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Mercredi 19 octobre 2005

**Standing committee on
estimates**

Ministry of Transportation

**Comité permanent des
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère des Transports

Chair: Cameron Jackson
Clerk: Trevor Day

Président : Cameron Jackson
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ESTIMATESCOMITÉ PERMANENT DES
BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Wednesday 19 October 2005

Mercredi 19 octobre 2005

The committee met at 1555 in room 228.

MINISTRY OF TRANSPORTATION

The Chair (Mr. Cameron Jackson): Good afternoon. I'd like to convene the standing committee on estimates. We are together today to begin seven and a half hours of the Ministry of Transportation.

We customarily begin with our half-hour first rotation. We will hear from Minister Harinder Takhar. Minister, welcome, and we are in your hands.

Hon. Harinder S. Takhar (Minister of Transportation): Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, maybe I can take a minute to introduce some of my staff members here. I have Acting Deputy Minister Frank D'Onofrio. I also have here from my staff Alexandra Pecoskie; Rob Fleming, ADM, corporate services; and, at the back, Carl Hennum, assistant deputy minister, operations services, Bruce McCuaig, assistant deputy minister, policy, planning and standards division, David Nicholl, chief information officer, transportation and IT cluster, Steve Naylor, director, finance branch, Colin Douglas, deputy director, legal services, and Brian Gaston, executive director of RUS operations.

Thank you for inviting me here today. I appreciate this opportunity to speak with you about my ministry's work.

The McGuinty government has now been in power for about two years. In that time, we have accomplished much for the people of Ontario. I am proud of these accomplishments, which I would like to outline today. They support our vision of strong, healthy communities and a prosperous economy.

A safe and efficient transportation system is central to Ontario's economy and our quality of life. It is essential to keep our goods and people moving. Almost \$1.2 trillion worth of goods move across the province's highways every year. The better traffic moves, the better off we all are.

My ministry's goal is to ensure a safe and efficient transportation system, and we aim to do this in a fiscally responsible manner. We are not just talking about creating a transit culture; we are creating a transit culture in Ontario. In 2005-06, we are investing more than \$800 million in transit funding across the province, and we are delivering on our commitment to share a portion of the gas tax with municipalities to improve public transit.

Ontario has major challenges ahead. The population in our province is increasing. Thirty years from now,

another four million people will live in the greater Golden Horseshoe region alone. Now is the time to invest in improvements to support that growth.

Due to years of neglect, much of our infrastructure, including roads and bridges, needs repair. That is why we are investing in our infrastructure. We are looking to find cost-effective ways to invest in our infrastructure and to manage those investments responsibly.

In 2005-06, this fiscal year, the province will invest more than \$1.2 billion in highway infrastructure programs across Ontario. That is a 14% increase over last year, a record high. And it is money well spent. This investment will allow for the construction of 150 major contracts across Ontario to maintain, improve and expand Ontario's highway network. Road maintenance is one of the biggest expenditures for my ministry. In 2005-06, our budget for highway operations and maintenance is more than \$274 million. Our strategy is to invest now in maintenance, repair and upkeep of our highways so that we don't wind up paying more down the road. Highways, like cars, last longer if they are properly maintained.

1600

As Minister of Transportation, I'm proud to have introduced important legislation to improve safety on our roads. Bill 73, An Act to enhance the safety of children and youth on Ontario's roads, was passed into law last year. Bill 169, the transit and road safety bill, is currently being reviewed by the Legislature.

I will detail some of our highway infrastructure improvements and our safety measures later in my remarks. First, I would like to talk about a key way to keep people and goods moving and alleviate gridlock: public transit.

We are getting public transit back on track after the previous government eliminated provincial support from cash-strapped municipalities. We are the first Ontario government to provide a long-term, sustainable source of transit funding that municipalities can count on. I am proud to say this government is delivering on our commitment to gas tax funding. It is being phased in, and by late next year, two cents per litre of every litre sold in this province will go to public transit. Over the next four years, gas tax funding alone will add more than \$1 billion in investment in transit systems across Ontario. It will serve 83 transit systems in 110 municipalities. Municipalities currently without transit services will be eligible for funding once they have services up and running. We estimate that gas tax funding will help lead to more than 33 million new transit riders by 2007.

Our stakeholders are big supporters of gas tax funding for transit. Roger Anderson, president of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, calls this an important step toward a new deal. To quote Dale Richmond, former acting CEO of the Toronto Board of Trade, "Gas tax dollars are good news for Toronto's business community because it will help reduce the time and costs of moving people and goods across the city."

We are also making a big commitment to GO Transit, which carries 45 million riders every year. For the 2005-06 fiscal year alone, we are investing \$300 million for GO's operating and capital costs. Our government is meeting the needs of GO commuters, and is doing so by purchasing 27 new, more powerful, fuel-efficient locomotives that can pull two more cars, adding 300 more passengers per train; increasing the number of bi-level rail coaches to carry more passengers; providing a customer e-mail alert service—e-news—to advise of delays or schedule changes; lengthening train platforms to accommodate longer GO trains and more passengers; and opening four new GO stations: East Gwillimbury, Mount Pleasant, Kennedy and Lisgar.

I cannot stress enough that when it comes to our transportation systems and public transit, we want to ensure both are seamless. We are working to create a partnership: the Greater Toronto Transportation Authority, or GTTA. GTTA will coordinate transit planning, investment and services and make sure that transit is seamless and integrated. We are working to build consensus among municipal leaders. We want to ensure the system we put in place is supported and will be a success.

We have introduced a new fare card to make travel much simpler across the GTA. Instead of tickets, tokens or a pass, the swipe of a card will work for all participating systems, whether it's GO Transit, the TTC or a municipal transit bus in Oakville or Oshawa. People will be able to top up the cards at kiosks or on a secure Web site. The fare card will start in 2007 on city buses in Mississauga, the TTC's Union Station and on the GO Milton line. It will be fully implemented system-wide by 2010.

We are doing everything we can to make transit better, encourage more riders and reduce the number of cars on the road. One transit bus can take as many as 50 cars off the road.

We are also making better use of limited road space by encouraging carpooling. Right now, most cars on the road during rush hour carry only one person: the driver. It is a waste of highway space. We're proposing to be the first government to build high-occupancy vehicle lanes on Ontario highways. We are adding new lanes to sections of Highways 403 and 404 and we are proposing to limit them to transit vehicles or cars with two or more people. Earlier this year, I introduced the transit and road safety bill, which, if passed, would allow for HOV lanes to be effectively enforced. I will have more to say about Bill 169 in just a moment.

Traffic congestion is a major problem at our border crossings to the US, where more than \$700 million in

goods pass back and forth every day. A report by the Ontario Chamber of Commerce estimates that delays at the border cost the US and Canada more than \$13 billion a year. Ontario alone absorbs \$5.25 billion of this cost. So it is clear that keeping traffic moving at our borders is essential to the economies of both countries. The border crossings between Windsor and Detroit are Canada's premier trade gateway: 45 % of all Ontario-US trade flows through it. That is why we are partnering with the federal government and the city of Windsor to invest nearly \$500 million in construction of a major Windsor project to ease congestion at the border. This includes \$300 million as part of the Let's Get Windsor-Essex Moving strategy.

Our technical people have also met with Windsor officials on suggestions made in the city's recent Schwartz report, released in January. Schwartz, a traffic consultant, proposed a number of solutions to ease border congestion, from a new Windsor-Detroit rail tunnel to a new multi-modal air, rail and truck facility.

Projects such as the ones being implemented through the Let's Get Windsor-Essex Moving strategy and others will go a long way to easing traffic congestion and creating the seamless transportation system we envision. We are working closely with our American partners in this as well. Improvements are planned or are underway at all seven of our crossings, which include Sarnia-Point Edward, Fort Erie, Queenston-Lewiston and Thousand Islands.

I'd also like to point out that my ministry is working closely with the federal government to shape a security strategy for the transportation sector in a post 9/11 world. We recognize the need to address security challenges at our international borders and on our public transit systems. To that end, my ministry has improved the security of Ontario's drivers' licences and we are actively taking further steps to improve it.

Let me talk a little bit about highway infrastructure financing. Our investments will keep our highway system in a state of good repair, ease congestion and drive economic prosperity. We are also investing to keep our roads safe. I am going to provide you with a few figures: In 2005-06, the Ontario government will invest a record \$1.2 billion in highway infrastructure programs across the province. We have earmarked \$582 million for construction in southern Ontario; \$297 million will go to construction in northern Ontario. The Windsor gateway will receive \$19 million. And \$237 million will go toward design, property acquisition and support for the construction program.

I would like to talk for a moment on northern Ontario. Highways in the north are a lifeline for northern communities. Improvement has been much needed, long promised and longer overdue. A few weeks ago, it was my pleasure to announce a record \$1.8-billion, five-year plan for highway improvement and expansion in northern Ontario. No other government has ever made such a commitment. We have committed to \$1.1 billion in pavement and bridge improvements and \$700 million in high-

way expansion. The plan includes expediting the four-laning of Highways 11 and 69, with planned completion in seven and 12 years, respectively. These are real and achievable timelines. The northern Ontario highways strategy is the first of its kind and a great example of the McGuinty government's commitment to fostering prosperity in the north.

1610

At the same time, this government is making good on its commitment to expand and improve the highway system across the province, including the greater Golden Horseshoe area. Here are just a few examples of key construction projects:

- the rehabilitation of Highway 417 in the Ottawa area from Limoges Road to Casselman;
- the widening of Highway 401 from County Road 38 to Sydenham Road near Kingston;
- the construction of Highway 17 north, a new four-lane highway from the trunk access road to the Garden River First Nation;
- the widening of the QEW in Niagara to improve border access;
- the widening of Highway 401 from Windsor to Tilbury and from Cambridge to Woodstock.

There are many other important construction projects I would like to tell you about, but I am afraid that if I did I would go way over my allotted time here today.

I would like to take a moment, though, to mention the positive media coverage of the work of the Ministers of Transportation across the country to redefine the national highway system. Staff in my ministry worked closely with the federal government to re-examine the 1988 NHS. Through this work, Ontario has made significant gains, making more highways eligible for federal infrastructure funding.

The next matter I want to discuss is safety, which is a key priority of my ministry. Yes, an efficient transportation system is critical in our society, but it is of utmost importance that the citizens of Ontario are safe on our roads. Ontario's roads are the safest in North America, but we are always looking at ways to improve our safety record.

Pedestrians represent about 15% of motor-vehicle-related fatalities in Ontario. Some 45% of pedestrian fatalities occur at intersections and pedestrian crossings. It is a sad fact that children are nearly five times more likely to be killed than adults. Speed is one of the biggest killers on Ontario's roads.

That is why we are proposing to crack down on the worst speeders:

- by more than doubling minimum fines and adding three demerit points for drivers who ignore school crossings;
- by doubling minimum fines for drivers who don't yield at crosswalks;
- by allowing all municipalities to set a 30 kilometre-per-hour speed limit in areas where traffic-calming measures, such as speed bumps, are in place; and

—by substantially increasing the fine for speeding from 30 to 34 kilometres per hour over the limit; for example, the fine for speeding 30 kilometres an hour over the speed limit would increase from \$135 to \$210.

Bill 169 is currently being considered by the Legislature. The bill would also mean longer licence suspensions for those repeatedly convicted of excessive speeding: 50 kilometres per hour or more above the posted limit. We all want drivers to take safety seriously. We think this bill would help save lives.

However, the high-impact, low-cost safety measures in Bill 169 would not have a significant effect on our enforcement resources. In fact, the proposed measures would better support police efforts to enforce the Highway Traffic Act. Ministry staff will continue to work with police and stakeholders to develop an effective public education campaign to accompany the bill.

Bill 169 would also tackle the issue of highway congestion. If passed, it would allow police to open highways faster after a collision or spill. It would clarify powers and protect police and the province from liability. Sometimes trucking companies or their insurers want to bring in a clean-up crew from hundreds of kilometres away; it can take hours. Our proposal would ensure the orderly movement of traffic. It would also shorten the dangerous period during which stopped traffic may be struck from behind.

OPP Sergeant Cam Woolley told the Toronto Sun about Bill 169: "The police have been waiting for this legislation for a long time. It's going to save lives, improve the quality of life and the economy." I could not have said it better myself.

Another piece of legislation the McGuinty government introduced to make roads safer, especially for our kids, was passed last December. Bill 73, an Act to enhance the safety of children and youth on Ontario's roads, improves safety for toddlers, school bus riders and teens. It protects toddlers and small children by making booster seats mandatory. All drivers who are transporting children, including grandparents and babysitters, must use a car seat or booster seat. The law means that owners of vehicles now face a \$2,000 fine if their vehicle illegally passes a stopped school bus.

This bill will further protect children riding school buses by requiring new safety features on all Ontario school buses built after January 1, 2005. The features include more emergency windows and side mirrors and crossing arms to stop children from walking in front of the bus where drivers can't see them.

It protects teenagers by strengthening the province's graduated licensing system. It limits the number of teenaged passengers a teenaged G2 driver can carry between midnight and 5 a.m. Our analysis shows that teenaged G2 drivers are almost three times more likely to be involved in a fatal or serious collision if they are carrying teenaged passengers—the more teenaged passengers, the higher the risk.

You can see from this that safety is a top priority for my ministry and for this government. By working very

hard to make our roads safer, we are saving lives and building safer communities for everyone in Ontario.

A safe, efficient, modern transportation system is crucial for moving people and goods. It keeps our communities strong and drives Ontario's economy. In the 1950s and 1960s, our transportation system was a model for North America. With our commitment to good planning, sound investment and fiscal responsibility, our government can make Ontario a leader in transportation once again.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share with you the important work my ministry is doing for the people of Ontario, our economy and our future. I will be very happy to answer any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. Now I will recognize Mr. O'Toole.

Mr. John O'Toole (Durham): Thank you, Minister. It's a pleasure to be here. I apologize that I was a little late coming, but I'll certainly get a copy of Hansard. I do also have a copy of your speech here.

I want to start out by saying, in the ministry's defence, that over the last 10 years that I've been here I find it probably the most responsive ministry that I deal with at a constituency level. A lot of times, as elected members of whatever party, it's important that we get responsive feedback to concerns that are brought to our attention, whether it's the condition of our provincial roadways or other observations that are made.

I can tell you that in my riding of Durham at the moment there are two or three projects underway. I would say that I'm very happy with the work that's being done and continues to be done on Highways 7A, 35, 115, 401 east of Oshawa, in parts of Oshawa and certainly around the Salem Road interchange. I'm very concerned about progress being made as quickly and expeditiously as possible on Stevenson Road, a huge issue for the region of Durham.

So starting off on a positive note, I commend the staff of the ministry. I've always felt that I've had very good responses from and relationships with the ministry, and I certainly want that to be on the record, because most of what I have to say is probably more critical, as it is my role as the critic to bring concerns to your attention.

I think, in any sequential way, I want to say that Mr. Dunlop has a few specific questions, and his time is limited, so mine is as well. So I won't be too pushy on some of the stuff.

I think it's probably important first to deal with the bill that's before us. Bill 169 is a bill that's before the Legislature. In fact, it was supposed to be debated in third reading this afternoon. The House leader set that aside, probably under your direction, because of your presence here today—or ministry staff; I have no idea, but I'm well prepared for that debate.

1620

I would say, though, that that bill, respectfully, shows the continuity between governments to some extent, with a couple of exceptions. As you probably know, much of the work done was in the legislation presented by Norm

Sterling, Bill 241. I commend you for replicating that work and bringing it forward as soon as possible, because you had pointed out that some of the incident management and traffic congestion initiatives are supportive of it. I would say that John Tory and the opposition are in support of that.

As you know through question period yesterday, we did have a couple of concerns—some of which were of a political nature, some of which were really of a substantive policy nature—about the attention being paid to the section of the bill dealing with the airport limousine issue. I want to treat that as an issue that, in all senses, it's probably best to state in third party observations.

Some years ago, as you know, the history probably started when the province interfered inadvertently and probably shouldn't have. They should have left it under municipal jurisdiction between the city of Mississauga and the city of Toronto. I suspect and hope that that's how it would be done. I think that would reflect very well on you and your ministry to—not for any motives by the government. In all fairness, we entertained a bill similar to your content in Bill 169, and it wasn't passed.

But I'm looking at third party endorsement here. David Miller's letter, dated September 29, is probably a case in point:

"...the city indicate its opposition to Bill 169 ... as it pertains to 'scooping' fares at the airport, unless it is amended to remove the exemption that permits airport-licensed vehicles from 'scooping' fares within the city of Toronto and the Minister of Transportation and opposition critics be so advised."

You're probably aware of that correspondence. Mayor Miller is a consensus kind of leader. He sort of said, "I support council's position on this matter." There's a third party, some would say NDP, perspective. Gilles would like to hear that, I'm sure. He's saying that it's the right thing to do.

When you look at some of the issues around fairness, I could live with the solution that levels the playing field both ways. I know there are more taxis in Toronto than there are limousines at the airport; I'm aware of the implications of allowing that to happen. But there are members of your caucus whose future will depend on you forcing this through, forging ahead, failing to listen to the committee during the hearings, where there were many proponents of both sides of the issue. I have quite a few comments in the Hansards from those hearings on Bill 169.

I leave it at that, because I think the second issue that, as a party, we have a concern with is something that maybe didn't receive—just to wrap that up. We did move an amendment which I thought was rather conciliatory. All it said to you is, "Don't proclaim that section." I mean, you can pass the bill; you're government and you probably will pass the bill, but all we're asking you is not to proclaim that section dealing with the scooping issue. You may find other resolves. We, as a party, would like to support the bill, but we will probably find some difficulty, because that issue has been left out there as

somewhat contentious in its nature. I'll leave that with you.

The second opposition that we certainly would have would be the failure to resolve the driving school issue. In fairness, ourselves—again, I go back to being as unbiased as possible in this discussion. I commend you for disbanding the Ontario Safety League, in terms of whether or not they were doing what they were contracted to do. I understand that you have now given that to independent arm's-length audit groups to look at the operational functions of giving out driving school safety certificates.

As it turns out—I'm referring to a couple of things here—there was quite a good article on television which really clearly indicated that there was a miserable misuse of the validity of the certificates themselves under the old regime. The solution there is to have a self-regulating organization by your own design, if you will, that deals with compliance, as most colleges or regulatory bodies are compelled to. I do think the bill somewhat fails to resolve that issue. I think the driving school association made a couple of very important presentations to the committee. I'm sure you're very familiar with the argument. We were, as government, and probably didn't solve it either. But you have an opportunity in this legislation to resolve the regulation and enforcement of compliance with curriculum and content for the validity of these driver safety certificates that are awarded.

You get revenue—I'm not sure, and we'll leave that as a question for you to provide the response for us, but about \$4-plus is sent to the ministry for every certificate. But it's my understanding that now you're just giving the certificates out. Hopefully, you know how many you've given out to whom so you can say, "Gee, there are 5,000 out there." Maybe they're doing laser printing. There could be counterfeit certificates out there; in fact, some would suggest there are. I'm not yet aware of the auditor's comments on that, but the auditor's report is a substantive document. The committee on public accounts dealt with your ministry and there are several issues that will arise as part of these ongoing discussions. That is the other issue we have some problems with in Bill 169.

How much time do I have, Mr. Chair? I do want to leave Mr. Dunlop about half the time.

The Chair: You have about 20 minutes. I've been advised by Mr. Dunlop that he needs 10. I will signal you.

Mr. O'Toole: If you'd just give me a signal, Chair, I'd appreciate that.

This is sort of complimentary and not meant in a backhanded way. Compliments come from me after a lot of reflection—I'd like to criticize if I could, because I'm a critic. That's the job.

I brought to your attention a couple of issues. The work being done that I say is a compliment is on 35/115 at Orono. You've done a great job on the sound barriers on that section, and I know there was similar work on the 401 in Newcastle. It's very expensive—they do a lot of studies and all that kind of stuff. My advice to you is,

don't have the public meetings too much before you're prepared to put them on your capital priority list. That was done earlier in our mandate and we never did it. So for four years I had nothing but complaints because it was never done. That's advice, if you will. You are doing it—we didn't—and I commend you for doing it, because I'm taking the credit. No, not really. They know your good and able staff are doing that.

But at that particular location there is something, which I have argued since I was a regional councillor in Durham, that should be done. I mean this as a non-political comment. The Taunton Road exit from the southbound portion of 35/115—a couple of years ago they did put an advance warning sign that that ramp was coming up on people, but people are driving 110 or so up to that ramp. Maybe they should be travelling slower. They come on the ramp and there are about three roads that merge right at the end of a very short ramp. I know the region has jurisdiction over Taunton Road; I understand that. But certainly that ramp exit should have been extended. I'm telling you—I use it weekly—I almost got killed twice. It's just terrible.

I leave that with your ministry. I have written on it within the last year and in previous years as well. There is video evidence of it. I know it takes an agreement with the region. What they've got to do is extend the merge lane; just extend the pavement 30 feet. That's all. We're not asking for the whole environmental assessment nine yards. I've talked to regional council about it. It's an issue where you could probably, while you're there—you're still there grinding up the road. I find it difficult to go to some of my meetings, but I overlook those short-term interferences.

When we get traffic problems on Highway 12—Mr. Arthurs may want to bring this up because he services a lot of that part. That road is becoming very busy. There is work being done on it to accommodate some of the overflow from 407, since it comes to Brougham. This brings me to the point that the 407 east expansion—this is a brand new topic—is absolutely critical, not just for me on a personal level. It goes right through my riding and creates a lot of havoc for me on land acquisition issues. You've been very good in terms of having public input and consultations, and that's valid.

The major concern I have is dealing with significant landowner situations. I'm going to bring one: It's called the Powell farm. It's a family farm: a father and two sons, with many generations of farming—very prosperous. It's right north of Durham College at Simcoe Street. There won't be a farm there. That should not be bought out as farm property; it should be bought out as what it's going to be, the future destination of a Westin Harbour Castle Hotel or whatever. That's the problem. They need to get on with the business of farming. I believe that location—I'll put it on the public record here; I'm not an engineer nor am I qualified, but I do live there and am quite familiar with the area—should go north of Winchester Road. There are a couple of locations there where it crosses back and forth. It probably

cost millions of dollars. I want that on the record: It should go north of Winchester, somewhere in the vicinity of the new university, and stay over there, instead of going down below and then back up. They'll have to rebuild Winchester Road. There will be dislocations—the Knights of Columbus Park and a whole bunch of other land issues—so there's no easy solution.

1630

The east expansion needs to be built. I'll leave that as a question. I need to have the date of when you're going to get on with it. I could talk more about it, because Wayne Arthurs and I were on regional council at the time when what they called the technically preferred route was mapped out. I recognize some of your staff in the audience that have lived with that file; they've made their career out of that file. Hopefully, their career on that file will be ending soon. So I bring that to your attention.

Laurie Scott, Jim Flaherty and I had a gridlock meeting in my riding last week, represented by the chambers of commerce from the city of Kawartha Lakes, Whitby, the Greater Oshawa Chamber of Commerce, the Clarington Board of Trade, a very large group of commuters and other interested transport stakeholder companies and stuff like that. The biggest issue there was the 407. That was without their being prompted; there was no agenda for them to bring up certain issues.

A compliment, Minister, on a second issue: in the fastest-growing area in this province, the expansion of GO service. I know you are doing something with the municipality of Clarington, Mayor John Mutton, to bring an express bus service from Clarington. I think you've done some land acquisition around the plaza there. You're going to have an express bus to Oshawa. That's a smart idea, because there's no more parking at the Oshawa GO station. It's a huge issue.

They are building internal transit. I like the initiative in the throne speech that there should be a smart card. Durham region is going forward with an integrated transit system. That's to start this year. It's huge money, with lots of political footballs on that issue. I'd say to you that they should be the smart card community for implementation. You really can't integrate transit without the smart card. It's too much time at the fare box and making change—non-value-added activities. Get the card and put it out. If it doesn't work, if you implement it in York region or Ottawa or some of the other larger cities it will probably be ironed out. I'm convinced that Durham region would work with you co-operatively. They want to do the right thing. They're expanding transit; we're expanding GO to Port Perry. These are all good initiatives.

I say this with some kind of personal agenda here, because I am also asking you today to implement my private member's bill. I've met with the academics from the Canadian Urban Transit Association—Dr. Roschlau, I think it is—and a few others. I've actually written to federal Minister of Finance Goodale to make sure that it's a non-taxable benefit to incent the use of public transit. I think it is part of the solution. It may not even be

a popular idea amongst some persons in my riding, but I do believe the solution is not a lot more roads but improving transit service to get into congested areas. There's no more space left to park or to bring all those thousands of cars in for people who want to go to work in Toronto from York.

I commute every day. It's now two hours a day each way for me. I'm in my car almost as long as I'm here. I'm going to suggest that they extend question period, because I don't get a chance to ask too many questions. I'm being flippant there, but I would say that increasing the use of perimeter surface will relieve your necessity to buy more parking lots. Parking lots are a loss of commercial income for municipalities, because those would be commercial highway frontage properties. Why are we putting cars on them? That doesn't make any sense.

My sense is that there's an aversion today to get on the bus, but there isn't to get on transit. I use transit as frequently as I can, and because I'm on duty today, I've missed the last train. I'd have to wait for an hour once I get down to Union Station. There are more people in Durham than in all of Nova Scotia, maybe Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island.

So forget about Hazel. She whines all the time. They've got all the roads. They've got all the transit. Start to think of Roger Anderson and Mayor John Gray in Oshawa. You were there for an announcement on the low-platform buses, and I commend you for that, because there's capital money there, as well as Marcel Brunelle and John Mutton from Clarington.

Durham region is ready, willing and able to be a very significant contributor to some of the issues of frequency of the trains and GO Transit, and this will all enhance ridership, because if you implement my bill, it would give a tax credit. You could control that through regulation of how much. You could implement it over a number of years. It's better than the gas tax. The gas tax doesn't work for Blackstock; it doesn't work for many parts of Ontario. It's unfair. They're collecting the money from the people who are paying a fortune for gas today and not getting any money. That's an argument I'm sure Garfield will be making clear.

It's fine for the urbanites to get all this gas tax money. David Miller will be giving everybody an increase. There won't be any more people on transit, minus a direct subsidy to the user. In fact, I would only give it to people who buy monthly or annual passes. I'd make it a non-taxable benefit, as well.

Now, that's the problem. Federally, they want to treat these things—now, what's the argument here, Minister? The argument here is—this is a real privilege, to get this chance to push my bill on this. It's his time, and he doesn't have to answer questions. On this bill, the problem was issuing, collecting and monitoring valid, legitimate receipts. The smart card solves that problem. It's like your 407 toll, solved. You've got the transponder? See you later. Here's your bill. Go to court. Now, you haven't solved the 407 issue, but I didn't think you could. You knew you couldn't. You just spend a lot of money in court.

I do say in all sincerity, this is a really good opportunity to recognize that smart policy is smart politics. So I'll leave that with you. I know that you're a smart person. You run a large business—well, you don't run it any more, at least as I understand it; certainly at arm's length, except for dinnertime, of course. Those are just flippant comments.

The Chair: There are 10 minutes remaining, Mr. O'Toole.

Mr. O'Toole: I have 10 minutes remaining?

Thank you for the opportunity to address you directly, Minister, because I have a lot of respect for the challenge ahead of you to implement my bill.

The Chair: Mr. Dunlop, 10 minutes.

Mr. Garfield Dunlop (Simcoe North): I appreciate the opportunity to make a few comments today. I have to tell you, I'm a new member of the estimates committee and I'm learning very quickly.

I want to say a few things about MTO to begin with. I know a number of the people in the room, and I know you see governments come and go. Like Mr. O'Toole, I compliment the ministry for sticking with their plans and trying the best they can to keep our roads in a well-planned manner, safe and secure. I think the minister mentioned moving in a direction for increased public safety on our roads, increased safety of the vehicles and the way we transport our children in our school buses etc.

I didn't hear the minister say this in his comments, but I think it's safe to say that for a number of years now in North American studies, our roads in the province of Ontario have stayed reasonably high on that list; usually, if they're not one, they're number two. So I think we should all be proud of that.

A couple of further compliments, and then I do have a couple of specific area-type comments. As a person who travels a lot of kilometres per year on the roads in my role as an MPP—I drive one specific car for that job—I generally put between 60,000 and 70,000 kilometres a year on my car. I want to say to you that I've watched two companies in my region—first of all, it was Beamish Construction, and now it's TWD Roads Management—and I just want to pass on that I think they both did an excellent job, and are doing an excellent job, of maintaining the roads. I see them out there on weekends cleaning culverts. I know there was some opposition to the contracts, but I just want to pass on from a personal point of view that I think they've done a fairly reasonable job.

1640

The other thing I would like to pass on—and I wish our government had made the initiative because I brought this up a few times—is I'm very pleased to hear that the government and the Minister of Transportation are going ahead with HOV lanes. I first travelled on HOV lanes, I guess, about 10 or 11 years ago, in Washington and the Virginia area. Actually, I was extremely impressed with that program. In Washington, you have to have four vehicles in a car, because we happened to be with two—

Mr. Gilles Bisson (Timmins–James Bay): You mean four people in the car.

Mr. Dunlop: What did I say?

Mr. Bisson: Four vehicles.

Mr. Dunlop: Well, that's the kind of day it's been. No, it's four people in a car.

My wife and I spent a week in Washington with another couple, and we were allowed to travel in that lane. I've got to tell you, if we can get these things up and running, they will in fact keep a lot of cars off the roads. I think I heard the minister say "a minimum of two in a car." If somebody could respond as to why we couldn't jump that to four, I would like to hear that answer at some point because it seemed to work well in Washington. I've seen a lot of buses and these small cube vans with eight or 10 seats in them. I think there's a fine; you could report a car, also, that did not have the four people.

I know it will take money to put the HOV lanes into place, and I hope it's not at the expense of planning in other areas. My colleague from Durham made a passionate plea for road improvements in his region, but I've got to tell you, the province of Ontario doesn't end at Durham; it ends at Simcoe county.

Mr. Bisson: We know. We live in northern Ontario.

Mr. Dunlop: We have a couple of roads in Simcoe county—and I told Jim Wilson I'd mention this today; he's actually on TV right now on the mandatory retirement bill. More specifically, in my area we've been expecting an approval and actually to see construction of Highway 12 between Coldwater and Orillia for some time. As an MPP it is by far my number one road issue or traffic issue.

We're very fortunate in that region. We have Highway 400 and Highway 11 both going through the region. They both go through the riding of Simcoe North. They're well maintained and looked after. We get a tremendous amount of traffic through that part of the province. I can also compliment both Minister Klees and Minister Takhar for finishing up Highway 93. I'm not here simply to criticize, but I do want to say that Highway 12 was the priority road, as far as the condition it's in.

Then, of course, if we could respond to the timing of Highway 26 at some point—I think you've all heard about this: the realignment from Wasaga Beach to Collingwood. I think it's safe to say that with the \$1-billion-plus expansion by Intrawest in the Collingwood area—there's a substantial number of new homes—Wasaga Beach, per capita, is the fastest-growing municipality in, I think, Ontario today. They're growing by leaps and bounds and there's a huge amount of traffic in that area. So Highway 26 and Highway 12 are the priority areas that I hear the complaints and the concerns about.

Minister, it doesn't have to be today—I'm thinking along the lines of Minister Watson's new area, the Minister of Health Promotion—and don't laugh at me for saying this, but I've actually already suggested this for one county road, and that's bike lanes or running lanes for people. Perhaps I could just explain a little bit. On County Road 44, the road that runs from the casino at

Casino Rama through to Washago, the county is going to redevelop that road. It's a fairly big redevelopment program. A couple of years ago, because there are so many campgrounds and cottages along that area, I asked the county, "Why wouldn't you proceed and try to have a bike lane there?" I have seen them in Waterloo region; I've seen bike lanes on the roads. It's for public safety as well as for promoting physical fitness. I've had a couple of e-mails just this week, following a Highway 12 public hearing—I think it was held at Warminster a couple of weeks ago—from MTO, and I've had a bunch of e-mails come into my office asking me to investigate if any of the provincial highways have ever had a bike lane, and if it may be an idea to promote a healthy lifestyle and public safety at the same time. We would love, if that's a possibility at all, to be a pilot project. I know there are going to be some truck lanes etc. when it is built. If you could investigate that, and maybe even possibly comment, whether it's today or at another point.

Interjection.

Mr. Dunlop: I'm down to one minute? OK. Just a comment through Mr. Arthurs, who's the Chair now: It would be a good opportunity for you to take advantage of some of these announcements and announce them together in the Durham area.

Those are the comments I had today. I guess we're together for a total of seven hours? Is that what I heard?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Wayne Arthurs): Seven and a half.

Mr. Dunlop: Seven and a half hours. I guess I'll have to find other things to talk about as well. In the meantime, those are comments we could start off with today.

The Acting Chair: The floor is now over to the third party.

Mr. Bisson: Welcome, Minister, and to the staff of MTO, who work under difficult conditions at times trying to keep our highways open and operating. I appreciate the work you do. I've got some specific questions. I don't want to do a 30-minute speech; I just want to get into some of the things that I think need to be raised, in no particular order.

I just want to raise one issue that we've been seeing much more of, and I'd be interested to hear from the Liberal members if they're getting the same thing; and that is, people who are having their driver's licences suspended as a result of a visit to a doctor or a visit to an emergency. At one point, I believe it was under the Conservative government—I'm not sure if it was a law or regulation—that any time you present yourself to your doctor or emergency or a health clinic, if there is suspicion that the person has had some kind of a seizure or something that may be an incapacitation from being able to drive, a report has to be filed to the Ministry of Transportation. As a result of that, the person's licence is withdrawn. It's causing a lot of trouble. We all agree with the intent, which is that we want to make sure that people who have a driver's licence are safe and able to drive and do not put themselves, their passengers or other people on our highways or roads or sidewalks, whatever it might be, in danger.

But what we've seen, at least in my constituency office, is a pattern of a couple of things happening. One is that we have a lot of people who have had their licences taken away that, quite frankly, shouldn't have been taken away. I'll give you one example: One particular gentleman—I don't want to use his name; I do have a waiver signed by him, but I didn't tell him I'd be raising his name at estimates. He went to the hospital because he wasn't feeling well, at one point about two years ago. He was seen by a neurologist just as a matter of procedure. A guy by the name of Dr. Meloff, who is a neurologist, happened to be in Timmins doing his duties that day; he comes up from Toronto and does work in the city of Timmins. Just because he happened to be there, they said, "It would be a good idea to pass you on to Dr. Meloff for a consultation." Dr. Meloff looked at him, said, "No, there's nothing wrong with you. You're fine. You had a dizzy spell. It might have been something you ate." God knows what the stated reason was. "But that's the reason you passed out. Away you go." He was forced, along with the attending physician, to fill out a report. When the report was filled out by the nurses at the beginning, it was listed as a seizure. The guy lost his licence. It took my office 10 months to try and get this guy's licence back that should never have been withdrawn, to the point that the attending physician, the physician who was the family doctor and the neurologist who treated him all had sent in letters to the Ministry of Transportation saying that this man did not have a seizure and that there was no reason he should lose his driver's licence. We were unable for the longest time to get the ministry to overturn this suspension.

1650

Finally, thanks to Nathalie Walsh in my office, one of my constituency workers, we managed to yet again go back to the doctors for about the third time. The first time we were rejected, the second time we were rejected and the third time we gathered all the letters again. The doctors were all mad as heck because they've got better things to do. Basically, we asked them, "Could you please give us some letters again that say that this man didn't have a seizure and there's no reason there should be a suspension or even a limiting of his licence?" Again, we got letters from his family doctor and the neurologist, at a real pain to the neurologist and the doctor because they've got better things to do, and he got his licence back.

There's no reason for that. If it was only once, I'd say, "This guy got caught in the trap." But the reality is it's more than once. I've taken the time to go back and talk to the medical community, at least in the city of Timmins, and I've talked to a couple of doctors up in Hearst and Kap about this, and what they're telling me is that part of the problem is that when the person comes in, they are forced to fill out a form if they believe he had any kind of seizure. They're saying that, number one, that's putting them in a heck of a position. The guy had a seizure; of course he had a seizure. The good doctor across the way knows what I'm talking about. But what is the cause of

that seizure? It may very well be that the person didn't eat well the day before or maybe he fell and hit his head: I don't know. But sometimes it's not because of a pre-vailing long-term disease.

I would like whoever is responsible for that department up front so I can ask a couple of questions on that. Who's responsible for licensing, other than the minister?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Do you want to do it now?

Mr. Bisson: Oh yes, this is my 30 minutes, so I want to do it now.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I will let the DM answer.

Mr. Bisson: My first question to the DM is, do you have any stats to indicate how many suspensions we've had over the last two or three years, year per year?

Mr. Frank D'Onofrio: Given that we have 8.5 million drivers, we do have a heavy workload. I wanted to say a couple of things in response to your questions. First, the standards we use are national standards and they're created by the jurisdictions across Canada in consultation with the medical profession. Seizures are a specific area of concern. I have to admit that's certainly the case because whenever there are seizures involved, there's obviously a concern about being on the road and driving, and that's something we should all be worried about.

We do have volumes of reports that—

Mr. Bisson: OK, can you provide that to the committee, please? I would like to have the numbers of suspensions because of medical reports, let's say over the last five years, year per year, and how many were reinstated, if that's possible.

Mr. D'Onofrio: Sure. The most recent year I have is for 2004, when we had 10,500 suspensions for medical reasons. That's been pretty consistent over the years. There were 10,000 in 2003 and 10,200 in 2002.

Mr. Bisson: Is it your view that the ministry has the capacity to deal with the volume? I mean the amounts that are coming in by suspension. Do we have the staff necessary to do the due diligence that needs to be done to make sure licences are not unnecessarily suspended?

Mr. D'Onofrio: Yes, I believe so.

Mr. Bisson: I don't believe so. I don't want to argue with you, but that is not the impression out there. I'm trying to help you here.

Mr. D'Onofrio: I can tell you that when cases come in, we categorize them into the most serious, so seizures would be important and dealt with most quickly. I can also tell you that the decisions are made on the basis of the most recent medical opinion that comes in to us. So if one opinion comes in that says there might be a problem and we take action on that, it can be replaced by another medical opinion.

Mr. Bisson: Just on that point, that is part of the problem. I talked about the one particular case where the initial letter basically said there was nothing wrong, the letter we provided after from all the doctors, and a third time. What we were told every time we sent it in was that they had to rely on the initial letter and for the medical review team to do its work. For whatever reason—I don't

know how much plainer it could have been. The letters were very clear: This man should not have had his driver's licence suspended.

I guess I'm asking if we have the capacity at the review level to do what has to be done so they can take a look at the letters and actually read them.

Mr. D'Onofrio: I believe we do. I think the case you described is one that is complicated. We can certainly review it and look to see what happened in this particular case. If it went to the medical review board, it means that it was a complex case.

Mr. Bisson: How many would go to the medical review board?

Mr. D'Onofrio: I don't know.

Mr. Bisson: You can provide it later. That's something I would ask you to provide this committee with.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Can I just add something to this? Actually, I had the opportunity myself to visit that section of the ministry. I think there's a tremendous amount of work that goes through the ministry in that section; there's no question about it. But we are reviewing all our procedures in this regard. We depend upon—

Mr. Bisson: I'm sorry; I have a bunch of more questions. I don't want to cut you off, Minister, but I have 30 minutes and I have a bunch of specific questions.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: OK, go ahead.

Mr. Bisson: I do appreciate your interjection, though. I'm not trying to be rude; it's just my time.

What I need is if you can provide us with the number that actually go before the review committee and what the stats are.

Mr. D'Onofrio: I have that. For 2004, files reviewed by the medical advisory committee, 3,400; in 2003, 3,500; in 2002, 3,700.

Mr. Bisson: OK. Just explain to me so I better understand. If you get about 10,000 that are sent in and about 3,400 go to the medical review committee, the balance, I take it, were not objected to on face value by the people who were reported. What happens to the rest?

Mr. D'Onofrio: Those numbers—the 10,500, 10,000 and so forth that we talked about—were actual suspensions, so we receive many more than that.

Mr. Bisson: That's what I wanted to know: how many you get. Is that tracked? I misunderstood when you gave it back. I will get back to you, Minister; I didn't mean to be short.

I'll tell you why I'm asking for this specifically. The doctors in our community are complaining, number one, that they're finding this is putting them in an awful spot, and number two, it's quite onerous. Some of them are quite upset about it. I would like to know how many of these actual reports get filed per year. If you can provide that, it would be helpful.

Mr. D'Onofrio: We can get that for you.

Mr. Bisson: Thank you. I have a memo—we've got so many of these, but I just want to give you one in particular. I might ask the gentleman for permission over the weekend, and I can give you his specific case next week. Here's another one. A guy works for the transit—

he was a bus driver. Basically, he was involved in an accident where he lost part of the vision in his eye, so he wanted to withdraw himself from driving a bus. He said, "Listen, I don't think I can do my job as well as I could. Is there something I can do for the transit?" So the transit authority gave him a job doing maintenance inside the garage.

The guy is a year away from retirement, and all of a sudden the employer decides to play hardball: "You've got to go back and drive a bus." OK, that's fair. So the guy had to go back and requalify for his licence. But in the process of requalifying for the licence, they suspended his licence.

I know a lot of people who only have one eye and still have a driver's licence. In fact, I know some driving instructors who are in that situation. It seems like it's somewhat arbitrary. I'm not sure of the class of licence he needed to drive a bus, but he lost his G as a result of being asked to do a driver's test to get back whatever licence he needed to drive the bus.

So here's this guy, less than a year away from retirement. The only freedom he and his wife have, because they live out in the bush at the lake—you know, the guy is snafued. Luckily for him, his wife drives. If his wife didn't drive, he'd be in deep trouble. The problem is that they say, "Go get an assessment." There are no assessments available in northern Ontario. You've got to go to London. I'm not talking London, England, hopefully; I'm talking London, Ontario. He goes to the assessment. And it's not just one assessment; they make him go back a couple of times.

This whole thing takes a long period of time, with loss of wages by this individual from having to take time off work, expenses as far as travelling and all that, which he may or may not have. My question to you is, what can we do to make sure we have a system that is not seen to be as arbitrary as this one is? Like I say, I know people who drive who have one eye, and yet this guy loses his G because he lost partial vision in one eye. Any comments?

Mr. D'Onofrio: It's difficult for me to comment on a specific case because—

Mr. Bisson: I will bring the specifics.

Mr. D'Onofrio: We need the specifics.

1700

Mr. Bisson: But do you understand where I'm going with my general comment? I'm not pointing the finger at anybody in the ministry; I understand people honestly try to do the right thing. That's not my argument. It seems, though, that it's somewhat arbitrary, because we see cases come through the door where one person with the exact same situation gets a suspension, and the next person with the same situation doesn't get the suspension. I find it rather frustrating, and our level of frustration is from our constituency office—and I imagine it's the same for other members if they go check with their staff. When we call the medical review people, whatever they're called, it is pretty difficult sledding. You have to have a staff person who's got a lot of patience, a lot of time and is willing to invest the time necessary to move forward to try to get the person reinstated.

What I guess I would ask the ministry and the minister a little bit later is, you do have an MPPs' help desk there. I don't want to be mean, but we'd like a little bit more help from that particular desk. What can you do to assist members when they're contacted by their constituents to make sure that a case is reviewed and that the information we provide is reviewed fairly? If the minister would like to comment?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Absolutely. The staff is there to help you out. I want to say that on the vision standards, there are certain criteria: either you meet them or you don't, right? It's pretty clear-cut. On the medical side, we are actually working with the medical association right now to review the forms, what they need to report and what they don't need to report, and we will streamline that process.

Mr. Bisson: It needs to be streamlined. But on the MPP help desk, specifically on suspension, is there anything that can be done in order to—I don't want to speak against the people who work there, because I know they work hard; this is not pointing fingers at anybody. But it seems that they're overloaded and don't have the time to deal with individual cases as we send them in. I'm just wondering if the minister is prepared to review that and, if necessary, to add staff to that particular function.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I am prepared to review it and see what the workload looks like.

Mr. Bisson: OK, that's good. Thank you for that.

Moving on to another issue, I want to bring you to page 62 in your estimates binder. It's a question I just want to understand: airport maintenance. We're obviously talking about remote northern airports in, well, northern Ontario, basically. As I looked at that, it's just kind of strange, the way that's laid out in your estimates.

Interjection.

Mr. Bisson: No, it shouldn't be federal. The federal government can't do anything right. Don't get me going with the James Bay. Oh, man. I've got E. coli in water up in northern Ontario in Kashechewan, and the federal government's response is, "You can bathe your babies in the water." Don't get me going on the federal government.

OK. Estimates, page—my eyes have seen the glory—62. Here we go: Is the overall budget \$3 million for the maintenance of those airports? I was a little bit unsure as I was looking at the numbers down the page a ways, where it says "First Nations" in that table. Is that the money that's attributed to the maintenance of those airports? On page 62, about 80% of the way down that column, you'll see "First Nations," just underneath "Transition Fund."

Interjection.

Mr. Bisson: I couldn't find your actual maintenance budget in here. Is that capital?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: This one is the capital.

Mr. Bisson: Yes, it would help if I had my glasses. That is capital. That's why it didn't make any sense.

What's the operational budget? I couldn't find it.

Mr. Rob Fleming: Sir, that's for roads; that's not for remote airports.

Mr. Bisson: But MTO pays—I fly into those airports with my own airplanes, and you guys maintain those airports.

Mr. Fleming: Yes.

Mr. Bisson: What do we spend per year? I didn't see it in the estimates binder. That's why I was wondering. Where would I find it?

Mr. O'Toole: Page 58.

Mr. Bisson: Page 58, you're saying, John?

Mr. Fleming: The operating, sir, is \$5.5 million.

Mr. Bisson: And that's on page 58, I'm told? What page do I find that on? Because I couldn't find it in the binder, and I'm just a little bit curious.

While you're looking for that, Minister, have you had any requests from any of the band councils, primarily where these airports are, where the First Nations have asked for a greater role in the decision-making around those airports? Has anybody contacted you?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I am actually not aware of this.

Mr. Bisson: No? ADM? DM? Anybody? No? Who's responsible for the airports?

Interjection.

Mr. Bisson: Get over here and introduce yourself. Sorry. I'm going to move quickly through this stuff. I don't mean to be disrespectful.

The Chair: Please, if we could just tone down the pace a little bit. You've asked a series of about eight or nine questions. Staff are scrambling to assemble it.

Mr. Bisson: They're looking for a number.

The Chair: No, I'm talking at the moment, Mr. Bisson. I'll make sure you get your full 30 minutes, but I've never seen this sort of pace. So I'd like to just suggest that if we need a little more time, we'll take more time. If you could leave the questions under advisement and allow them to respond.

The gentleman who's in front of us, if you could please identify yourself and respond, and, where possible, if you're referencing a page in the estimates, that is helpful for the Hansard record. Please proceed.

Mr. Carl Hennem: I'm Carl Hennem, ADM of operations. I wonder if you could repeat the question.

Mr. Bisson: My question was, a couple of First Nations have approached me about this anecdotally, and I haven't had anything official given to me, but apparently there's a bit of a move afoot on the part of some of the First Nations band councils to ask the ministry for a greater role in, not the maintenance, but the decision of how we run those airports. Has anybody contacted you guys?

Mr. Hennem: The answer generally is no, but they have ongoing dialogue with the local First Nations. Quite frankly, they have quite a bit of participation in deciding what takes place at the airports. As you know, we employ people from the First Nation reserves as well.

Mr. Bisson: I was just wondering, because people have mentioned that to me a couple of times.

Now that the ministry has had a chance to look at it, do we have the page where I can find where the \$5.6 million comes from? Did we find that?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Can we get back to you on that?

Mr. Bisson: Yes, that would be fine.

Again, on airport facilities in those remote communities—I don't want to put the ministry on the spot, but if I asked people who have been to those remote airports to put up their hands, it would probably be me and you. You've been to Cat Lake. You've been to a whole bunch of them. Those buildings are in—

Mr. Hennem: Fort Hope.

Mr. Bisson: Fort Hope is in terrible shape.

Minister, just one of the things that I see first-hand and that people are complaining about is that the condition of many, I guess you can call them "terminals"—but they're really not terminals; they're buildings that people basically wait in when the plane is coming in or going out—are in pretty desperate shape. I'm wondering, does the ministry have a capital plan in order to replace or repair some of these particular buildings? Is that available?

Mr. Hennem: We do have a capital budget for the airports.

Mr. Bisson: Yes, I know a capital budget, but I meant a capital plan about which ones we're going to fix when and all that stuff.

Mr. Hennem: These are operating decisions that are made as required. Those decisions are made as the airports require repair and maintenance.

Mr. Bisson: I give you credit and commend you for the maintenance of the runways, because I land on them; they're pretty good. However, the building facilities are in pretty sad shape. I think you can agree, if you go into most of these communities, I can think of a few of them that are probably acceptable for use anywhere else, but for a large percentage of them—I would argue upwards of 50% to 60% of them—we wouldn't dare put that in a community south of Highway 11. Quite frankly, we'd be looking pretty bad. So what I'm asking is, is there a capital plan, and if so, can I get a copy of the capital plan for the ongoing maintenance and reconstruction of the terminal buildings in those communities?

Mr. Hennem: Maybe we can supply that.

Mr. Bisson: OK. If I can have that for next week, that would be very helpful.

Minister, just by way of invitation, if you ever want to take the time—and I know you're a very busy man—it would be really instructional to come and visit some of these facilities, because, quite frankly, the infrastructure is pretty weak.

Interjection.

Mr. Bisson: I can fly you up in my own plane.

Interjection.

Mr. Bisson: I'm very safe. I'm licensed by the federal government. I can fly.

I can't remember if it's—I think it's Big Trout. Is it Big Trout? Anyway, some of them are in pretty bad shape, to the point that the doors don't even work to get in and out. Here you are as a passenger, either you're a government official coming in on business or whomever, and you land in a community that's 30 to 40 below zero and there's nowhere to go and you're standing outside in

the elements. That flight, when you get off the skid, takes off and goes off to the next community and you're standing at the airport with nowhere to go at 40 below zero. It is not a very pleasant experience. Anyway, we'll come back to that next week.

The other thing I want to find out is on the capital budget. I need a little bit of help here because—it's my fault—I didn't bring my glasses and I'm having a bit of a problem seeing the numbers. I noticed in two different places in the estimates that capital is reported a little bit differently. In one place I saw it at \$500 million and in the other place, \$800 million. I'm sure I'm reading this wrong. Can somebody explain to me, what is the overall capital budget for the year for the maintenance of highways? And tell me what page, if you could, please.

1710

Mr. Fleming: I'm on page 57.

Mr. Bisson: All right. Thank you.

Mr. Fleming: There are a number of figures that are reported because of the accrual accounting for infrastructure. The total spending on highways for the ministry, including northern highways, is just over \$1 billion—\$1.031 billion.

Mr. Bisson: Does it include operation?

Mr. Fleming: No, that's just capital.

Mr. Bisson: So we're talking about repairing potholes to building new highways.

Mr. Fleming: Correct.

Mr. Bisson: So it's about \$1 billion.

Mr. Fleming: However, because of accrual accounting, we amortize spending, and not all of it is voted at the same time. Amortization is a statutory appropriation.

Mr. Bisson: I wasn't aware of that. Maybe you could explain that a little bit. You're saying that if the ministry goes out and builds a brand new highway—obviously it wouldn't be paid for in one year because there's more than one year of construction—you amortize the cost?

Mr. Fleming: That's right. We amortize the cost. Depending on the type of asset, it could be 40 years—60 years, I think, for bridges. The amortization is the payment for past investments, and that's the conception in this particular year.

Mr. Bisson: That explains why we see the two figures.

Mr. Fleming: That's right.

Mr. Bisson: So the actual capital spent this year, less amortization of previous projects, is how much?

Mr. Fleming: Pardon me? Could you repeat the question?

Mr. Bisson: Sorry about that. Maybe I'm not explaining it right: the total capital dollars spent this year for ongoing repair and new construction, less what we're paying for construction from periods before. I don't know if I explained that right.

Mr. Fleming: I'd just like to check my figure.

Mr. Bisson: Thank you.

Mr. Fleming: It's \$597 million.

Mr. Bisson: So we spent \$597 million for that last year.

Mr. Fleming: The \$597 million is the net investment after amortization.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Can I just interject something?

Mr. Bisson: Please, Minister.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: The total capital that we spent was \$1.13 billion. If you look at the budget book, it is on page 76. That is where you will find it.

Mr. Bisson: Oh. I don't have that with me.

I guess what I'm trying to figure out—and I think I got an answer, but I just want to be clear. If we're saying our total is \$1.13 billion that we spend at MTO for total capital costs including amortization, what we're spending for new construction this year is \$597 million. Am I correct?

Mr. Fleming: Not quite.

Mr. Bisson: Help me out.

Mr. Fleming: That's the change in what we would call the net book value of the asset.

Mr. Bisson: Can you explain that a bit?

Mr. Fleming: Yes, it's—

Mr. Bisson: I think you've got a colleague trying to help here.

Mr. Fleming: I'll defer to my director of finance.

Mr. Bisson: That's OK. I don't pretend to know all the answers. I just know all the questions.

Mr. Steve Naylor: I'm Steve Naylor, chief accountant for the ministry. In 2002-03, we moved from the cash basis of accounting, where when we spent a dollar it was recorded as an expenditure, to the amortization of assets over time. On page 76, you'll see \$1.131 billion in the budget book. In there, you'll see that it's \$1.131 billion; I believe it's on the left-hand side.

Mr. Bisson: I see it there, yes.

Mr. Naylor: Then you'll see that the previous investments by the Ministry of Transportation over the last 20, 30 years are amortized based on the expected life of the asset. This is in accordance with Public Sector Accounting Board rules. We're in complete compliance with those and they've been approved by the Auditor General. He's actually audited the investment amount, as well as the amortization amount, and concurs that they are correct. You can see that on our planned expenditures. If the highway construction goes the way it's supposed to, we would hit approximately \$1.131 billion. The amortization on past investments and this year's investments would represent, I believe, \$534 million.

Mr. Bisson: That's what it was, yes.

Mr. Naylor: Then, as my colleague was referring to, the increased investment that we have in the highway network is approximately \$600 million.

Mr. Bisson: OK. So I did understand it correctly. Looking at the budget book, the number in brackets, \$534 million, is the amortized amount?

Mr. Naylor: When you look at our capital expense line, that's the bulk of those expenditures.

Mr. Bisson: And the \$597 million is new money. It's new construction.

Mr. Naylor: No, \$1.131 billion is the actual new.

Mr. Bisson: OK.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: New total investment is \$1.13 billion a year. The depreciation on old investment is about \$534 million a year. When you net the two out, the assets go up by about \$597 million, but the new cash that is being invested every year is around \$1.1 billion.

Mr. Bisson: Now I'm more confused than I was when I started. The \$1.13 billion includes the money that we have to pay for the amortized cost of construction from the previous years.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: No, forget about that for the time being.

Mr. Bisson: OK.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Because that is in the assets; right? Whenever you spend some money—it's like buying a chair. You spend \$400 on the chair and you put it into the assets. So your assets go up by \$400. Every year then, over the life of the chair, you will take a certain portion of that and depreciate it; right? But every year you can buy another chair at \$400 and put it into the assets. What we are doing is putting \$1.1 billion into the assets every year, but then the old assets we are depreciating by \$534 million. The cash impact on capital is around \$1.1 billion a year.

Let me just give you—

Mr. Bisson: OK, please.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: We are spending about \$582 million on highway construction a year: \$300 million roughly on highway construction; engineering and property acquisition—

Mr. Bisson: Where's that? Is that in the estimates book?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: You might not have that.

Mr. Bisson: Can I get a copy of that?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Yes, we can give you that.

Mr. Bisson: Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Then \$237 million on engineering and property acquisition; and then we are spending some money on the Windsor-Detroit gateway improvements.

Mr. Bisson: OK. What I would appreciate, if I can get it, is—because when we move the type of accounting, it gets a little bit difficult to track what was on before. What I'm looking for is if you can provide us with how many dollars we're spending in new construction—I don't know how else to put it; if you're paying mortgages and stuff, that's another thing—for highways, bridges, all of that stuff for this year, and let's say the previous five years.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Over the last five or six years, the average investment has been about \$1 billion into new construction or refurbishing the old highways.

Mr. Bisson: Yes. I think your assistant—I don't know the name—got what I wanted. So if we can get that, that would be very helpful.

The Chair: Two minutes, Mr Bisson.

Mr. Bisson: Two minutes left? A two-minute question; that's an interesting one.

A very quick question, again on the estimates book, and maybe I want to keep the accountant here because—oh, I'm sorry. Did you want to go?

I promise to bring my glasses next week. There's a whole bunch of entries in the estimates binder. It's like an arbitrary number and I'm just going to bring it to you—page 61, provincial highway management. If I'm reading that correctly, the actual is \$1 million for that.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Page 61.

Interjection: No, it's \$1,000.

Mr. Bisson: OK, I do need glasses. Can you explain to me what that is all about? I was a little bit confused when I looked at it and I didn't know if my eyes were playing tricks on me. What's \$1,000—

Hon. Mr. Takhar: It's basically to keep the account open in case you ever need it.

Mr. Bisson: That's why there are a number of these accounts that show \$1,000 on the vote.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: That's right.

Mr. Bisson: These are areas where we're not spending money now, but we want to leave the accounts open. For example, there's a whole bunch of them there—land, highway transfers and a whole bunch of other things. I think there were some safety initiatives etc.

1720

The Chair: Did you just answer your question?

Mr. Bisson: He just answered it for me.

The Chair: That's what I thought. Thank you very much, Mr. Bisson.

Mr. Bisson: I can do a question, and I can do an answer.

The Chair: You're doing great.

Minister, it is now customary to give you upwards of 30 minutes or less for you to respond to any of the comments or concerns that were raised by the official opposition and the third party. You can advise us when you are ready and we will then begin a rotation for regular questions.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Let me just thank broadly my critics, both from the opposition party and the third party, for some very good remarks that they made. Let me just get to the questions.

The first question that the member from Durham raised was about Bill 169. The first question was about taxi scooping, and I want to address that again. I want to be very clear here: There are three goals that we are trying to achieve with regard to illegal taxis, or what we call scooping: The first is we want to protect consumers from illegal operators; the second is we want to ensure safety for the taxi industry and the limo industry; and the third is we also want to make sure there is viability of the taxi industry in this area. Our goal is this: very simply, to stop those who provide taxi services without a legal licence by strengthening the enforcement tools. Anybody who does not have a licence to operate in certain areas we want stopped. I think that is only fair because we don't want to put the lives of people at risk.

This scooping bill actually makes life easier for everyone because it will make scooping illegal at the Toronto airport and it will make scooping illegal in Toronto. People will not be able to pick up passengers from hotels if they don't have a licence to do it. Not only will people

who pick up passengers get charged, but the people who actually arrange it will get charged as well; so it should make things better. It is absolutely essential that we stop this scooping. It is a major issue in the Niagara region right now and it's a major issue in the Ottawa region. What I really want to say to you is this: Scooping is a problem province-wide. We cannot have unlicensed drivers picking up passengers when we have licensed drivers who operate in that region.

That's what we are trying to do. It does not make anything unfavourable for anyone. It does not mean what people have led you to believe. In fact, this makes life easier and better for them. I think we need to stand up against unlicensed taxi drivers. We need to protect our visitors to this province. We need to protect people who earn a living by working hard. This bill essentially does that. I hope you can spend some time with us to go over this, and that you support this bill at the end of the day.

The other issue that you raised was about driving schools. I want to say to you that in the proposed legislation, in fact, the intent here is to strengthen our oversight of driving schools. We want to do that by having clearly enforceable standards, a formal sanctioning process to deal with non-compliant schools, and we want to provide tools to the ministry to enable effective auditing of participating schools. We have recently improved the auditing of ministry-approved course providers to help ensure that all ministry standards are met and that students receive the best driver education. This includes a program of both targeted and random auditing.

Currently, just for your information, there are about 460 ministry-approved commercial beginner driver education courses provided in Ontario, and over 200 high schools deliver the ministry-approved course. So for anybody who provides a good driving school, if they have a good program going, they don't need to worry about this legislation. But the people who are not providing good programs, and the customer service isn't there and the good program isn't there—that's who should worry a little bit about it. That's what we are trying to change. A good driving school provides good driver education, and that is essential for safety on the highways. That's what we're trying to do.

The other issue you raised is that we don't have public meetings regarding sound barriers. I will be more than pleased to discuss that with the ministry and see what we can do or not do on that.

I want to talk to you a little bit about the 407 east expansion. The 407 east expansion, as you indicated, is very critical, and that's exactly why we in the ministry are putting a lot of effort behind it. This government is proceeding, as you know, with the 407 east environmental assessment process. The Minister of the Environment has approved the terms of reference already, and we are going full ahead with the public consultations. We feel that this issue needs to be addressed. You have some issues about the property acquisition, and we will look at that. But my feeling is, the environmental assessment process will determine the route, exactly where this

highway should go, and we shouldn't be interfering in that process. It should be an independent process, and it should address that.

I'm very much aware of your gridlock meeting and what issues were being raised there, and the suggestion you made about the smart card initiative for the Durham region and that we should get them involved. I wholeheartedly agree with that, by the way. We will take that up with them. I think there were some delays involved in that process because they were integrating public transit in the Durham region, but we will work very closely with them.

The issue you raised about the taxable benefit, actually, is an issue for the Minister of Finance. I would encourage you to raise it with him, and I will raise that with him as well.

You said something about Hazel. I tell you, I couldn't forget about Hazel. I have to consider that whenever I do anything.

I just want to say a little bit more about beginner driver education. The MTO has already started to clean up the driving school industry, and we will continue to do that.

Mr. Garfield Dunlop raised some issues about Highway 12 and Highway 26, if I'm not wrong. Highway 12: Design work is underway to address the immediate bridge rehabilitation needs for this section of Highway 12.

MTO has several other highway improvement projects in design and/or construction on Highway 7/11 through Durham region: the \$6-million highway rehabilitation under construction from Columbus road to Highway 7A; the \$7-million highway rehabilitation and improvement under construction from Brock 2nd Line North to the junction of Highway 7; and \$1 million for the Columbus line road signalization at the Highway 7 intersection. The plan will be refined every year as we complete the current years of one-year projects, and add five-year new projects, but we are aware of what needs to be done for Highway 12.

On Highway 26: When will the Highway 26 bypass be built? Let me just say that we understand that improving Highway 26 is important to the Simcoe area; there's no question. We have steadily progressed with engineering and planning work for improvements to this highway as well. Completing the design for the new alignment of Highway 26 between Collingwood and Wasaga Beach is being done. We have completed negotiations with the final property owners to acquire land required for this project. The next phase will require Department of Fisheries and Oceans approvals for some water-crossings prior to construction proceeding on this project. As a result of the consultations required by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, this may require several more months.

This government has created, as you are aware, a five-year, \$30-billion infrastructure investment plan, which we call ReNew Ontario. This plan will be updated annually, allowing new projects to be added. Projects like the Highway 26 bypass between Collingwood and Wasaga

Beach will be assessed yearly to see what needs to be done and how far we are on that project.

There were some suggestions made about creating bike lanes and/or running lanes. I think those are good suggestions, but I just want to say to you that some of those projects have actually already been undertaken; it's not a new idea. Wherever the demand warrants, we are prepared to look at some of those projects.

Some of the other issues that were raised by the critic from the NDP: I think he raised some issues with regard to the medical assessments by the doctors. As I said before, we are looking at the process and trying to revamp it so that we know exactly what the doctors need to report and how frequently they need to report so that the process becomes a little bit clearer for the doctors and also for the ministry. Some of these recommendations also came from the coroner's inquest.

1730

The vision standard, in my mind, is very clear. There are clear-cut standards for vision: either you have it or not. I understand some of the problems it might create for the people who are very close to retirement, but if the standards are not met, it's very hard for the ministry to waive any of those standards.

I hear his concern with regard to the airport issues as well, and we will be more than pleased to provide any information that he requested.

At the end, I do want to say to you that we are concerned about gridlock, especially in the GTA. Actually, that's why we are investing \$1.2 billion in the highways and making an \$800-million-plus investment in public transit. We want to create a public transit culture in this province, and we are proceeding with initiatives like HOV lanes and all that to address some of those issues. One of the questions that was asked was, why only two people in the HOV lanes? Why not four? We have to start somewhere; we need to create a culture. We can always move up, but we need to encourage people to start carpooling, we need to encourage them to start taking HOV lanes so that some of the gridlock can be addressed. But just creating lanes sometimes doesn't help, so we're going to have good enforcement rules to go along with it. But we will see what our experience is, and as we move forward, we will address that.

I will be more than pleased to take any other questions that the members may have.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. As I understand it, there are a couple of items that you will submit some additional information on, and I appreciate that staff has been making notes about that.

I'll round that to a half an hour. I think we'll do 10-minute rotations to take us to the top of the hour. I'll begin with Mr. O'Toole.

Mr. O'Toole: Thank you, Minister. It is beneficial to have a dialogue. I'm not completely convinced, as I understand it, that the scooping solution, as you're interpreting it, is solved. This is primarily a Toronto problem. I don't think it particularly applies in the GTA, but there may be some evidence in the Hamilton area. I do believe

that allowing the limousines to pick up downtown and drop off at the Yorkdale Shopping Centre is basically taking work away from hard-working taxi drivers, who are under a lot of pressure; there's no other way to describe it. I think David Miller is prepared to deal with this.

You are clever. What you do is you deal with it under the Municipal Act. I think you could win there. You may end up with them having to proclaim your section, but I would encourage you to respect that opportunity under the Municipal Act, because they're going to be wanting more money. These licences in Toronto are worth a fortune on the black market. There is a long discussion. I would be happy to go off-line to be educated on it, as well as to make sure I understand it.

The second issue, in the limited time I have, is the driving school issue. I would say to you that even there, I'm not sure that the Ministry of Transportation, as complimentary as I can be, should be in the business section of that. You can find a way of getting additional revenue—I understand that—but third party enforcement? Why don't you let them become self-regulatory, as they were? I'll say this on the record as well: It's my impression, even when we were government, that there was way too much of a relationship between the Ontario Safety League and former or current members of the ministry staff. I say that on the record. I don't mean to say that in any disparaging way.

The curriculum needs to be totally updated, absolutely, without question. It doesn't even deal with technology. That should be a given to the industry. I can cite for you the presentations made to the committee hearings by one Mr. Lewis as well as Svensson. I would encourage you to deal with the organization, whatever the bad feelings and all this stuff. I could read a whole tirade to you on that file.

Good move on toasting the Safety League. This professional person actually referred to that issue—I'm just looking here—Mr. Bob Lewis. He's a former Ontario secondary school teacher, and the Liberals are very friendly with the teachers' groups. This may be one more peace offering here, if you will. He said, "My concern, again, with this bill is: no consultation." It's ministry-driven. You should set the standards and let them enforce it. Get out of the business of being in business. You can still get your \$4.25 a certificate.

I'll be bringing this up with the auditor, not in any threatening or intimidating way. Why are you in the business? You should set standards that protect the young drivers and the parents in Ontario. There are reports, as you know, without being critical here, that say that those who take the course have a higher accident rate. This was done by an independent audit under the watch of the Safety League, so that's another concern.

On the medical reinstatement issue, in some respects I agree with Mr. Bisson. It is a huge issue in areas that don't have public transit. There are fewer drivers, so when you've got this intake person/case manager/blah blah blah—some of the people are finished. If they live north of Port Perry, and the husband has a heart attack,

they're finished. Now you say to that, "Those are the rules." No, no; it doesn't work like that. We're looking at administrative changes, not lowering standards, like the EQAO. We're looking at the needs of the person who pays our salaries: the constituent.

In many cases, retired people don't live close to the GO train or the TTC, nor do they have a condo. They're just surviving. It may bring tears to some of your staff. I see them grimacing here. They need to understand that I have currently with you a man who has had a heart attack and has recovered. The doctor said it's OK. His wife is now a stroke victim in the hospital. I'm not just trying to make you change the rules; I'm saying, "Re-examine the priorities." This family is suffering unnecessary delays. I think they had to have a \$460 test to prove that they weren't—now they're going to get a retest so they can get a day permit. That's another 460 bucks. These people are living on less than you'd spend on coffee in a month. It's tragic. That's the point that Gilles is trying to make. They're living in Attawapiskat; nobody has a transit pass there.

All this is is a suggestion to review, and you've committed to do that. Don't do it because I said so. Those that aren't serviced—if you have an alternative, take the smart way, the TTC; fine. Their needs are somewhat different; they have an alternative. They're living in a less-than-satisfactory condition.

I have a question on the other part here too. For Highway 407, I recognize and appreciate that the EA process should not be interfered with. I have a couple of questions on the order paper on that, and they'll be on the order paper from now until I'm removed as critic. The connecting link is a huge deal. I hope the Lakeridge connection is resolved, because you're underway now in improving the Lakeridge interchange on the 401. I hope you're not spending a lot of money without thinking that it's eventually going to be the same exit to the 407, otherwise it's a waste of taxpayers' money. That's supported by the regional chair and most of the people who know the area. I'd ask Mr. Arthurs to support it. It's a common connector road.

The 407 link that goes up north of Taunton or somewhere like that is a whole different deal. We don't want two exits taking up commercial highway frontage because one is a billable road and the other isn't. Get over it. You can find a way. You've got some smart people working there. Fix it.

The other link that I'm concerned about is very important to have resolved, otherwise you're going to end up in the middle of a farm field. There is no link from there until Courtice. Oshawa is filled in. There is no link. It's going to be servicing Oshawa. You're going to flood the traffic into that area. The growth in Durham and the university is all in that area, in Brooklin and that area; take a look. There will probably be 200,000 people in that area in the next 10 years, and that road probably still won't be built.

1740

I know there's work undergoing. I'm probably on the record as saying that the original link at Courtice—I'm

going to get a two-minute answer here. Hopefully you've cancelled the Hancock link. My understanding is, it is. I think it should be in the Holt Road area. I'm trying to be helpful. There's a highway corridor there. It would make better use of land. If you look at the future, there will be another nuclear station at Darlington sometime—probably in your term. That whole area and the construction activity—Holt Road's the connecting link. It's sort of in that vicinity.

I'm trying to be helpful here. I may not even be here the next term. I would like some responses. Are they looking at the alternative link there in the Courtice area? Some of your people on 407—it's your major project.

The Chair: That's a request for an answer?

Mr. O'Toole: Yes.

The Chair: Mr. O'Toole, you have a minute left.

Mr. O'Toole: I have a minute left? How many rounds are we going to get? I've got a series of—

The Chair: Today? You've had it.

Mr. O'Toole: Yes, I've had it today, but there is tomorrow's, isn't there?

The Chair: No. We meet Tuesdays and Wednesdays only.

Mr. O'Toole: I'll just give you a forewarning. In the public accounts, there are several outstanding questions. If we don't get them, I'll submit them in writing. They're straightforward responses to the auditor's report.

On the 407, could I get maybe an update? Probably the most important thing—I'll circulate the Hansard response to the Durham region and to the councillors, because that's kind of my job, to work with them, as it is yours.

The Chair: I'm afraid we will take that under advisement. I have to recognize Mr. Bisson, and then I will be recognizing Mr. Zimmer for 10 minutes.

Mr. Bisson: Two questions—well, I've got a bunch of questions—but specific to Highway 407: What's the status currently with your struggle to try to get the toll situation under control? Where's that at, Minister?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: We are still negotiating with them. We have not been able to come to any terms yet, but we are still negotiating with them.

Mr. Bisson: Are you still pursuing the court aspect?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: We are pursuing the court aspect as well, yes.

Mr. Bisson: A specific question: Can we get how much money we spent over the last two years legal-wise for that?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: We don't have those numbers yet, but we will be able to get them to you when we have those exact numbers.

The Chair: Minister, if this is over a two-year period, you would have last year's actuals, which the committee's requesting, and you would have this year's budgeted.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: But this is information that's also solicited as my privilege.

Mr. Bisson: I'm not asking for—

The Chair: What he's asking is not for the specifics; he's asking for the quantum of what you've been spending, which is within the realm. We don't need to know who the lawyers are; we don't need to know the contracts under which you've contracted with them; we need to know the quantum in which you were spending.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: OK. We'll take that under advisement.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bisson: Well, I want more than advisement; I want the numbers. One of the things that we do here is go over the estimates, and I want to know specifically how much last year and how much you're budgeting this year for that particular initiative.

The other thing is, you spoke just briefly and said that we're currently negotiating. Is there a status on where you are at negotiations? Are we likely to see any movement?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I basically said to you that we have not been able to reach any agreement yet, but we are constantly in touch with them and we are talking to them. We are in the courts with them. That's all I can tell you.

Mr. Bisson: Would it be a question to the Chair? I don't know if I can ask for this, but is it possible to get some kind of a *compte rendu*—I don't know how you say it in English—

The Chair: A summary.

Mr. Bisson: —a summary, thank you, of what has been done so far on this particular file?

The Chair: My understanding is that once this went into the courts, there are some matters in which the ministry must maintain privacy. I've already suggested—and I know that is within the realm—for them to give the amounts that are being spent, but beyond that, the minister can give an anecdotal update. If you're asking for a summary of events that have occurred up to this point, to the extent that they're able to do that, I'm sure the staff will prepare what they feel they are able to prepare.

Mr. Bisson: I'm not asking specifically on the court case; I'm talking about your initiatives in order to try and negotiate with them, is what I'm asking for. If we can get that, that would be helpful.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: As the Chair said, this matter is before the court. I can only give you the information that I gave you. There's nothing more that I will be able to provide you with.

Mr. Bisson: I'd just ask you this, then: Are you planning any blitz or added pressure or anything to try to get some relief for these commuters on the toll issue?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: We like to work with the 407 people, but we are also going to proceed with the legal issues on that front and see where that leads us.

Mr. Bisson: A question to either the minister or the deputy minister: How many winter road maintenance contracts do we have out, specifically by region? I've lost count of where we're at.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: My understanding was 16.

Mr. D'Onofrio: I can tell you that it's exactly the same as last year's bundle, so we can get you the exact numbers.

Mr. Bisson: OK. Is it possible to get the historical numbers per region per contract, how much we spend every year? Can we get that?

Mr. D'Onofrio: We'll look at that. I think we can do it.

Mr. Bisson: I think you may have the answer. No? I just saw somebody come to the front here.

What I'm looking for specifically is, per contract, how much we are spending this year versus last year and whatever other years those contracts were in place.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: We will get that information.

Mr. Bisson: Thank you. That's very helpful.

Just by way of anecdotal evidence, and I don't expect you to respond to this, there really is a growing sense up in my part of the world that there are more and more occasions where people are not taking the highway in the winter because of the feeling that road maintenance is actually deteriorating. That brings me now to a specific question, which is, currently—at least last year—we had what I call winter road maintenance patrols. I'm not sure if I'm using the term correctly. It's the people who go out, look at the highway and then call back to dispatch, "We need a plow. We need a sander." What do you call those guys again? Patrolmen or winter road patrol guys? I forget the term.

Mr. Hennum: We call them maintenance coordinators and maintenance technicians.

Mr. Bisson: Those are the people who drive in the truck and basically say, "More snowplows, more sand." Is there a move afoot to privatize that? I heard some rumours that apparently there's going to be a move to privatize those people who do that service.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Nothing that I'm aware of.

Mr. Bisson: Nothing along that line. Very good. So we can expect those people will still be paid employees, although seasonal, of the Ministry of Transportation this winter.

Mr. Hennum: Yes, that's right.

Mr. Bisson: And the plan is to continue in that direction?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: We constantly review what our structures should look like.

Mr. Bisson: But at this point, there's no plan; right?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: There's no plan at this point.

Mr. Bisson: That's what I was asking.

The other thing is in regard to—I don't have enough time for that, so we won't go there.

The other thing is, and I'm going back to capital here, the ministry used to have—at least, as I remember—a capital plan of where they were going to spend money. I remember looking at them. They'd show all the various recommendations by your people about what sections of highway need resurfacing, need to be redone, passing lanes, all that kind of stuff. Do you still have that process or whatever you call it? Sort of the capital maintenance plan or whatever it was called.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I will let the ADM answer that.

Mr. Hennum: I think you're referring to the construction book that we used, a sort of current-year picture of what we intended to undertake. Those disappeared in the late 1980s or so.

Mr. Bisson: So they don't exist any more.

Mr. Hennum: But, as the minister will probably talk about, we have a strategic investment plan for northern Ontario highways.

Mr. Bisson: And the same for the south.

Mr. Hennum: Similar things are being worked out for the south.

Mr. Bisson: How much time do I have, Chair?

The Chair: A minute.

Mr. Bisson: I don't quite understand now. You don't have those books that I used to see once upon a time, highway by highway, in five years, six years and 10 years. You have a different methodology now. Is it possible we can get those? I don't know what you call them.

The Chair: I want to make sure we understand your question. You're asking for a multi-year schedule that used to exist—

Mr. Bisson: No, no, what replaced it; what they're currently using.

The Chair: Let them answer the question and then, when they answer it, we'll determine it if it's in a form that we can request.

Mr. Bisson: You're so helpful, Chair.

The Chair: I'm trying. Please, Minister.

Mr. Hennum: First of all, the minister very recently issued a strategic plan for northern Ontario, as you know, and that has a five-year perspective. It details in the first year, and broader details certainly in subsequent years in that five-year period. That plan will be updated every year and rolled over and will be accessible for you.

In the south, we are trying to do the same thing. There's a little more work involved and more complex projects to put together, but we are working on that. I can't give you a date by which we will have one, but I hope, for our own sake as well as for yours, that they will be available shortly.

1750

Mr. Bisson: So one exists for the north and the south one is not completed, right? Can we get the one for the north?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Yes. If it exists, we will give it to you.

Mr. Bisson: Thank you, Minister; that was very helpful. It exists, as I understand it.

The Chair: You still have a minute.

Mr. Bisson: Oh, I thought I ran out of time.

The Chair: No. You shortened up your question. It's amazing how much time you gained.

Mr. Bisson: I'm trying to help you out, Chair. I'm just being very helpful today. I've got some other stuff that I want to go through that's going to take more time than a minute so I'll pass on.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bisson. I would like to recognize Mr. Arthurs.

Mr. Wayne Arthurs (Pickering–Ajax–Uxbridge): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We look forward on this side to asking some questions of the minister. I'm going to take an opportunity to first just comment on some initiatives and hopefully the minister will see fit to pick and choose from amongst these to comment on today. We look forward, in the balance of the time available, to ask some things that will be a little more specific as well.

I do want to comment on the gas tax. I believe that as of this October we are into 1.5 cents per litre for municipalities. I know that's been well received. When it was launched a year ago, the minister was kind enough to come into my riding as part of that announcement scenario.

I know that whole process started some number of years ago. I sat on a committee as a mayor back in 1991 under the then NDP government that launched an integrated transit strategy. Lou Parsons, who was GO Transit chair, chaired that process. We talked about a dedicated gas tax at that point in time, but it was to be an add-on. It was the breaking point to existing tax structures and there was no way that the municipalities were then going to endorse an additional tax load on the gas, so it never managed to come to fruition. I'm very pleased that it's happened, and I look forward to the minister's comments on the success that he has had in that regard as it moves forward into the next phase.

I'd be interested in his observations on an ongoing basis on what I can only refer to as the 407 boondoggle. I would have hoped that my great-grandchildren might have been able to drive on that highway for free. When they did the Burlington bridge, I think it was about 30 years ago—I'm not sure; I was pretty young then—but I recall driving over it and my dad slowing down and putting a dime or a quarter in. Once it was paid for, we got to drive on it. My great-grandchildren will never see that opportunity. Members of the media have written about what has occurred in that regard. I appreciate the minister's efforts to bring some reason and rational sense to that process, in spite of the decisions of the court. I certainly welcome his comments and observations, after having had two years as the minister, in respect to what we might expect in the future, those of us who can afford to drive on the 407 on the most infrequent of occasions.

It sure would be nice to see more trucks on the 407, because you sure can't drive on the 401 any more, because they are eating up all the possible capacity through it. If there are four lanes, they've got all three. If there are three lanes, they have at least two out of three for trucking, day and night.

As we move along, I will be keen on hearing some comments on the success you've had with the booster seats. I know my grandchildren are benefiting from that in particular at this point in time.

The Viva York region initiative that has been launched: I hope that the ongoing discussions will be modestly parochial; I'll try to avoid it to the extent that I

can. I know my friend from across the way Mr. O'Toole spent considerable time on what might be considered a more parochial agenda, but having said that, I'm anxious that Durham region will approach the government in respect to its integration of its transit and expanded transit systems and look for some assistance in doing that, to make it the kind of success that York region is hoping to have.

The recent GO announcement for young people as it reflects in Durham: Frankly, one of the routes terminates in my municipality, the Pickering GO station, and it is being well received. I don't know what the numbers look like at this point, but you may, during the course of the seven and a half-plus hours, have a chance to comment on that as well.

The bus yield right-of-way: I know there was a moratorium initially, a launching before enforcement started. I can't recall what the enforcement date was; I think it's up and running now. But I think people are responding well to that yield provision for buses, which at least is allowing buses to move more quickly.

I know you have a keen and particular interest in HOV lanes. I know some of 400 series highways are being proposed for that. We'd again like to hear additional comments with respect to that initiative, and any comment on whether it should be two or more persons per vehicle and what opportunities there may be to maximize the opportunities for HOV lanes in that regard.

We're certainly not without initiatives that you have been a party to, Minister, and other activities that are ongoing as part of your ministry. Those are a few I've had the chance to observe during the first couple of years, each of which has its own legs, and we'd welcome your comments on any or all of those in the few minutes that are available to us this afternoon.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Let me just thank the member for asking those questions and making other comments. The gas tax announcement has gone very well in the province. We gave \$156 million last year, we're going to give roughly \$234 million in the full year, and then it will go up to \$312 million. Most of the municipalities have used this money to buy new buses and new roads, new routes and new drivers. Any municipalities I've talked to, whether it's Oshawa, York, Mississauga, Brampton—everywhere—the people have been very happy with that. The gas tax money is making a difference; there's no question about it. I think all the municipalities are very happy.

We have made major strides in promoting transportation culture. We made a \$600-million announcement in Ottawa to promote transit there; Viva has been a success; I think Durham Transit is making great inroads, and I look forward to working with them. Durham will get about \$1.8 million in gas tax money in 2005-06 as well.

The 407 is an issue. Everyone will agree that the 407 contract was not a good one; it was a bad deal. There are 93 years left in this contract, and our government is absolutely committed to making sure we can secure a good deal for the people who take the 407. The toll for

truckers is pretty close to 42 cents per kilometre at this point, so it's very hard for truckers to really take the 407. That's why you sometimes see a lot more trucks on the 401 and on other highways, and that adds to the maintenance cost of our highways as well. Because of these reasons, and also the customer service reasons, we are absolutely committed to pursuing this issue, because it is for 93 years. I don't think your grandkids are ever going to see this highway free, but we need to make sure the deal is fair and equitable, and we will keep fighting for that.

The booster seats came into effect on September 1, 2005. There is tons of evidence out there that they save lives. The announcement has been well received. All safety organizations have supported this announcement. We feel that even if we can save the life of one child, it's worth doing, and that's exactly what we're trying to do.

Let me talk a little bit about the GO Transit announcement. We are putting about \$1 billion into GO Transit—there are three levels of government doing that. Our GO Transit ridership has increased considerably. We were hoping that GO Transit ridership would increase by maybe 4% this year, but it looks like we might have a two percentage point increase over and above the 4%. About 45 million rides are taken on GO Transit.

GO Transit is really the hub of our public transit strategy, and we need to hook up with that. We are opening new stations, creating new parking spaces, adding more service, buying new engines. We are doing anything we can to promote GO Transit service.

GO Transit is almost an essential service in the GTA area at this point in time. If we could add more trains, those would be taken up as well; if we could add more parking spaces, those would be taken up. So GO Transit is doing that, and the same with the TTC. We're making another \$1-billion investment in the TTC as well.

What we're really trying to do here is create a transit culture. That is the only way to address some of the congestion problems in the GTA; there is no other way to do it. Our HOV lanes are part of that strategy; the bus bypass shoulders, which you talked about, are also part of that strategy; the bus yield right-of-way that we talked about is already in operation. Any initiatives we take are making some difference in our gridlock at this point in time. But at the same time, there are a lot more people coming to the GTA, and if we don't take these kinds of initiatives, I think our highways will be way more congested than what we see right now.

Mr. Arthurs: I know that our members on this side will have some far more pointed questions for the minister, but given the late hour of the day, I thought it was an opportunity for him to once again reflect on some of the initiatives he's undertaken as a minister.

The Chair: I thank you, Mr. Arthurs. I also thank you for your trip down memory lane. I'm going to date myself, but I remember as a small child going over the only bridge across the Hamilton Harbour. In those days there was a partial lift bridge and a partial swing bridge, and I remember the day a ship ran into it and you had to

go all the way through Hamilton to get to Toronto from Niagara. It was impossible. The first three days that the Skyway bridge was open were free, and my uncle took me over it about four times.

This committee stands adjourned until we reconvene next Tuesday, immediately following routine proceedings. Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 1800.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 19 October 2005

Ministry of Transportation	E-13
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Hon. Harinder S. Takhar, minister
Mr. Frank D'Onofrio, deputy minister
Mr. Rob Fleming, assistant deputy minister, corporate services division
Mr. Carl Hennem, assistant deputy minister, operations division
Mr. Steve Naylor, director, finance branch

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