping – we will see progress on that. When you look at not just the community of Smith south of that bridge but also the oil play in and around that area, it's significant, and we want to make sure that we can have this bridge built.

Again, it's another one of our economic corridors that we're highlighting to make sure that we can have a bridge and a highway network that can maintain the oil and gas work that goes on in that area.

Mr. Dach: Right. Thank you for that. To follow up a little bit, Mr. Chair, I'm just wondering, related to that comment just made by the

minister, what studies the minister has undertaken to determine the economic activity that would be enabled or enhanced by building that new Smith Bridge, because there is a wide area of resource development that has been laying fallow in that area.

The minister might also be surprised to learn that I used to go hunting up in that area, around Smith and Athabasca River. It's an area that has that potential as well for recreational opportunities. What has been stalled, or what economic activity hasn't taken place? What's the value of getting this bridge replaced? I know that previously it was being dismissed because of low traffic volumes, but what's the anticipated increase in traffic should that bridge get built?

Mr. Dreeshen: I'm not the one to ask about floor crossing, but your oil and gas background, hunting and fishing: like, it's incredible.

Mr. Dach: Don't get your hopes up.

Mr. Dreeshen: I go to our resource revenue map work that we're doing within the department. To your question of, you know, "What would be the cost-benefit analysis of these types of projects?" obviously, the engineering, the design of it is \$1.65 million that we've provided. What we think would be the cost of that bridge is \$76 million. But if you just look at the typical car counts that the department does look at for replacements of certain roadways or bridges, that doesn't work in a place like this, where there's billions of dollars of oil and gas investment. There are hundreds of millions of dollars of direct revenues that the province receives from oil and gas up in that region.

The cost-benefit analysis of a \$76 million bridge that may not have a lot of people driving across it but has huge economic benefits to the province: that's something that we are actually working with RMA right now on developing this resource revenue map, which will show the \$15 billion to \$18 billion a year that Alberta receives in royalty revenue from oil and gas. Where does that come from? It obviously – no offence – doesn't come from your riding in Edmonton or in Calgary; it comes from rural Alberta. And how can we make sure that we have a road and bridge network across the province that actually allows for the growth and expansion of this project and the revenues that we need to spend on all the things that Albertans love and enjoy?

Mr. Dach: Thank you again. A follow-up, through the chair. And in relation to your last remark I would remind the minister that West Edmonton Mall does pay taxes, so there is revenue coming out of my riding.

But I want to ask the minister about the highway conditions. We talked about bridges, but let's move on to highway conditions in the limited time I've got left in this block. Can the minister tell Albertans what current percentage of Alberta highways are in very poor, poor, or fair condition? And this is a chronic percentage that seems to not change as well, similar to bridges.

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, we've had a good back and forth so far, but the fact that Fantasyland is in your riding doesn't surprise me.

I would say for the good, fair, and poor targets, we do actually have – for good we have 58 per cent; for fair, 26 per cent; and for poor, down to 16 per cent. So 58 per cent, 26 per cent, 16 per cent of the physical condition of our provincial highway surfaces.

Mr. Dach: Yeah. The historical number seems to not really change a lot from the 2017-18 numbers. I'm looking at down to 2008 and 2009; it seems to be somewhere in the neighbourhood of, like, 40, 43 per cent of our highways are not rated in good condition. I'm just wondering if the minister finds this chronic level of disregarded

or deferred maintenance to be acceptable, or is this something that the Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors sees as a detriment to investment in the province because our roadway system is not keeping up?

Now, we used to have – you could almost drive from outside provinces, from Saskatchewan and British Columbia, blindfolded and tell when you're entering Alberta because the road conditions improved. But you can't say that anymore. I mean, it's actually the opposite. Those neighbouring provinces seem to have better conditioned roads than we do. The maintenance is an ongoing critique that I'm hearing from municipalities and truckers and Albertans.

11:00

When I sat down at Alberta Municipalities, every table I sat at, immediately in response to my question, "What are you concerned about in your area?" said that it was roadways and maintenance and potholes and road conditions. I've had people wearing T-shirts, "can't drive 55," up around Athabasca, you know, demanding that the road be repaired.

It's just the deferred maintenance or neglected maintenance kicked down the road that seems to be chronic, and that's something I think if we're looking at getting people to come here and invest, and their economic corridors are important, let's get the basics fixed, get our roadways up to absolutely top-notch shape again so we can boast about them being the best in the country again.

Mr. Dreeshen: First off, I would recommend people not drive blindfolded. Hopefully, that was not a real comment.

Mr. Dach: The passengers.

Mr. Dreeshen: Okay.

We typically do about a thousand kilometres of roadwork in the province on an annual basis, and, as I mentioned before, a 42 per cent increase in this budget over the 10-year average of our highway rehabilitation and capital maintenance I think goes a long way to make sure that, to the member's point, Chair, we try to keep up with the growing demands.

The federal government has said that by 2035 they want to have an electric vehicle mandate, where there's the banning of any new gas vehicles. Electric vehicles, typically, if you look at just an F-150 Lightning versus a regular F-150, the Lightning is about 22 per cent heavier. So that's pounding out our roads even more. It's something that obviously with a growing population, with more vehicles on our roads, with possibly heavier electric vehicles on our roads, we do need to make sure that we have adequate funding for rehabilitation and to make sure our roads are up to snuff. It's not just a nice, smooth driving experience, which obviously is important, but it's also a safety feature as well, to make sure that our roads are designed in a way that the roughness index, that we actually use to have the fair, poor, and good rating, makes sense.

Mr. Dach: Right. Thank you.

Through the chair once again, to continue on this theme about highway maintenance, given that the Alberta Roadbuilders & Heavy Construction Association – I'm referring to estimates line 4, provincial highway maintenance, page 229 – has stated that Alberta needs to double its current level of investment for proper highway maintenance and preservation and given that the preservation cost for an average kilometre of highway is five times less than the cost of reconstruction, can the minister please explain how many years it will take with this current level of spending on maintenance to get all Alberta highways rated to be in good condition?

Mr. Dreeshen: As I said before, if that \$80 billion of NDP debt had not existed, we would be able to double our budget.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That concludes the first portion of questions for the Official Opposition.

We will now go to the independent member for 20 minutes. Could you introduce yourself for the record, please?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes. Jennifer Johnson, MLA for Lacombe-Ponoka.

The Chair: Okay. Would you like to share time with the minister?

Mrs. Johnson: Shared time would be great if the minister is willing.

The Chair: Minister? Yeah. Okay.

Go ahead. You've got 20 minutes.

Mrs. Johnson: Great. Thank you, Mr. Chair and, through you, to the minister. Page 148 of the ministerial business plan states that the transportation ministry will develop a passenger rail master plan as the foundation to advance passenger rail in Alberta. The master plan will look forward and include a 15-year delivery plan to prioritize investments. This is also reflected on page 150, 3.2, to assess feasibility and develop a passenger rail master plan; \$9 million has been allocated for the development of this plan, including a 15-year delivery plan. There is talk of Alberta's population increasing to 5 million in the near future and potentially 10 million by 2050. Population increases are often realized in our urban centres. The possibility of a high-speed rail system connecting Calgary and Edmonton has been talked about for decades. How will this passenger rail master plan work towards this goal?

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you very much for that question. It is a pretty exciting project to have within my mandate letter from Premier Smith, on the passenger rail master plan. It is an exciting time in Alberta when it comes to rail projects. For years we have looked at LRT projects within Edmonton and Calgary, light rail projects, to see how we could effectively and efficiently move people around our two biggest cities. But this master plan is: how can that be connected into a broader rail strategy? That's everything from a commuter-type system like a Metrolink, that they have in Ontario, where you could have surrounding communities of Edmonton and Calgary connected by passenger rail, as well as the possibility of a high-speed train between Edmonton and Calgary, which I know has been talked about and proposed for a long time in Edmonton, as well as a Calgary to Banff project for tourists coming in from the Calgary International Airport, to be able to directly go out to Banff. Then, obviously, you know, rail connections from downtown cores in Edmonton and Calgary to the airports.

You know, really, really exciting times to be able to see, with Edmonton and Calgary, with our municipal LRT projects, how they can connect into a provincial rail system, whether it be a commuter one or between Edmonton and Calgary and beyond. It's a very ambitious project. You're right. It's going to take two years of engineering at a very detailed level to see where exactly we could go with these new tracks and then, obviously, you know, a ridership assessment to see: is it actually feasible? If everything goes well, we would hope to see construction kind in that year 3, year 4, but it would most likely take about 10 years to achieve.

So it is a 15-year strategy, and as a government with always four-year shelf lives, it's hard to think big and broad in 15-year terms. But it is a pretty ambitious initiative that we're undertaking.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Chair and, through you, to the minister. As a rural MLA in a rural constituency transportation can be an issue for some, whether it's through school busing, transportation of goods, or even just getting to work. The option does not exist for most in rural Alberta to just take the bus. As the population increases, likely concentrated, again, in urban centres, how can rural Albertans be assured that their local road system will not only remain maintained but that roads will continue to be built?

Mr. Dreeshen: Great question. As I mentioned in the previous back-and-forth with the NDP, we actually have a 42 per cent increase in our rehabilitation budget, you know, comparing that to the 10-year average. Obviously, we have more and more roads here in the province. We have 64,000 lane kilometres in our provincial highway network as well as nearly 5,000 bridges, and with a growing population and growing industrial investments, we'll need to have more bridges and more roads. So to be able to make sure that we can maintain what we have plus build new I think is why it's reflected in the estimates that we have a 42 per cent increase on that, which is great.

But as a neighbour – yes, Lacombe-Ponoka to Innisfail-Sylvan Lake – obviously, highway 2 going in between our ridings or going through our ridings is important. Actually, I'm happy to say that there are two major bridge replacements on highway 2 south of Lacombe that are in this budget as well. Obviously, highway 2 twinning we look at. I think just north of you it gets a little smoother and then in our ridings it's maybe a little rougher, so we're obviously looking at repaving on highway 2 as well.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Chair and to the minister. I'll come back to that in a bit.

Highway 604 in Lacombe-Ponoka was first commissioned for grading, base, and full paving in 2008 for 11 kilometres. Work was partially done but never completed and remains incomplete to this day. In spite of being a high-traffic road and critical for local traffic, a gravel quarry, construction, intensive livestock, and other agricultural operations, is there a plan to complete this important piece of road, and where does this fit into the current budget?

Mr. Dreeshen: Highway 604 west of highway 2 is in the engineering stage right now, so planning and engineering. What typically happens for our projects is that it goes into planning and design, then it goes into engineering, and then it goes into the construction world. As I mentioned before, we want to make sure that when we tender out these projects to the private sector, we have them engineered as much as possible so that we can get very accurate bids and low bids. If there is any vagueness in the project, vagueness being not engineered enough, then we do see risk factors that get baked into the bids so that they're essentially just higher. So we want to make sure that we can be as detailed as we can in the engineering so that we have very accurate bids coming in, so we get more value for taxpayer dollars. That project is, as I said, just in the engineering stage, and once it is refined as much as it can be, it'll go out for tender.

11:10

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Chair and to the minister for that great news.

On page 149 of the ministerial business plan, 2.4: work with law enforcement and municipalities to ensure automated traffic enforcement, commonly known as photoradar, is focused on traffic safety and not revenue generation. It seems as if this photoradar might be falling under several ministries, but for your ministry, how much photoradar has been decommissioned and how much is remaining? And how is this affecting revenue?

Mr. Dreeshen: Great question. As you mentioned, it is within multiple ministries, the use of photoradar. Obviously, we set the rules for photoradar and the locations where they get set up, and that's actually why we took off the photoradar on the Edmonton and Calgary ring roads. When you look at the stats, it was, unfortunately, used for revenue generation and not for traffic safety. When you have a multilane highway as straight as an arrow and have photoradar there, with no accidents, that's not about traffic safety; that's about revenue generation. So we removed them from the ring roads.

We're now actually going through and will be starting this summer, working on the remainder of the 2,400 photoradar locations across the province with the 25, I think, municipalities that currently use them, to make sure that they are being used for traffic safety and not for revenue generation. That is something that we're very cognizant of because the whole point of traffic enforcement is to make sure that you are enforcing the current rules, and it's not just a cash cow for local municipalities.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Chair and to the minister. It is good to hear that it is going to be for safety and not just revenue generation, and working with the municipalities on that, just in case there were issues of photoradar, you know, being clocked at 90 in an 80; not that I would know anything about that.

On page 150 of the performance measures, physical condition of provincial highway surfaces – and we've heard about this already from my colleague. In 2022-23, 58 per cent of our highways were rated good, and, as the minister said, 26 per cent were fair and 16 per cent poor, with targets forecast to remain at these rates for the foreseeable future. How do these rates compare to the past 10 years, and how do they compare to other provinces?

Mr. Dreeshen: Great question. When we look at the estimates on page 231 and through section 11, the \$456 million in this year's estimates is substantive, plus the \$120 million in bridge contracts from page 230. That total of \$577 million is actually a 42 per cent increase from that 10-year average. So although Alberta grew by almost 200,000 people last year and by 100,000 people the year before – that's three cities of Red Deer in two years that the province grew – we need to make sure that we can rehabilitate the 64,000 lane kilometres that we have already and the almost 5,000 bridges but also to be able to build additional roads and additional lanes on highways to make sure that we can accommodate that growth. So 42 per cent is a significant increase.

I know that if there was more, we would be able to build more. But I think 42 per cent is a very good start and, as you said, to try to make sure that good rating is maintained or improved is something that we're always going to work towards.

But I would just say – and I mentioned it before – that the \$80 billion of NDP debt that they saddled Albertans with for their four years of government, just the annual debt-servicing cost is \$3.3 billion. And the entire budget of Transportation and Economic Corridors is, ironically, \$3.3 billion. So just paying off the annual debt servicing of \$80 billion NDP debt: you could easily double Transportation and Economic Corridors' budget if we weren't saddled with that \$80 billion intergenerational NDP debt. That's why having balanced budgets is, obviously, important but also investing in our critical infrastructure.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, to the minister: with what some would say is federal overreach into our province in saying that maybe perhaps we should stop building roads, how can the minister ensure, again, that rural Alberta is being serviced?

Mr. Dreeshen: Great, great question. It is frustrating. The national trade corridors fund is a federal program in which I think it's \$4.6 billion over 11 years, and it's actually – the program is nearing its end, which is obviously an issue for the province of Alberta. We transfer so many billions of dollars to Ottawa. But this federal program: on the last nine projects that we put in as a province, we received zero for nine on those projects. That goes to everything from highway 3 to 686 up in the northern part of the province, to many other important trade corridor projects. It was very frustrating to see that zero for nine score. I would say that if we were an NHL hockey team and your power play was zero for nine, you'd be asking a lot of questions about the management and the coaching staff.

But it is something that, on top of that, we have the NDP-Liberal coalition in Ottawa and Minister Guilbeault talking about: no new road funding. He actually said those comments right before all the transportation ministers across the country were meeting in Montreal with the actual federal transportation minister. When all the transportation ministers got to Montreal for the FPT meeting, the clarifying point that Minister Rodriguez said to Minister Guilbeault was: well, he just meant no new funding for large projects. Well, that is the national trade corridors fund. So we'll see the federal government – if they're going to renew that fund in their upcoming budget in April.

We're really, from Alberta's standpoint, just trying to get our money back from what we send in to Ottawa. But we are hoping that the national trade corridors fund gets renewed. I actually asked for it to be increased, not just at the \$4.6 billion over three years but to actually match the public transit fund, which is \$3 billion a year for 11 years, so for a \$33 billion total envelope of funding for the national public transit fund from the federal government, to bump up that \$4.6 billion for the national trade corridor fund to at least match the public transit fund. I know our friends in the NDP here could pick up the phone and ask Jagmeet Singh to make that happen in the upcoming budget, and I hope they do that. That is something that – we are obviously advocating for Alberta's fair share of federal funding. That would be a big win, if the national trade corridor fund gets replenished and actually funded at the same level as the public transit fund from the federal government.

Mrs. Johnson: Great. Thank you.

Mr. Chair, to the minister: on page 152 of the ministerial business plan ring roads debt servicing is about \$100 million. It does drop off substantially, which is good news, but can the minister speak to what this debt servicing involves, the funding model around it, and the decrease in coming years?

Mr. Dreeshen: Yeah. As I mentioned before, the P3s that we had on the ring roads were huge Alberta success stories, and I'm sure people will write about that for years to come. One of the main reasons was even just the locking in of the interest rate, being anywhere from 3 to 5 per cent. Anybody having to redo a mortgage now or any debt now: you're looking at prime at 7.2 per cent. So these locked in for 30 years were a huge benefit and bonus to the Alberta taxpayers. As I mentioned before, the specific savings that we had on all of these projects ranged from millions to over a billion for the six P3s that we have on the ring roads. They were huge success stories.

I know that the NDP likes to say they don't like P3s, yet it was the NDP in 2016 that actually themselves signed on to a P3. I think the transportation minister at the time, Brian Mason: maybe he was a more enlightened NDP than the ones that we have now. The P3s have been a huge success story for Alberta and for the ring roads in Calgary and Edmonton.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Chair to the minister for that.

My final question is about capital investment in Lacombe-Ponoka. As you mentioned, there is a new bridge going south of Lacombe on – is it highway 2? And I believe there could be a project on highway 12 east of Lacombe to Clive. Could the minister elaborate on that and if there is anything else going to be coming to that constituency?

11:20

Mr. Dreeshen: You're an excellent local MLA. I know going through all the different projects is very important. The highway 2 project near Clive is in that design phase. As I mentioned before, you do the design phase, obviously, looking at land purchasing or additional land that may be required, and then the engineering and then construction. Highway 12 is a 15-kilometre paving project near Clive.

As I said, yes, the two major bridge replacements on highway 2 south of Lacombe is the CPR overpass. They're in the design phase, and land acquisition is under way in preparation of those two bridge structures and the related roads around the bridges.

There's also just in your riding, if I could, Mr. Chair, a new bridge-sized culvert that's near highway 2 as well near Lacombe. That's in the design phase. We're also looking at, as I said, highway 2 from Red Deer to Leduc, which a variety of safety improvements along highway 2. We're doing the planning stages for that. Engineering is also under way for a second phase of paving from highway 604 west of highway 2, as we mentioned before.

Design is under way for a flood protection berm at Buffalo Lake to address water management issues in the riding of Lacombe-Ponoka as well as a grant to the Shirley McClellan Regional Water Services Commission through the water for life program, which, again, is one of our three water programs. Water for life is another one that will actually address regional water needs from Donalda all the way up to Bawlf. That's another project within your area that is within these estimates.

Mrs. Johnson: I'm going to end with one quick one: \$134 million is allocated under the provincial water for life, as you just mentioned, First Nations water tie-in program, and capital regional waste-water treatment to support municipal and regional water and waste-water priority projects on page 148 of this ministerial business plan. How many Indigenous communities currently don't have access to fresh water, and how many communities will the budget be able to help?

Mr. Dreeshen: Our First Nation water tie-in program is something that I'm very, very proud of and working with First Nations to make sure that they have access to clean water. Obviously, what the program does is it goes from a regional waterline and it builds the pipeline and infrastructure up right to the edge of a reserve. Then it's obviously working with the First Nation and also the federal government to make sure it goes that final mile in the reserve to First Nations communities. In total there are 48 First Nations in Alberta, and seven of them are actually connected to regional water systems. I know that there have been 14 First Nations projects that have been approved for funding, of which 12 have actually been completed already.

As I mentioned before, we pay on progress within our estimates. Just because there was a whole bunch of projects that are now nearing completion doesn't show a lack of priority of that program. It just shows that it was a success, that we're actually having pipes in the ground, that we actually have – the water tie-in program was a success, and now finally the federal government taking it that final mile is the next stage.

If I have time, Chair, I'll go through the actual completed projects: the Paul First Nation waterline to Wabamun, the Alexis Nakota Sioux First Nation, Cold Lake First Nation, Whitefish, Dene Tha' First Nation . . .

The Chair: Didn't quite make it.

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, halfway.

The Chair: Yeah.

That concludes the first portion of questions from the independent member.

We will now move to the 20 minutes for the government caucus members. Would you like to share time?

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Yes. I would like to share time.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead. You have 20 minutes.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Chair. Through you to the minister, I'm glad to see, Minister, on page 8 of the capital plan that Budget 2024 allocated \$30 million over three years for the Vinca Bridge replacement. This is a critical need for the Industrial Heartland, and it is very important to the hard-working Albertans from Fort Sask-Veg who drive Alberta's energy sector. You spoke of the importance of the \$30 million Vinca Bridge replacement already, but can you speak to other transportation infrastructure projects in Alberta's Industrial Heartland, specifically in my constituency of Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville?

Mr. Dreeshen: I'm not supposed to have favourite MLAs, but when you look at the Arrow Utilities announcement that we did just yesterday, MLA Armstrong-Homeniuk . . .

Mr. Dach: I thought I was your favourite.

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, you had your chance.

The \$50 million investment into Arrow Utilities, which helps out 13 municipalities around the Edmonton region, will eventually lower water rates for 400,000 in that Edmonton region, is huge and also a great example of how municipalities can work together on these regional water programs. You have economies of scale of municipalities working together and, obviously, the provincial government stepping up and helping with engineering as well as financially contributing to the projects and funding the projects.

But, yeah, the Vinca Bridge is going to be so, so important to the Industrial Heartland. It is going to be a very complex project when we have the engineering and design dollars. As you mentioned, the \$3.8 million over the next three years for the Vinca Bridge replacement: that's really just the start. There'll be other construction dollars in future years that'll probably clock in at around \$100 million for that bridge when it's finally completed. The build of the new Vinca Bridge beside the existing Vinca Bridge will be a very important project for your riding as well as for the Industrial Heartland and the entire province, because they pay a little more taxes than West Edmonton Mall. The Industrial Heartland and the jobs that they create is just fantastic and helps out that surrounding area.

So, yeah, the Vinca Bridge is a very important economic corridor construction project that I'm proud to advocate for, and I know you are as well.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Minister. Thank you for your answer.

Chair, through you I would like to cede the rest of my time to MLA Sinclair.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you to my colleague, and thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Minister and your team for all your incredibly hard work. I will say, in terms of being your favourite MLA, that I'm pretty happy that I've got pretty thick skin, thicker than I used to have even, I might say.

As I've said before, I'm the MLA for Lesser Slave Lake, and I would commend you on the numerous visits you've made to my riding even in the short time that I've been elected. It really helps highlight the importance, especially highway 88, which is probably a bit of a broken record, both for you and your ministry, from me. It runs north from Slave Lake, for those who don't know, all the way past Fort Vermilion, and it's a central corridor for trade, supporting both the oil and forest industries, as well as the primary point of access to and from my hometown of Slave Lake. However, there is a need for safety improvements to the intersection, overall maintenance. I know the government has committed to this necessary work. I was wondering if the minister could please speak to whether Budget 2024 includes design funding for repairs and upgrades to highway 88, including, I'm hopeful, the widening of the road for proper shoulders and installing proper turning lanes.

Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Dreeshen: Yeah. Great question. You're not a broken record. Highway 88 is another example of a very important economic corridor in this province. As I mentioned before, the resource revenue map that we're working with municipalities to figure out: of the \$15 billion, \$18 billion of nonrenewable resource revenue coming from rural Alberta, where exactly does it come from?

Actually, I'll give credit to constituents in your area, MLA Sinclair. The idea was spawned out of a meeting that I had up in your riding with them when they were looking at a new oil and gas company being able to drill a lot more and to have a new play that was just discovered up in your area. They were very excited about it, but they knew that Smith Bridge was going to be a limiting factor of that development and, obviously, the benefits that would go in that surrounding community but also to the province. That's something that that resource revenue map that I mentioned does show: where exactly does the revenue of this government come from? And to be able to identify that – you know, highway 88, Smith Bridge, so many of these projects, even though they may not have the traffic counts, are very important.

You're right. Highway 88 was planned to be repaved and smoothed out. But to local concerns and your concerns as well, MLA Sinclair, talking about how the truck traffic meeting with the regular traffic and the short shoulders that are on that or nonexistent shoulders in certain parts: that's not a safe roadway. We are, within this budget, looking at rescoping that project to make sure that we have the design and the engineering for a wider road. It'll take longer, but it's the right thing to do to make sure that we can improve highway 88 and the safety for so many people in that area.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I also just wanted to briefly mention that the member opposite here does a lot of hunting in my riding. So if he'd like to buy a membership, I can hook him up with the right people after the meeting is done. They'd be happy to sell him a membership for our riding since he's so invested in it, which I'm very excited about.

The rest of my time, Mr. Chair, I would like to cede to my colleague MLA Hunter. Thank you very much.

11:30

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and, through you to the minister, thank you for the work you've done on the highway 3

twinning. I know that for probably three decades at least, that I know of, and maybe even longer than that, there's been the dream of being able to have a twinned highway from province to province, and under your leadership and your vision of being able to see that as an economic corridor, you were able to actually get that done. Thank you for that work. That is going to be a great benefit to Alberta and southern Alberta, for sure, that area.

My question that I have for you, Minister, is on the ICIP, or the investing in Canada infrastructure program. Now, I was looking at the statement of operations, page 152. It shows that there is a budgeted amount under '23-24 and then a forecasted amount. The budgeted amount is \$430 million, and then the forecast amount is \$336 million. I guess one of my questions is, you know: why has it gone down? Then it shows a three-year estimate, going forward, up to \$668 million.

Now, from what I had heard, they had not determined whether ICIP is actually going to continue on. Are you expecting that the federal government will be bringing forward a new whatever the ICIP is going to be called in the future and that it will be fully funded by '26-27?

Mr. Dreeshen: A great question. First off, I'd like to throw the thank you back at you for your advocacy and your work on highway 3 and your work on the agrifood corridor down in southern Alberta. I know we served in opposition together. We've been at this for a long time, and to finally see highway 3 twinning happening – I know that in your neck of the woods lots of people thought that day would never come. Taber to Burdett, that first segment of the eight-segment highway 3 twinning: to see that construction start this spring is going to be pretty historic and pretty memorable. I just wanted to thank you for your advocacy on that.

When it comes to ICIP, we'll see what happens with the federal budget coming up in April. I had mentioned the public transit fund, that \$3 billion over 11 years, as well as the national trade corridor fund, the \$4.6 billion over 11 years. Those are two big programs that are coming to an end. We're somehow getting mixed messages from folks in the NDP-Liberal government on what exactly will be the new ICIP or what will be the new public transit fund or what will be the national trade corridor fund going forward.

Obviously, we're building Alberta. We're doing what we can do to make sure that our provincial highway networks and our economic corridors are being built. Obviously, having some of the funds that we transfer to Ottawa back to Alberta would be nice, but we'll see what happens in this upcoming federal budget. We've lost there before, so we'll see how that goes.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to cede my time to MLA Dyck.

Mr. Dyck: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. As you know, I'm the MLA for Grande Prairie. South of Grande Prairie we have significant resource revenues coming from down there. We see incredible energy, obviously, forestry, but we also have the Greenview Industrial Gateway just ramping up and industrial land being developed a few minutes south. I know you mentioned the resource revenues map, which I'm excited to see, but because of the resource revenues and the opportunity for some more potential, the industrial gateway, I think we're going to see a potential rise in revenue from our area.

As well, in the capital plan I see \$24 million this year for the twinning of highway 40 south of Grande Prairie, which I'm thankful for, but I don't see a specific line item for highway 40X, the bypass around Grande Prairie. This is significant as most if not all of the heavy traffic goes directly through our city. I believe it's

about 28,000 vehicles that go through Grande Prairie, including about 3,000 heavy trucks navigating residential, some school zones and pedestrians. Minister, can you speak on the importance of both highway 40 and the highway 40X bypass, both to industry and to Grande Prairie residents, and also share whether design funding for highway 40X, the bypass, is contained within this budget?

Mr. Dreeshen: Great questions. Yeah, another major economic corridor, the Grande Prairie area, similar to the Industrial Heartland, similar to highway 3 down in southern Alberta on the agrifood corridor, so a very important economic region for the province. When you look at the highway 40 improvements and twinning, just in prior years they've been about \$140 million in funding to date. But this budget actually has \$60 million forecasted, but also the estimate for this year is \$24 million and \$3.7 million to finish off that highway 40 project, for a total of \$27.7 million within the three-year capital plan to extend from highway 40 south of Grande Prairie.

As you mentioned, highway 40X, for those who don't know the Grande Prairie region well, will essentially create a ring road around Grande Prairie so that truck traffic, especially heavy-truck traffic, is not having to go right through downtown Grande Prairie anymore. It will be able to do a safe ring road around the southwest part of Grande Prairie. Budget '24 actually has engineering dollars committed as well. There will be \$14 million in engineering for highway 40X, and I think we're close on the land purchasing, to be completed as well, needed to make that ring road.

That's obviously another important project, 40 and 40X. I would say, with great advocates like you and your other colleague up in Grande Prairie – you guys have been great champions of that project. I think you guys understand not just the economic benefits to the province but also the safety for people that live in and enjoy that area. It's important to make sure that 40 and 40X are built.

Mr. Dyck: Awesome. Thank you so very much, Minister. I really appreciate that. I'm looking forward to seeing the design of that highway bypass and it getting completed.

I'm going to cede the rest of my time to Member McDougall.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you, Minister, thank you very much for coming and for the very good work that you're doing. There are a lot of projects that are in your bailiwick that relate to Calgary, so with the time remaining, I'll try to talk to some of them. First of all, you talked briefly about the 15-year rail study. I'm just trying to understand. There's a connection study that is under way. There's been some talk about a pinch point study. Is that pinch point study part of the overall longer term planning? How does that fit into the thing?

If you will allow yourself to guess, I guess, or estimate what you think will be the time frame for when decisions might be made as to whether or not any of the rail projects that come from Calgary, that being the Calgary-Edmonton or the Calgary-Banff projects, might be in a position to be decided to go forward or not.

Mr. Dreeshen: Great questions. Actually, this budget has the master rail plan strategy attached to it, the \$15 million of detailed engineering study for the overarching, umbrella view of rail for the province. The previous budget, the budget before this, had the airport rail connection study committed. I believe it was \$1.5 million for that study. That work has already been under way with the Calgary airport as well as the city of Calgary.

But the beauty or the logic behind the master rail plan is to make sure that everything fits together, that our LRT systems in Edmonton and Calgary fit within a broader possible commuter rail system, an Edmonton and Calgary passenger rail system as well as

a potential Calgary to Banff passenger rail system. The thought process behind all of it – obviously, rail lines connect to each other; that is the main reason – is: how can it all work together and even have ridership and feasibility studies to show it actually makes sense, at the end of the day? Or do we need, you know, kind of greater population centres to be able to have a profitable or at least a break-even type of rail network?

11:40

It's two years to do these engineering studies, and that's \$9 million in year 1, \$6 million in year 2, to make the \$15 million. Then, after that, we'll see what the studies say. If it's actually viable to have private-sector components be able to build some of these passenger rails, the province will be able to step in on connecting the LRTs to a commuter rail system in and around Calgary and Edmonton. That's a big, visionary project and would probably take about a decade of construction. As I mentioned before, with a four-year shelf life, for governments to talk decade-plus projects is a rarity, but it is a great vision from Premier Smith to see the benefit of rail and what the possibilities are here in Alberta.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you for that.

Deerfoot Trail: we spent \$156 million this year, \$523 million over three years. What exactly are we going to accomplish from this? I'm thinking specifically, for example, you know, that there are bottlenecks between Southland Drive and Bow Bottom Trail that affect my constituency to a great degree. Of course, Deerfoot Trail is a very busy and congested expressway at this point in time. By the end of this investment, what exactly would you see as being the improvement or the change that we can expect?

Mr. Dreeshen: Yeah. I'm going to stop doing the favourite MLA thing. But when you look at the Calgary investments, they are quite significant: Deerfoot Trail upgrades, \$523 million; to finish off the Calgary Ring Road, \$120 million. We also have the Calgary rivers district and events centre, \$237 million over three years. So, you know, significant investments in the Calgary area.

But on Deerfoot Trail specifically, it is a mix of design/build and design/bid/build delivery models. At 64th Avenue there is the widening of the northbound lanes of Deerfoot. There is an improved connection at 11th Street and the main line widening from Beddington Trail to Airport Trail, and that should be completed this year. As well, the McKnight Boulevard interchange, the improvement to the interchange and the main line widening from Beddington Trail to 32nd Avenue, also to be completed this year. Also, Memorial Drive, the main line widening from 32nd Avenue to Memorial Drive, and 16th Avenue ramp modifications, to be completed in 2025. So significant Deerfoot Trail improvements.

Just for the benefit of the committee, with the 64,000 lane kilometres that we have in our provincial highway network, that also includes the 101 kilometres for the Calgary Ring Road, the Edmonton ring road but also the Deerfoot in Calgary. It's also a provincial-owned road. That is something where these improvements are obviously improving the asset that the province has along the Deerfoot but also making traffic a lot better for Calgarians in their daily commutes.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you.

Seeing that I only have 40-some seconds left, on LRT: you have some funding going for both the blue line and the green line. I guess: what do we think we're going to accomplish on the blue line by the end of the next fiscal year? That's probably all we're going to have time for in this question.

Mr. Dreeshen: Yeah. The green line: our commitment of \$1.5 billion is something that we're always going to stand beside and behind. It is something that is a city of Calgary project. As they are working on scope to try to figure out what funding they can have – that is provincial; that \$1.5 billion is coming from the province. The federal government over a decade ago committed their \$1.5 billion. As funders from the federal and provincial governments, that will continue.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That concludes the government members' first block of questions.

We now move to the second round of questions and responses. The speaking rotation, going forward, will remain the same as the first round, starting with the Official Opposition, followed by the independent member, and then government caucus. We're going to assume shared time, so that will be a 10-minute talking back and forth. No one can talk for more than five minutes straight at a time, and you won't be able to cede your time to another member.

With that, I'll ask the opposition to carry on with 10 minutes of shared time.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. In the interest of time, I'm going to try to shorten my question so that the minister can get himself on the record so that stakeholders who are listening will hear his response.

I'll start first with something that is, really, a public safety issue. I'm referring to estimates line 4.3, salt, sand, gravel inventory acquisition. I refer to something that's missing from that inventory acquisition, and it is the brine solutions that are being applied to roads in Alberta already. I'm talking about salt brine solutions that are being supplied to ring road maintenance contractors and also being bought by municipalities and counties to apply as an anti-icing agent to their roads. We are proud to claim that Alberta is rat-free. Why can we not aim for ice-free Alberta highways by adopting a widespread use of the anti-icing brine solutions to suppliers in this province, prominently supply it, Tiger Calcium and LuGr, using proprietary solutions? It seems to work very well, and it saves lives. I'm wondering why the province has not adopted it in a widespread way as part of a modern arsenal to prevent icy roads from developing in the first place.

Mr. Dreeshen: Proud that Alberta is rat-free. But for Alberta to be ice-free, I think we need the benefits of global warming to hit that, because at minus 12: that's when that type of solution doesn't work. The efficacy of it and the studies that we've shown just don't work. That's why we do use sand to make sure that you have that traction on snow and ice. Obviously, if you can imagine in a blizzard, to be able to put down even heavier sand, which for anybody with a rock chip: you've probably got one from that – but just the physical properties of sand, to make sure that we have traction on our roads when we need it so that there is safe traction in icy and winter conditions. That's something that we do on an annual basis: monitor that to make sure that it's being applied appropriately.

But when it comes to that brine solution, unfortunately, minus 12 is just a bad freezing property, and we obviously get colder than minus 12.

Mr. Dach: Thank you. Through the chair I hate to contradict the minister, but the stakeholders would I think disagree with you wildly on this minus-12 assumption. I think it is incumbent upon the minister to take another real close look at the studies and the recent performance of these brine solutions. They're being used on the Henday by all three contractors, and there is data available, I believe, that the minister might want to look at, that shows the

performance rating of these contractors and their ability to keep highways clear of ice.

Given that this brine solution is available in large reservoirs here in Alberta, and potentially sugar beet additives to reduce corrosion could possibly be sourced in Alberta – they're being trucked in from the United States right now by at least one of these contractors – there is a good economic development opportunity here to source this brine as well as the anticorrosive agents in Alberta. I really would ask the minister to take a serious second look at anti-icing solutions as a problem.

We all know people who've died on icy highways. Former MLA Manmeet Bhullar, of course, was a victim of icy roads and a constituent of mine, Sana Ghani, driving back from her teaching position in Cadotte Lake. Everybody knows somebody. Seriously, Minister through the chair, I would ask that you take a real second look at these brine solution alternatives, check the data, and see if you can be updated and perhaps reassured that they have a wider operating temperature range than you may believe they now are able to be effective in. I'll leave that topic for now, but please revisit that issue.

I wanted to turn to the question of rural bus networks. Now, in 2018 you saw the demise of Greyhound. It does not appear as though the minister is interested in provincial support for re-establishing a rural bus network, regularly scheduled rural buses, or at least finding out what business model might work to re-establish this. This is an economic lifeline to small communities, economic development in rural Alberta, and it's something that the minister doesn't seem to be paying a lot of attention to. Yet you talk to people at RMA and Alberta Municipalities, and you ask them if they have a bus, and they say no. I mean, communities as big as Camrose, Wetaskiwin are without rural bus transportation, and on a number of fronts it's necessary to their survival. It's also parcel delivery. It's economic development. Is your ministry interested in finding ways that the provincial government can play a role to support the re-establishment of a rural bus transportation network in Alberta and interconnected across the province, across the country?

11:50

Mr. Dreeshen: Just if I could, Mr. Chair, on his last point on freezing rain and anti-icing solutions. Freezing rain – I'm not a weatherman – around zero to minus 10: anti-icing agents can be applied and have been used for that freezing rain, you know, just right at the freezing mark. Depending on the weather, they can be useful. But in our technical service branch we are always looking at new, innovative ways of how we can maintain our roads, build our roads in a more timely and efficient and effective manner. For your pilot . . .

Mr. Dach: Will you commit to meeting with the stakeholders who are involved in supplying the anti-icing brine already?

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Point of order.

Not relevant, 23(b). It's not part of the estimates, meeting with stakeholders.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The minister was providing an answer to the question, so I think that he should be allowed to continue this line questioning. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for the point of order. Again, if you can point to a place in the thing that comes up, I would ask you to do that.

But if you're willing to answer it, then that's fine, too.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The whole topic of the anti-icing questions that I was referring to all dealt with the supply of a product that I referenced already, and it wasn't included in that purchase list. I've already referenced the appropriate section of the budget. I just had to simply ask in response to the minister if he would agree to follow-up meetings to talk with the stakeholders.

Anyways, let's leave that topic, Mr. Chair, and now talk about rural buses and ask again: what interest does the ministry have in trying to determine a business model and assistance in re-establishing a rural bus network in Alberta?

Mr. Dreeshen: The member asked me at last estimates this exact same question, and I'll try to give the exact same answer from last year. We actually have about a dozen private-sector bus lines that operate here in Alberta from the Pacific Western Transportation . . .

Mr. Dach: They're nowhere near network, Minister. They're not anywhere near as adequate.

The Chair: Could you allow the minister to answer, please.

Mr. Dach: Sure. Go ahead.

Mr. Dreeshen: As I was saying, there are about a dozen bus lines that actually operate in the province of Alberta in rural areas. That's Pacific Western Transportation, Red Arrow, Cold Shot, J and L Shuttle, Northern Express, SunDog, Prairie Sprinter, Rider Express, Rimbe Express, Bashaw Bus Society, Brewster Express, and the Banff Airporter focused on Alberta's rural areas.

I think there is, you know, private sector that's already providing this service. There was a pilot – actually I think it was initiated back in 2018 – that looked at rural transportation and busing network, and that's something that we've reviewed and looked at. But with the private-sector industries that are already out there providing that bus service: that's something that I think they do a great job on. I'm happy to meet with those bus lines operators.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, through the chair, Minister, for that answer. Once again you're relying upon the private sector to supply Alberta with the needed transportation in rural Alberta. My response to you, sir, with respect, is that it is not working. It's absolutely inadequate, and there is a role for the provincial government, in my view, to play in determining what business model might work. It needs provincial leadership, which your ministry is failing to provide. Rural Alberta is waiting for leadership on this issue with respect to rural bus transportation. Believe me; you're going to hear from me about it this year and next year on an ongoing basis until something happens.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Point of order, Chair. This is not part of the estimates. Can we stick to the to the paper, please? That's on 23(b).

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. McDougall: Time is up.

Mr. Schmidt: We deal with points of order as they arise, Member McDougall, as you know.

You've been very generous in granting members wide latitude in using their time here at estimates. We've had similar sorts of discussions at previous meetings that you've allowed. I can't see any reason to change the direction now.

Thank you.

The Chair: Yeah. Well, I think it's been answered, and we'll go with that. Thank you very much.

Okay. We'll go to the independent. Did you have another?

Mrs. Johnson: Pass. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. We'll go to government caucus for the rest of the meeting here. Go ahead

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister. I just wanted to let you know that when I'm done my question, I'm going to be very excited to allow you the opportunity to finish answering my question, which might be a first of the day considering how it's been going so far, but I will commit to not interrupting you halfway through one of your fulsome answers, which I appreciate.

I just want to take a quick pivot here to the wildfire impacts and specifically your very long title of Transportation and Economic Corridors. If I was to add another word to it, I might add "safety corridors" just because that's what I believe – when we're talking about wildfires, that is so important to an area like mine. In 2011 – I've said this before – my hometown of Slave Lake, including my brother-in-law and some other family and friends: half of the town burned. As most of the people know, I was trapped inside of the southeast, where there was only one route out of the small neighbourhood.

This past summer when, just as an example, East Prairie Métis settlement, which is in my riding, lost 40 homes that I believe were destroyed, it highlighted the first-hand struggles, I think, of the families displaced and the trauma of not knowing if not only your house will be there when you return but if you'll be able to get out of the area safely. I'm very proud that our government did step up with a \$9 million spend to make sure these people all had homes to return to.

However, Minister, this tragedy demonstrates the importance of having multiple access routes and corridors to our smaller communities. So my first question – and I have a brief follow-up if there's time – would be: can you please speak to some of the investments that you're making in Budget 2024 to improve highway and road access to some of the smaller communities in northern Alberta and maybe highlight the importance of not just the economic corridors but what I would call safety corridors?

Thank you.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you, through you, Mr. Chair. The MLA is absolutely right. There are so many especially northern communities, First Nations, and the like that have one main access

in and out of those communities, and to have an alternate safety route is something that we do look at as well. Specific projects, like highway 686, which will essentially be a new 200-plus-kilometre road from Fort McMurray down to Peerless Trout Lake and the three First Nations that live along that route – to be able to have additional alternate safety routes in case of a wildfire is, obviously, a main priority.

Just of last year's wildfire season, Fox Lake: they have one access crossing the river, and their homes got damaged. Working with Fox Lake for them to gain access and to be able to barge across equipment and to rebuild that community is something that we've done through Transportation and Economic Corridors. Obviously, we were hoping the federal government would step up. They haven't yet. But that is something that, whether it's rebuilding communities or making sure that there are alternate safety routes in and out of those communities, is very important. You're absolutely right, and it's something that we need to identify and make sure that we can work with communities so we can build out that infrastructure. You're absolutely right, MLA Sinclair.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Minister.

And just, finally, under key objective 1.3 your minister is collaborating with Indigenous communities to identify and advance infrastructure projects across the province, one of which you just mentioned. I was just wondering if you might be able to identify any of the other projects that we either have already announced, such as the 686, or anything else coming down the pipeline as an early Easter Bunny gift to some of my people in my riding.

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, I know that the First Nations water tie-in program: it has been a success and is a success, and there are 14 First Nations that \$110 million grant has actually allocated to. You look, Budget '24 provides \$37.7 million over three years to support First Nations connecting to existing regional water systems. Essentially, that puts it right to the doorstep of the First Nation, and then, obviously, the federal government can step in.

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

I'd like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet this evening at 7 to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Forestry and Parks.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

