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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF ONTARIO

Tuesday 9 March 2021

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE
DE L'ONTARIO

Mardi 9 mars 2021

The House met at 0900.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Good morning. Let us pray.

Prayers.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

SUPPORTING BROADBAND
AND INFRASTRUCTURE EXPANSION
ACT, 2021

LOI DE 2021 SOUTENANT
L'EXPANSION DE L'INTERNET
ET DES INFRASTRUCTURES

Ms. Scott moved second reading of the following bill:

Bill 257, An Act to enact the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021 and to make other amendments in respect of infrastructure and land use planning matters / Projet de loi 257, Loi édictant la Loi de 2021 sur la réalisation accélérée de projets d'Internet à haut débit et apportant d'autres modifications en ce qui concerne les infrastructures et des questions d'aménagement du territoire.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'll recognize the Minister of Infrastructure to lead off the debate.

Hon. Laurie Scott: I'm pleased to rise today to speak about the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021. I will be sharing my time with Minister Walker and the member from Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry.

Now more than ever, we need to build better infrastructure faster, laying the foundation for growth, renewal and long-term economic recovery. We need an Ontario-made plan to build infrastructure cost-effectively, to create good jobs and to connect communities to what matters most.

Our proposed legislation comes at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has shined a glaring spotlight on the digital divide. Today, as many as 700,000 households across Ontario lack access to reliable broadband. That's hundreds of thousands of people who are struggling to work, learn or connect remotely from home; hundreds of thousands of families struggling to access vital resources like virtual health care or to connect with loved ones and friends through video calls without constantly dropping out; hundreds of families struggling to reach their fullest potential, not to mention local businesses across Ontario—a family farm, a bakery or a bed and breakfast—that need reliable broadband to source supplies or connect with their customers, or the entrepreneurs who need connectivity to get products and services to the global markets.

In today's 21st-century digital world, those who lack access to reliable Internet only continue to fall further behind. Mr. Speaker, that's why we're proposing to take bold action through these legislative changes. The proposed act would, if passed, help connect communities to reliable high-speed Internet sooner by accelerating the deployment of provincially significant broadband infrastructure.

In order to understand the impact this act would have on communities, I will first briefly explain how broadband is often deployed to underserved or unserved communities. To connect communities to broadband, telecommunications service providers often need to run broadband cables over long distances. These cables are usually buried in the ground or attached in the air to hydro poles. Frequently, telecommunications service providers pay annual fees to attach these cables to hydro poles owned by utility companies. Sounds simple enough, but the reality is that Ontario has the highest hydro utility pole attachment rates in Canada. These costs are a real financial barrier to expanding broadband to unserved and underserved communities in our province. There are other barriers too, such as potential delays in accessing those same poles and municipal rights-of-way to install broadband on municipal land.

If passed, our proposed legislation would provide the ability to reduce these barriers. Through this legislation, our government is introducing the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021. This act, if passed, would help to accelerate broadband infrastructure deployment by providing the Minister of Infrastructure with the authority to reduce barriers for provincially significant projects. This would include the ability to ensure municipalities and utility companies provide timely access to their infrastructure, such as municipal rights-of-way and hydro utility poles.

This legislation would also, if passed, allow the government to help reduce the time it takes to prepare electricity infrastructure, such as hydro utility poles, for new wire attachments on provincially significant projects, and it would help accelerate what has been a slow and cumbersome process whenever a new attachment request is made.

If passed, this legislation would help ensure that owners of underground infrastructure provide locations of their infrastructure within 10 business days for specific broadband projects before a dig. This would allow service providers to more quickly start work on laying down underground broadband infrastructure without worrying about damaging other wires and lines.

Our proposed Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, if passed, would also amend the Ontario

Energy Board Act. It would provide the Ontario government with the regulation-making authority to reduce barriers regarding the development of, access to and use of electricity infrastructure by third parties. This would include the authority to reduce or fix the annual charge that telecommunications companies must pay to attach their wire lines to hydro utility poles. It would also allow the government to enact regulations to establish performance standards and timelines on how utility companies must respond to attachment requests.

The amendments would also provide the authority to require utility companies to consider possible joint use of hydro utility poles during their planning process and require transparency around when and where hydro utility poles are scheduled for replacement or refurbishment. This would help to save time and money in the future as telecommunications service providers seek to enter new communities. This innovative new approach builds on previous commitments our government made in our 2019 broadband and cellular action plan to remove barriers.

Why is this a priority? It's a priority because this affects the livelihoods and well-being of mothers, fathers, students, seniors, businesses and workers. They are our families, our friends and our neighbours, some of whom live just down the road from us, often past an invisible line that divides those who have access to broadband and those who do not. They are individuals and families who are being left out of the 21st-century digital economy.

Mr. Speaker, I want to take a few minutes to share stories from people who have written to me from across the province about their frustrations. I know there are a lot of technical things in what I just said, but here are the real stories.

In Wellington county, a couple found working from home difficult, their Internet signal too weak at times to even transmit a single file, not to mention that their Internet cut out during their son's exam.

In eastern Ontario, a small business owner outside of Ottawa asked when she will have the Internet speeds to sell her products online.

I've heard the story of a resident in Thunder Bay who found many good jobs they would love to take but, without reliable Internet, didn't qualify for them.

In a nearby township, a resident told us their mother is helping their children with remote learning, but the poor Internet connection has resulted in many frustrations and has led the family to tears.

0910

And then there are the seemingly absurd situations, the ones that you can't believe you're reading about in the newspaper if it wasn't also happening to you as well. It was reported that a northern Ontario resident, along with his wife and teenaged sons, had to ration how many hours they can go online since they live just over a kilometre from the cut-off for unlimited Internet. When the COVID-19 outbreak occurred, the sons had to sit on benches outside their schools—initially in cold March weather—to connect to the school's WiFi.

We've heard stories of people having to drive to fast-food restaurant parking lots, cafés and local libraries. This is only a small sample of the many, many letters that are sent to me and my ministry, and the stories that I read every single day. As someone born and raised in rural Ontario, I understand and have personally experienced many of these frustrations.

Mr. Speaker, our proposed legislation, if passed, would help connect communities like mine and those I just mentioned to reliable broadband sooner by accelerating the deployment of infrastructure. As our Premier has said, no infrastructure project is more important to the people of Ontario than broadband, and there is no infrastructure project that can change people's lives more than broadband. This is an issue that I often focus on during the day, and it's what I think about long after the offices are closed.

Since day one, we have taken action to improve connectivity in communities all across Ontario. Last November, our government announced it was making a historic investment of nearly \$1 billion to improve and expand broadband and cellular services. That is an additional \$680 million on top of our previous commitments. This includes doubling our funding to \$300 million for our Improving Connectivity for Ontario program, or ICON, which we launched last summer. We expect the first projects to receive approval later this spring.

We are also partnering with the Eastern Ontario Regional Network to invest in a cell-gap project to improve cellular service in eastern Ontario. When the project is complete, residents in eastern Ontario will get near-complete cellular voice coverage and increased access to mobile broadband in areas where they work, live or travel. Meanwhile, in southwestern Ontario, we're helping to bring high-speed broadband to homes and businesses by investing in the Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology project, also known as SWIFT. Contracts have already been signed in Lambton, Wellington, Norfolk, Oxford, Dufferin, Caledon, Grey, Essex, Bruce, Simcoe, Waterloo, Brant and Niagara. Construction is under way in some of these communities, and residents are already starting to receive fast, reliable broadband service.

Most recently, I joined my colleague Minister MacLeod to announce more than \$4.8 million to upgrade broadband at public libraries in unserved and underserved communities. Upgraded broadband at these libraries will mean greater access to services, skills training and career development.

Mr. Speaker, we're also advancing the well-being of communities by investing in projects in northern Ontario to bring high-speed broadband to residents in towns and First Nations communities, such as the investments being made in the Matawa project. This winter, we also announced nearly \$11 million to bring faster broadband to several communities in northern Ontario. Through the Next Generation Network Program, for example, a new tower was built in Carling township to bring high-speed broadband to the area.

I love hearing stories of those who are now benefiting. In a video about the Carling township project, one resident said she tears up just thinking about the difference that this

will make in their lives. She talks about how she can now better connect with her family. “You have changed our lives for the better,” she says. Mr. Speaker, these are the encouraging stories and they give me renewed energy as we continue to tackle the digital divide.

But is this enough? No. Do we need to do more? Yes. Even with all our investments, barriers to expanding broadband are preventing communities from getting connected quickly. I’m sure many in this House have heard frustrations from their constituents on this issue. That’s why, Mr. Speaker, we are proposing these important measures today.

In this 21st-century digital divide, rapid technological advancements have transformed how we go about our daily lives. It’s changed the way we interact with others, the way we work, the way we learn and the way we shop. Virtual delivery of health care and justice are just two of the sectors being transformed during this pandemic, not to mention our shopping habits. According to Statistics Canada, the nominal GDP associated with the digital economy was more than \$109 billion, or 5.5% of the total economic activity in Canada in 2017, and no doubt that share has only increased since then.

In this year’s business confidence survey, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce asked its members about their top priorities they would like the provincial government to act upon to increase competitiveness. The number one priority: They wanted us to invest in infrastructure, specifically mentioning broadband. The chamber says such investments are one of the most cost-effective ways governments can drive development and growth, and we could not agree more. In the same survey, they asked what the biggest barriers were to starting a business in Ontario. Access to broadband Internet was listed as one of the concerns, right next to access to markets.

Access to broadband has become the bare minimum to participate in today’s digital economy. The digital divide is a threat to regional economic growth and to the competitiveness of businesses in these regions. In today’s knowledge-based economy where the Internet of Things, AI and autonomous vehicles are no longer considered future technologies, our province needs higher broadband penetration for us to compete on a global stage. We need to be digitally connected if we want to innovate and expand into new markets. Nowadays, you can start a business in any part of the province. All you need is a connection—a reliable one.

A report from Accenture stated that incremental new telecommunications connections from 2018 to 2019 directly boosted Canada’s output by over \$50 billion, or roughly 2% of the GDP. At least one study shows that broadband deployment promoted rural employment and wage growth in the service industries in Canada. Better broadband will also support farms, supporting precision agriculture techniques, including smart sensors to measure soil conditions and tracking devices for livestock. It’s amazing, Mr. Speaker.

Better broadband will also help tourism businesses when the pandemic begins to wane. Whether it’s accommodations, food and beverage, or recreation, businesses

will need reliable broadband to serve and book their guests and to market themselves. Better broadband will help the health care sector, as more organizations provide telehealth services. It will also help producers create media content, helping to spread our cultural industries far and wide across the globe. Better broadband will mean businesses will be able to market their goods and services, from a local microbrewery to a bowling alley, from a new food product to outdoor recreational facilities. Better broadband means smaller businesses can compete with larger e-commerce companies so that made-in-Ontario products can also arrive at your door.

Broadband infrastructure is a necessary cornerstone for an innovative economy that attracts businesses and incentivizes technological advancement. Undoubtedly, Mr. Speaker, it will result in the rise of new industries and new innovations. Our proposed legislation, if passed, would help modernize the regulatory environment to support broadband expansion so that we can accomplish all of this.

We know challenges and barriers remain. In fact, a CD Howe Institute report that was released last month confirmed that at a time when digital infrastructure investment is the most critical, too many barriers remain. The report stated, “Canada’s telecommunications facilities and services providers and potential investors in the Canadian telecommunications sector face an uncertain regulatory framework that operates too slowly in a fast-paced industry, with challenges of cost.” Mr. Speaker, our proposed legislation would help address those costs and barriers and help ensure communities are connected more quickly and cost-effectively.

0920

Through our consultations, industry, municipalities and the utility sector all recognized the linkages between access to infrastructure, like hydro utility poles and rights-of-way, and effective deployment of broadband. Although utility regimes throughout Canada vary, all provinces have identified access to infrastructure as a barrier to broadband deployment. We’re not the only province to consider policy and regulatory interventions to help deploy broadband faster, but if passed, Ontario will certainly be taking the lead.

Everyone has a vested interest in deploying broadband faster to unserved and underserved communities; the COVID-19 pandemic has only underscored this need. We have seen how lack of access to broadband hurts the most vulnerable among us. This is an issue of digital inequality, especially for those who have unequal access to vital services like health care, education and access to job opportunities.

I will quote our friends down south. Former chair of the Federal Communications Commission Michael Powell once said, “Broadband access is the great equalizer, levelling the playing field so that every willing and able person, no matter their station in life, has access to the information and tools necessary to achieve the American dream.” By helping to expand broadband faster, we will also level the playing field for individuals and families

across our great province so that they too can have the tools and information needed to achieve their dreams.

Lack of connectivity can also mean a degradation in the quality of life. Connectivity for older adults and people with disabilities, particularly in rural and remote areas, has become vital. That includes for health care, learning, access to social and community services, and services to reduce social isolation. With the access to government services increasingly online, people with disabilities and others benefit tremendously from increased web connectivity, but the people of Ontario will first need access to reliable high-speed broadband. No matter who you are, no matter where you live, the people of Ontario need action now.

As you can see, we don't just have an economic imperative to pass this legislation; we need to ensure that no one is left behind when accessing vital services, especially the most vulnerable among us. Passing this legislation is just the right thing to do, and so we are doing the right thing by coming before the House to propose these measures to help speed up broadband deployment so everyone can participate in the digital economy. We will continue to advocate on behalf of the people of Ontario to urge the federal government, which regulates the telecommunications sector, to accelerate and properly fund access to reliable broadband.

Our province is stepping up, continuing to invest in reliable broadband. We believe the government can be the catalyst for getting reliable broadband service to communities. To quote the top action recommendation from the C.D. Howe report from a diverse working group that consists of private and public sector and academic representatives, "Action by governments is urgently needed to ensure that public policy and the regulatory framework encourage deployment of the next generation of telecommunications infrastructure for Canada to remain competitive in an increasingly digitally mediated ... economy."

So time is of the essence. We must act now, without delay. By enacting these measures, we will help to ensure that every community in every region in the province can more quickly participate in the modern digital economy and contribute to our economic recovery.

This legislation, with the changes that we are proposing, is important to Ontario's future prosperity. It is important to the small business owner just outside of Ottawa who wants to sell her products online. It's important to the resident in Thunder Bay who wants to apply for good jobs without worrying whether their unreliable Internet will disqualify them. It is important to the family in northern Ontario who would no longer need to sit outside on cold benches right next to their school to download coursework. It is important to the family who would no longer have to deal with the frustrations of a poor Internet connection that has led them to tears.

Broadband is key to our economic recovery and renewal, and will help us create jobs and invest in the future of our province. Let's move forward together to ensure that we don't leave anyone behind in today's digital economy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I said at the start that I would be sharing my time with Minister Walker and the MPP from Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The minister did say she would be sharing her time, so I turn to the Associate Minister of Energy.

Hon. Bill Walker: I am pleased to rise to continue second reading debate on the proposed Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, 2021, to connect more people across Ontario communities to reliable high-speed Internet.

I thank the Minister of Infrastructure, the member from Haliburton–Kawartha Lakes–Brock, Laurie Scott, for opening this debate, and also her team at Infrastructure Ontario for all of their great work. I look forward to comments from the parliamentary assistant for the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the member from Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry, Jim McDonnell, who will be speaking after me, closing remarks on this bill.

Mr. Speaker, the COVID-19 pandemic has made reliable broadband access critical for Ontario families, businesses and individuals to be able to work from home, learn online, connect with family and friends, and access vital services. However, as many as 700,000 households and businesses in Ontario still lack access to adequate broadband speeds or have no Internet connection at all.

Now, more than ever, as the province recovers from the pandemic, we need an Ontario-made plan to help build infrastructure faster, strengthen our communities, and lay the foundation for growth, renewal and long-term economic recovery. That's why I'm proud that our ministries worked together to take swift action to remove barriers and help expand access to broadband service in unserved and underserved communities across the province.

With the introduction of the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, 2021, or SBIEA, the Ontario government is taking steps to remove barriers to help connect more communities to reliable high-speed Internet faster. Through this legislation, the government is introducing the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021, and proposing amendments to the Ontario Energy Board Act, 1998, to support the expansion of broadband service throughout the province.

If passed, this legislation would provide tools to help reduce costs to Internet and telecommunication service providers associated with attaching broadband wirelines to hydro utility poles. It would also help provide for timely access to hydro utility poles and to municipal rights-of-way to install broadband on municipal land. Our intent by removing these barriers is to speed up Ontario's broadband expansion. This would increase our competitiveness and make life more convenient for individuals, families and workers. These proposed measures build on the province's Up to Speed: Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan.

On November 4, 2020, the Ontario government announced a historic investment of almost \$1 billion to improve broadband and cellular services, which is an additional \$680 million on top of our previous

commitment. As the Associate Minister of Energy in the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines, it is my honour to be able to speak to some of the steps our ministry is taking to contribute to the expansion of broadband connectivity to every community in Ontario and how hydro utility poles in the province can play a role in broadband expansion.

We believe all Ontarians deserve access to reliable high-speed broadband and equal opportunity to engage in our ever-growing digital economy and lifestyle. COVID-19 has only magnified the digital divide that has put many without reliable connectivity at a disadvantage, especially those in unserved and underserved communities. Broadband connectivity is fundamental to our economic recovery and the shift to the future digital economy.

As a government, we cannot afford to let barriers that may easily be removed stand in the way of achieving this important goal. We know that the barriers facing Internet and telecommunications service providers include challenges with attaching to hydro utility poles, and we know that Internet and telecommunication service providers based in Ontario face the highest hydro utility pole attachment rates in Canada. That is why we're taking steps to make it easier and more efficient and cost-effective for telecommunication service providers to use existing electricity infrastructure, such as hydro utility poles, to expand access to broadband services.

One way we are seeking to accomplish this is by proposing amendments to the Ontario Energy Board Act, 1998, or OEBA, that would help reduce the barriers telecommunication service providers encounter when seeking access to hydro utility poles. If passed, these proposed amendments would provide the Ontario government with regulation-making authority under the OEBA regarding the development of access to or use of electricity infrastructure by third parties for non-electricity purposes. These would include regulations and provide authority under the OEBA that would address barriers to broadband expansion, such as:

- reducing or fixing the annual rental charge that telecommunication service providers must pay to attach their wirelines to hydro utility poles;

- establishing performance standards and timelines for how quickly utility companies must respond to attachment requests;

- requiring local distribution companies to consider possible joint use of hydro utility poles when developing their network expansion and asset investment and maintenance plans; and

- transparency around when and where hydro utility poles are scheduled for replacement or refurbishment. This would help save time and money in the future as telecommunication service providers seek to enter new communities.

0930

Mr. Speaker, the goal of these amendments is to ensure that telecommunication service providers can quickly, cost-effectively and safely attach assets to hydro utility poles. Telecom service providers, working with utilities,

would determine which hydro utility poles could be used for providing service. By reducing barriers and costs for Internet providers to use existing electricity infrastructure, we are creating a path forward to deliver cost-effective and timely broadband service to communities across our vast province. We firmly believe that this legislation will send a strong signal to Internet and communication service providers, providing them with the certainty they need in their planning process.

I want to stress that we will work with electricity utility companies to ensure ratepayers' bills are not increased due to this initiative. While hydro utility poles and other energy infrastructure require maintenance and repair, we will work with the Ontario Energy Board, local distribution companies, telecommunications, and Internet service providers to ensure that when maintenance and upgrades are related to broadband expansion, electricity ratepayers pay only their fair share of associated costs.

As mentioned previously, the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, 2021, would also enact the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021, or BBFA. The BBFA, if passed, would help to accelerate broadband infrastructure deployment by providing the Minister of Infrastructure with the authority to reduce barriers on provincially significant projects, including the ability to:

- ensure municipalities and utility companies provide timely access to their infrastructure, including municipal rights-of-way and hydro utility poles when appropriate;

- support an approach to reduce the time it takes to prepare electricity infrastructure such as hydro utility poles for a new wireline attachment for provincially significant projects; and

- ensure owners of underground infrastructure provide locations of their infrastructure within 10 business days for specific broadband projects prior to a dig through the Ontario One Call system. This would allow Internet service providers to more quickly start work when laying down underground broadband infrastructure. I'm pleased to say that my colleague MPP McDonnell will be providing more details on these aspects of the legislation in his words.

Mr. Speaker, COVID has truly shone a light on what the realities are when you don't have reliable Internet service. Certainly in my riding of Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound that's evident, and many of my colleagues both in our party and across all of the parties, particularly those in our First Nations communities—and I see one of my colleagues walking down the steps here this morning—have shared with us just how critical that infrastructure is in their communities, not just in the time of COVID but at all times—

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Water.

Hon. Bill Walker: We're trying to help you, Sol.

Speaker, it really does show what this technology can do to stabilize our communities, to improve our lives and to ensure that we all have that access. It has been said in here by the Minister of Infrastructure that this is the great equalizer, broadband across our great province, and that it can level the playing field.

I certainly am one of those supporters who significantly believe that. In Bruce–Grey–Owen Sound, there are parts in the beautiful Bruce Peninsula, especially where there’s a lot of that Niagara Escarpment rock, that we have to figure a way to get the service through. People want to come and want to enjoy it. We’re seeing a huge increase in real estate values, people wanting to get out of those urban centres, especially as a result of COVID. Who would not want to come to the beautiful Bruce Peninsula—and all of Bruce–Grey–Owen Sound, but especially on those beautiful blue waters, looking out? If you could sit on your deck there and do your job, whatever it is—your volunteering, your capacity, your inventing—why would you not want to do it there? This truly will allow that to happen.

Mr. Speaker, I want to acknowledge SWIFT, Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology, and all of their team for the work they’re doing. This is a group created by the western wardens’ caucus of southwestern Ontario, so virtually from Windsor all the way up to Tobermory, if you will, and a swath all the way through. All of those wardens and municipalities have been working collaboratively, which is fabulous, in ensuring that we all have that ability.

Recently, through our government, the Ontario government, \$16 million was approved for Bruce county and \$17 million for Grey county to get the contracts, to put shovels in the ground and to get that fibre laid. This is going to have a huge impact. Approximately 5,200 homes and businesses will be connected in Bruce county alone, and about 3,900 in Grey county. Of course, this is not only just for the fibre, because this then allows something like, perhaps, satellite service providers. We can’t get down every little nook and cranny for one house at the end of four or five miles on a gravel road. Yes, we still have gravel roads in Bruce–Grey–Owen Sound. That’s something that many people, particularly in the urban areas, should come up and explore and see just how we have that tranquil style of life.

There are all kinds of technology that I believe, by having the fibre in the ground, allows you to then expand. Hopefully we, at some point in the future, will get there. Many people want it yesterday. They want it today for sure, and if not, the latest is tomorrow. But it is challenging. Even with this, there are billions of dollars needed, and I know the infrastructure minister has been pushing her federal counterparts to provide even more funding on a federal basis so that we can, again, expand to every single home and ensure everybody has that reliable service. This is hugely transitional. This is going to impact jobs.

Recently, I was down in the home of the other Speaker, Mr. Arnott, in Wellington. We toured back in the spring, I think, of last year, and I know the member from Perth–Wellington was also there as the parliamentary assistant. We were touring some of the agricultural users—and the technology that’s changed. They can be driving their tractor, their combine, whatever, and they have that signal from the satellite right there at their disposal, so they can

preprogram things. They can understand the conditions better. So this is going to be transformational. But they need the connectivity if they’re going to actually take advantage of the new technology and make those improvements, be more productive, actually have the ability to farm even more productively.

Education: Without any other thought, Mr. Speaker, this has certainly shown us that we can do things in an emergency so kids can still get their education if they have that connectivity. Again, it’s absolutely critical in areas of our province like rural and northern Ontario, and particularly our First Nations communities.

Health care: again, the ability to not have to travel. In our case, many of our referral centres are to the London or Waterloo area. In many cases, people are travelling in the middle of January or February in a snowstorm, Mr. Speaker, just to be able to sit with that specialist for 10 or 15 minutes to have a consultation. We can now do that through technology if we have reliable connectivity, and that’s absolutely transformational, Mr. Speaker.

I always go to my friends in Tobermory, the very tip of the peninsula. It’s an hour just to get off of the peninsula in the middle of the dead of winter, to go for a 15-minute appointment—and then they’ve got to travel to Toronto, to London, to Waterloo or wherever that may be. So this, again, will make it safer for them, make it more convenient and reduce their stress and ensure that we have access, frankly, to physicians around the world, with specialties that we may need going forward. I think it’s wonderful.

I want to applaud the Attorney General. We’ve really done a lot of work in the last little while, particularly as a result of COVID, where we’ve been able to move things through the system and modernize our judicial system; things, again, where we used to take a prisoner from Midland, for example, all the way down to Brampton or Milton just to have an appearance. It would take three or four hours each way, in inclement weather. Now they can do that all by video. They can do that as a result of technology. So there’s an environmental impact, a safety impact, a cost-saving impact, and it allows people to get through the system that much quicker. Again, certainly I think, in the judicial system, the ability to have a fair hearing as equitably and timely as possible is absolutely critical.

I think, Mr. Speaker, we are very fortunate to have this technology amongst us. I applaud our government. I think one of the members yesterday opposite said we hadn’t done anything in regard to broadband and/or infrastructure. Mr. Speaker, I want to—a billion dollars was approved by the member from Ajax, the finance minister in the last budget. A billion dollars: \$680 million more than our original commitment, Mr. Speaker, because we could see how much this was going to transform our province.

I’m excited for areas like Bruce–Grey–Owen Sound and all of our areas of the province that are going to be beneficially impacted by this.

Mr. David Piccini: EORN.

Hon. Bill Walker: I know, certainly, in EORN, in eastern Ontario, exactly—the equivalent of SWIFT. I

don't know what EORN stands for, but I'm sure the member—

Mr. David Piccini: Eastern Ontario Regional Network.

Hon. Bill Walker: Eastern Ontario Regional Network, or something like that. Anyway, it's a really good organization. It's almost as swift as SWIFT, Mr. Speaker; not quite. Their acronyms aren't quite there, the same as SWIFT.

One thing I will say with SWIFT that I hear in my riding, Mr. Speaker—it's kind of an interesting acronym—it's not quite as swift as the people of Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound were hoping, because they would have liked to have had that connectivity a couple of years ago. But I again want to applaud the members of the western wardens' caucus and SWIFT for the collaboration and for actually coming to the table and ensuring that we're working in partnership, that we're working again for the greater good, and I'm excited for what that's going to mean to our small companies. We've had a number of small companies start as a result of this that are playing a niche market. There's lots of talk on whether the technology will stick with the fibre or satellite technology. Who knows, Mr. Speaker? I'm certainly not a tech, you might say. But at the end of the day, who knows what we'll have in another couple of years, that we'll have different advancements in technologies that, again, will allow every single person to have a reliable connection?

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It's truly one of those things that, when we think back to not even that far ago and what we tried to do without technology and what now we just take for granted—having our cellphone, having our computer, being able to send a message around the world and back in 30 seconds or less so that you actually have the information at your disposal. This, I can't state enough, in our First Nations and Indigenous communities that are remote and want to have that accessibility, that want to have the ability to have the same health care, the same ability to communicate and connect with the world—I truly think this is going to be a game-changer. It's going to level the playing field and ensure that we have it. We'll continue to push for all of those different opportunities.

Again, I know the Minister of Infrastructure—and I applaud her and her team. I want to reach out to our federal counterparts, who we've done great things in collaboration with across all of what we're doing in the pandemic, to ensure that we can get to that point and ensure that we do.

Mr. Speaker, before I turn things over to my colleague, let me close by reiterating how vital it is that we help connect communities to reliable high-speed Internet faster by accelerating the deployment of provincially significant broadband infrastructure across Ontario. I speak to the urgency of this deployment from the point of view of my constituents in Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound, who want and need broadband across local communities to level that playing field and ensure that we have businesses that can thrive and grow and create more good-paying jobs in the future. For rural communities, access to broadband, much like access to affordable natural gas, is a game-changer,

and there is no limit to the new opportunities it will help to create.

We cannot leave behind the hundreds of thousands of households and businesses in Ontario that still lack access to adequate broadband or have no Internet connection at all. We owe it to everyone in all communities across this province to participate fully in this rapidly expanding digital economy to work effectively and productively from home, to run a business, to take part in online learning, to connect with family and friends and to access a growing number of online services like health care, banking and shopping.

With the regulatory measures and additional enforcement powers proposed in the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, 2021, if passed, we'll be able to remove barriers, which will ultimately allow many people to get connected to the Internet as quickly as possible.

Broadband connectivity is essential to job creation, economic growth and the delivery of public services, such as education and health care. Today, Ontarians expect and deserve reliable broadband service wherever they live, learn or do business, and this legislation is going to change that.

Now I'm going to turn it over to my colleague and friend the member from Stormont-Dundas-South Glengarry to bring it home.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): As the ministers have indicated, their cleanup hitter in this debate this morning will be the member from Stormont-Dundas-South Glengarry.

Mr. Jim McDonell: Thank you, Speaker. As a goaltender, I'm used to cleaning up after Mr. Walker.

It is my pleasure to rise today in support of my colleague and friend the great Minister of Infrastructure, Minister Laurie Scott, in support of her Bill 257, the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, which, if passed, would connect communities to reliable broadband sooner by helping to accelerate the deployment of provincially significant broadband infrastructure across Ontario.

Broadband has become an essential service in Ontario, and I'm proud to see that our government is taking action. The act, if passed, will help expedite the delivery of broadband projects of provincial significance by removing barriers and streamlining processes related to infrastructure that may result in delays to timely completion of these broadband projects, while enhancing fairness, coordination and engagement with the public and private sector stakeholders. Now, more than ever, we need to build better broadband faster, strengthen our communities, and lay the foundation for growth, renewal and long-term economic recovery.

Over the past few months, COVID-19 has altered our lives as we know it. It has underscored the importance of broadband connectivity in our daily lives, our well-being and our economic resilience. Today, as many as 700,000 households in Ontario lack access to reliable high-speed broadband. That is why I am pleased to say that our

government is proposing to remove barriers to help build broadband faster in communities, and in a more cost-effective way, opening our province to business and creating good jobs. Our proposed Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act would, if passed, help connect communities to reliable broadband sooner by accelerating deployment of provincially significant broadband infrastructure across Ontario.

The pandemic has only magnified changes that were already under way. This includes the continued global shift to a digital community and a digital economy. Just in the last year, we have seen great changes in the way Ontarians, let alone the members of this House, go about their daily lives. We are conducting education, commerce, consultations, conferences, health care and meetings with colleagues and stakeholders by digital means. Our communities need to be connected to reliable broadband to ensure people can work from home, learn online and connect with family and friends, to access virtual services.

As a member of Queen's Science '77 alumni, we no longer have to wait five years for our annual reunions as we now meet about every six weeks, and our next one is on St. Patrick's Day; I'm sure it will be the quietest we've ever had.

Since day one, we have been committed to improving broadband as this government and we have taken action to help improve connectivity in communities across the province. Our 2019 broadband and cellular action plan includes a historic investment of nearly \$1 billion over six years and is already improving connectivity across the province. This investment includes doubling our funding to \$300 million of our Improving Connectivity for Ontario program, also known as ICON, which was launched last summer. For example, we're investing in the Eastern Ontario Regional Network Cell Gap Project to improve cellular service in eastern Ontario.

The Eastern Ontario Regional Network, or EORN, is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to improving rural connectivity, supporting economic growth and enhancing quality of life. Created by the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus, EORN helps to create innovative public-private partnerships to address the digital divide and support a stronger future for rural eastern Ontario.

On the project's website, the chair of EORN and the warden of Peterborough county, J. Murray Jones, has this to say: "COVID has shown us just how critical it is for everyone to have broadband access. It's how we reach markets, create jobs, teach our kids and offer health care.... To ... level the playing field, rural communities need a once-in-a-generation investment in connectivity." I couldn't agree more with this sentiment, Speaker. The region is home to almost 1.2 million people spread over 50,000 square kilometres. Eastern Ontario can only thrive if the residents have the tools to succeed.

Mayor Allan Thompson, chair of ROMA, always commented at our monthly AMO meetings that he was pleased to hear the support for SWIFT, the broadband project in southwestern Ontario. Today, those tools

include access to high-speed Internet at home, work and on the road, and it is key to our economic prosperity.

Since 2010, municipal governments across rural eastern Ontario have come together to improve local connectivity through EORN. We've had great success working together with our neighbours. However, it is an ongoing effort as technology continues to drive greater demand for speed and bandwidth. When the project is complete, residents of eastern Ontario will get near-complete cellular voice coverage and increased access to mobile broadband in areas where they work, live and travel.

From 2010 to 2015, EORN oversaw a \$175-million investment in new broadband infrastructure, funded by all three orders of government and the private sector, that:

- connected a 5,500-kilometre fibre-optic backbone across the region;
- improved connectivity for about 90% of the homes and businesses, adding more than 140,000 new broadband subscribers so far;
- connected more than 60 business parks with fibre broadband;
- created a 10-year digital strategy focused on economic growth;
- generated additional telecom investments, bringing total project value up to \$260 million.

And Speaker, that's not all, for this regional project has also spurred new private sector investments since 2015, including \$100 million in new broadband infrastructure, with more fibre and wireless equipment in the pipeline. The proposed legislation in Bill 257 is designed to strengthen communities and connect families and individuals to what matters most. If passed, this is exactly what today's proposed legislation is designed to do.

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On March 4 of this year, Minister Scott had this to say in the House upon introduction of this vital bill: "It would pass the Building Broadband Faster Act, modelled on the Building Transit Faster Act, which would give authority to the Minister of Infrastructure to reduce barriers to" deploy "broadband-related infrastructure. And it would create regulation-making authority under the Ontario Energy Board Act, 1998, to reduce barriers regarding the development of, access to and use of electricity infrastructure by third parties. This authority would be used to make it easier for telecommunications service providers to use existing electricity assets such as hydro utility poles, as well as municipal rights-of-way, to expand access to broadband while reducing the costs to do so." This authority would also "require utility companies to consider possible joint use of hydro utility poles during their planning process. Again, this would help to save time and money in the future."

Prior to my time here, I worked for Bell Canada, finishing my career in their network planning group. You don't have to go back very far, to the late 1990s, when access to the fledgling Internet was a whopping 64 kilobits, if you were lucky. I remember the big win, the program that allowed Bell to expand its local calling areas to allow every subscriber to access an Internet service

provider, or ISP, toll-free. At 64 kilobits, the long-distance charges were really adding up.

When DSL technology arrived, making one-megabit service available, that was a huge jump, but it was short-lived. Within just a few years, five-megabit service arrived on the scene and is still the rural Cadillac today, if you are lucky. Of course, if you're more than two kilometres away from a Bell switch or a remote, speed drops off quickly.

The COVID-19 pandemic truly exposed the weaknesses of slow Internet. Three megabits will allow you to watch a movie on Netflix, but stay off the Internet, or don't expect to sign up to your local online course or watch a second movie. I can tell you from experience, when my daughters would turn on their favourite movie on Netflix, it was time to sign off the Internet. There lays the problem. For a family with young children or a business trying to access markets, those speeds make it very tough.

In my riding of Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry, many people would be happy with those limitations, for many don't have any high-speed at all. About two years ago, Bell Canada served the city of Cornwall and a number of villages in South Glengarry with their fibre to the home product. Rural areas such as Lancaster, Glen Walter, St. Andrews, and my area around Williamstown had local fibre placed, and I can tell you, the service was like night and day. The basic speeds of 150 megabits or more allow you to watch multiple programs and record others simultaneously.

The benefits of fibre cannot be overstated. Businesses can now access high-speed fibre from their home, which is so important to their development and expansion.

This legislation helps overcome many of the artificial barriers that may have driven up costs. Ontario is the most expensive jurisdiction in North America to place telecommunication facilities, and this bill will help address that. Engineering design requirements used all around North America for more than half a century are no longer accepted in Ontario, allowing local distribution companies to charge excessive make-ready costs.

Capital is a limited resource, and it is attracted to the areas of greatest return. Unfortunately, today, that is not in Ontario. I understand that the fibre to the home project was planned to be rolled out years before in Cornwall, but these excessive costs forced the company to move the dollars to a Quebec location served by Hydro-Québec.

The changes proposed in this legislation will not cost the taxpayers of Ontario any dollars to address, but the changes will provide many benefits by allowing scarce capital to do so much more. Our government got elected on a promise of eliminating unnecessary and expensive red tape, and this is just another example of getting the job done.

Speaker, there is more to do, but unfortunately, they fall under the jurisdiction of the federal government, and I know our minister has been working with her federal counterparts to address these issues.

As an example of needless restrictions, local telephone companies cannot extend local high-speed facilities across an artificial exchange boundary, whereas no such

restriction applies to any other service provider. I have neighbours and friends who have no access to high-speed services, wired or wireless, but their next-door neighbour has high-speed Internet, at a fairly high speed. Unfortunately for them, they are served from a different exchange.

These restrictions date back to earlier days, when the basic telephone was state-of-the-art technology. But times have changed, and it is time to change some of these old laws that keep Ontarians and their businesses from enjoying the benefits that are enjoyed throughout the modern world. Prime Minister Trudeau has committed to the majority of Canadians having this existing technology by 2030. The rest of the modern world is getting these services today, and it's time for Canadians once again to become world leaders and not to accept mediocre, as we seem to accept this far too often today. With the financial challenges we are all facing during this global pandemic, this is welcome news for every Ontarian.

As you know, Speaker, I am proud to serve my constituents of Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry as their proud MPP, and I am proud of our government and the great Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, as his parliamentary assistant to municipal affairs.

As a former reeve, warden, member of the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus and a rural resident, I know first-hand the challenges our municipal partners are under, whether it be the long travel distances, inclement weather, financial constraints and now a pandemic. Increasing connectivity has allowed us in rural Ontario and northern Ontarians to conduct virtual council meetings and maintain ongoing meetings with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, with the minister, PA Gill and myself.

In support of Bill 257, I wanted to share a quote from the mayor of Bracebridge, who was recently elected as president of AMO and is a terrific municipal partner I have come to know very well. President Graydon Smith: "The need for better rural and northern connectivity is clear. Speeding up provincially funded broadband projects will connect more people, faster. AMO looks forward to working with the province to make real improvements that benefit people and their communities."

We're working to remove barriers to broadband expansion so that more people and businesses will be able to benefit from better broadband services. To accomplish this, we must ensure the municipalities provide timely access to municipal rights-of-way and that utility companies provide timely access to their infrastructure.

Let me be clear: Ontario values its relationship with its municipal partners and stakeholders and will continue to work collaboratively to deliver broadband to the communities that need it the most. The authority to direct work is intended as a last resort and will only be used when all measures to reduce holdups have been exhausted. In doing so, we are going to see change coming, especially in rural Ontario.

Now, this may come as a surprise, but I know, for my own grandchildren—and I don't like to be the bearer of bad news, but with greater connectivity, these investments

will remove a cultural staple, especially in rural Ontario, and that is the elimination of the snow day. As many of you here today, I remember my children anxiously gathered around the kitchen radio, bookbag in one hand and lunch and extra gear in the other, waiting to hear the possibility of the school buses being cancelled. Our kids, through broadband investments, will remain connected to their classroom no matter what the weather is outside.

Bill 257, if passed, sends a clear signal that Ontario is committed to expanding broadband connectivity to underserved communities in Ontario. The legislation, which will include certain regulatory measures, additional enforcement powers and our government's significant investment in broadband projects, will complement our existing and regular engagement with municipal and other stakeholders. It will help us get as many people as possible connected to the Internet as quickly as possible, and it will help make Ontario more competitive while boosting our long-term economic recovery and is important to our province's future prosperity.

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We need to also allow the use of the latest technology. During my time as mayor of South Glengarry, we applied for and secured a number of grants to provide high-speed Internet service throughout our township. After picking off many villages and hamlets, we looked to service the most difficult areas, receiving a number of wireless proposals. Grant guidelines restricted or, perhaps more appropriately termed, handcuffed proponents from using the latest cell technology of the day, which provided a superior Internet service of 10 megabits per second. To meet the terms of the grant, the supplier installed equipment that was being removed from the Toronto market and was manufacturing-discontinued.

At the time, the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus was about to start its government-funded program to place wireless Internet service across eastern Ontario. At a ministry meeting, I raised the question as to why the program would not allow the latest cell technology to be used and provide both cell and Internet service, likely for less government money due to the extra revenue stream. The ministry, which was under the then Liberal government, was very clear that they could not be part of any project that allowed big cell companies to access government dollars to subsidize cell service. I pointed out that while they drove to eastern Ontario along Highway 401, able to talk on their cell throughout the trip, that was not the case in rural Ontario, where most areas had limited or no cell service at all.

Roughly \$250 million was spent to place low-speed wireless service, and there is still limited or no cell service to date. This month, the Eastern Ontario Regional Network, or EORN, supported by shared funding from this government, the federal government and the municipalities that make up the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus, will award a contract to one of the major cell companies to provide cell service to eastern Ontario—about 10 years later.

Mr. Speaker, this is a classic case of a government refusing to use the latest science in delivering critical infrastructure. Just a few years later, this same Liberal government would once again refuse to listen to industry and its own experts, costing Ontarians more than \$100 billion for the passage of the failed Green Energy Act.

I want to thank Minister Scott for all the hard work that she has put forward in Bill 257, Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, for it helps to build a stronger Ontario by letting our world-class companies build tomorrow's network.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time now for questions and responses.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I listened carefully to the government members about Bill 257, which, Speaker, you've perhaps heard a lot about and read a lot about out in the media and the broader world. But you wouldn't know, based on today's debate, about schedule 3. Schedule 3, interestingly, the government members didn't talk about. But I'll play the game for a moment and I'll talk about broadband.

I do know that the Minister of Infrastructure has been talking about broadband for a long time, and so I guess my question to her is: As we hear about the importance of rural broadband and connectivity and hearing about life for rural communities, I'd like to know why the word "rural" isn't in the bill, but also I want to know how the minister is feeling about her bill being co-opted by this government and schedule 3 taking over, so that this isn't a conversation about broadband; it's a conversation about destruction of wetlands and rewriting laws. How does the minister feel?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I thank the member opposite. I think that almost every sentence that I speak speaks about rural Ontario and connectivity for unserved and underserved areas and how important it is to everyone's daily lives now, especially since COVID has hit.

Mr. Speaker, I have not been shy to say that infrastructure is a marquee part of our government—investing in all kinds of infrastructure. Today we're mainly talking about broadband and facilitating how we can get broadband connections to those people in our communities—where I live, there's no question that's an issue—so that they can participate in not only the government services that are offered, but we all know that they live and work from home now and we have to do this for our economy to get everyone connected as soon as possible. I'm going to continue to speak about infrastructure—all kinds of infrastructure that facilitates not only broadband connection, but also transit and housing.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Northumberland–Peterborough South.

Mr. David Piccini: Thank you to the minister. Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the minister. Folks in rural Ontario, in my riding of Northumberland–Peterborough South, are sick and tired of not having reliable broadband access. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic has only further highlighted the need for reliable broadband in rural Ontario.

I know that the billion-dollar announcement our government has made has been well received, but people are tired of just seeing the money announcements. Can the minister speak about some of the structural changes in this bill, like hydro poles, that are so critical to ensuring that folks in rural Ontario have the reliable Internet service that they deserve and that they need?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I thank the member from Northumberland–Peterborough South for the question. He and I speak about broadband daily, I think, and about the connectivity to our constituents that needs to happen. Yes, this is federally regulated telecommunications, and the province of Ontario—the Premier, in 2018, said that we have to connect people all across Ontario, that we are all in this together. We have put \$1 billion on the table, and not only did we do that, we sat down with the utilities, with the telecommunications, with the municipalities and said, “How do we build this faster? We need a plan.” This Building Broadband Faster Act that I’m introducing right now is key, because we heard about delays to utility poles and we heard about delays to municipal rights-of-way.

Mr. Speaker, we are all at the table, and we’re going to build broadband faster.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Next question.

Mr. John Vanthof: My question is to the Minister of Infrastructure. I have enjoyed over the years working with the minister on various things, including broadband. We welcome the introduction of this act, but there are a few questions we have. I would like to refer to schedule 3, basically the explanatory notes: “The Planning Act is amended to provide that ministerial zoning orders made under section 47 are not required and are deemed to never have been required to be consistent with policy statements issued under subsection 3(1).”

So “deemed to never have been required”: Could the minister describe which broadband installations this applies to?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I thank the member across for the question. I’ve quite enjoyed working with the member and hearing his constituents’ concerns. There is no question that we share a lot of frustrations for our constituents mutually in accessing broadband.

But, Mr. Speaker, infrastructure is all-inclusive, and it’s helping people in whichever way we can help people. So when we’re talking today—and I talked a lot about broadband and I will continue to do so, and the historic investments we’ve put into facilitating broadband connections across rural Ontario. That is the focus of what we’ve heard from constituents and what we are planning on doing.

Infrastructure, as I said, means lots of things: broadband, housing, affordable housing, transit, hospitals, education facilities, correctional facilities. So we are having—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you.

The member for Ottawa West–Nepean.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: I appreciated the remarks from all of my colleagues on this side on this very important

issue and want to commend the Minister of Infrastructure for bringing this important legislation forward. Over the summer, I had the chance, through the standing committee on finance, to hear from hundreds of Ontarians around the province on different issues facing them during the pandemic, and time and time again, broadband Internet came up. Whether it was talks about how we could expand health care services virtually or help businesses to grow and expand, the need for broadband was clear.

I wonder if the Minister of Infrastructure could talk a little bit about how this bill is going to accelerate that push for broadband, particularly in my own home region of eastern Ontario?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you very much to the member for his question. He has certainly heard the stories over and over again.

The Eastern Ontario Regional Network is a great group of municipalities that work—in this case, I think it was mentioned about their cell-gap project that’s going to connect almost 100% of the people in eastern Ontario. That’s going to be an immense difference to the quality of life of the people there.

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Mr. Speaker, when I was making my opening remarks, I explained in detail about stringing wires. It seems so simple when we say this. This makes a huge difference. The delays that have occurred in just being able to string those wires to connect those homes, those farms, those businesses—you would think it’s simple. We say, “Take action. What is needed to make it more simple than it is today and bring down those barriers?” That’s what we have done.

I hope the members opposite will support this critical infrastructure bill that we’re bringing forward so we can connect all Ontario and all be on a level playing field.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Next question?

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: My community of St. Catharines and the Niagara region value their environment and wetlands, and neighbour on the Great Lakes. We are lucky to have not had any ministerial zoning orders, because this government has used the extensive powers it already has to green-light development on protected wetlands. It has felt like abuse of power, but this legislation changes the rules to ensure it cannot lose the mountains of lawsuits they already see right now.

My question: Can it be explained to the residents of St. Catharines and the Niagara area, if this legislation passes, why it is okay to have the minister be sole arbitrator of planning impacts across Ontario while cutting our local voices off, like Indigenous groups, environmental groups and, more importantly, the local municipal governments?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Our government has been clear that every single ministerial zoning order issued on non-provincially-owned land has been at the request of the local municipality. So our proposed changes will ensure that the priority projects do not face unnecessary barriers and delays after receiving an MZO.

Mr. Speaker, I’m sure the member opposite has residents in her area, even though there are large cities

there, who need broadband connection so their lives can improve. We are making changes and bringing in regulations that will help improve the lives of her constituents. We have listened to the people of Ontario, and they do want to progress in making broadband connections, affordable housing, better transit, better hospitals. That's what infrastructure does.

If they do not want to get on board with building a better Ontario, then I challenge them to vote against this bill.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The time for debate in this matter has been concluded.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We are a minute or two before members' statements, but with your permission, we can move the agenda along right into members' statements.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

SOINS DE LONGUE DURÉE

LONG-TERM CARE

M. Guy Bourgouin: Je me lève ce matin pour parler de l'éclosion de la COVID-19 dans le foyer d'Extencicare à Kapuskasing. Déclarée le 6 janvier, l'éclosion n'a pas été considérée comme terminée jusqu'au 24 février. Malgré les appels constants à ce gouvernement d'agir de façon proactive, nous avons été témoins d'un long et douloureux déclin qui a coûté 16 vies dans notre communauté.

Speaker, almost 30% of the residents in this home died; 90% of the residents and 19 staff contracted the virus. Families were broken by the lack of measures, by the absence of clear and transparent communication. I've heard front-line workers cry for help because they were scared and overwhelmed. I've heard from families whose loved ones did not get their baths for days and days, who did not get medication or food for hours. And yet, time and again, we were told staffing levels were "stable," the situation was "under control," that it was "business as usual." That was far from being true.

Avant de finir, je veux remercier les travailleuses et travailleurs de première ligne, les partenaires de santé de la région et la communauté en général pour leur dévouement et leur solidarité pendant cette difficile éclosion.

PUBLIC SERVICE EMPLOYEES

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Today, I want to mention two of our most accomplished community leaders. In Perth-Wellington, they're leading the effort to keep the rest of us healthy. And today, the day after International Women's Day, I should mention they just happen to be women.

Dr. Nicola Mercer is the medical officer of health for Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health. The publication *Municipal World* just recognized her with the Women of Influence in Local Government Award—a well-deserved honour. They noted that Dr. Mercer was the

first medical officer to mandate face coverings indoors. She took some heat, but others soon followed her lead.

In a dark time, Dr. Mercer chooses to focus on the positive. The article states, "That positive focus is something she has relied on throughout her medical career. After all, she went to medical school at a time when other women were few and far between." My constituents are fortunate to have Dr. Mercer's positive, forward-thinking leadership in a time like this.

The second public servant I want to acknowledge today is Dr. Miriam Klassen, medical officer of health for Huron Perth Public Health. I've known Dr. Klassen for many years. I don't think she's taken a day off since this pandemic started. When asked where she finds the passion for her career, Dr. Klassen responded, "You can really make changes for an entire generation."

They didn't ask for a pandemic. They didn't ask to be in the papers every day. Yet their leadership and public service is saving lives. We need them and we thank them.

AUTISM TREATMENT

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: It's been two years since this government essentially blew up the Ontario Autism Program. Since then, the wait-list for the OAP has ballooned to around 42,000 kids and continues to have children age out of qualifying for the autism program. The children who have been receiving care have suffered a reduction in services, clinics have closed and families are at their wits' end, hoping that their interim funding won't run out.

It's been over a month since the Ford government announced the revamped OAP, and we still have more questions than answers. The minister touts that this is a needs-based program, but can't confirm that it will be clinicians and not bureaucrats that will get the final word. There's no confirmation on the appeals process, no specific strategy for northern Ontario, Indigenous and racialized folks, and no mention of adults with autism.

The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services called together an advisory panel, only to ignore its recommendations. There has been a bottleneck of kids without access to programming for years. These age caps will not meet their needs. This is a problem this government created, and yet refuses to solve it.

Every parent of a child with autism will tell you that every day matters. I have spoken to these families, and many of those meetings end in tears. Parents are forced to remortgage their homes, go further into debt, work multiple jobs and travel for hours to make sure their kids get the therapies they need.

They have been going above and beyond to do their part. It's time for the government to step up and to commit to a truly needs-based model that leaves no kid behind. Families depend on you getting this right, now.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Mr. Rod Phillips: I rise today to acknowledge International Women's Day, which we celebrated

yesterday, and the strong women that make Ajax and Durham the great place it is today. As the Associate Minister of Children and Women's Issues acknowledged in her statement yesterday, I would also like to thank the women in this Legislature, who do serve their communities, the people of Ontario and Canada so well.

Turning to my community, Mr. Speaker: Since its founding, women have played an important role in Ajax. During the Second World War, Defence Industries Ltd. was a munitions complex in what is now Ajax and employed thousands of women from across Canada. These "bomb girls," as they became popularly known, were young women who worked for years helping to produce heavy artillery shells and anti-aircraft ammunition that helped Canada and the Allied forces win the Second World War. In 1947, following the war, DIL's site gave birth to the community of Ajax, and it's a place that so many call home today.

I am proud to have been present, in September of 2018, when Tim Schmalz's monument that pays tribute to the effort and contributions of the bomb girls was unveiled at Pat Bayly Square. Louise Johnson, who will be celebrating her 100th birthday this June, was at the ceremony. She helped spearhead the commissioning of the installation of the monument that tributes all the women in Canada's war effort.

The contributions of women to my community have never stopped over the years, and I want to take this opportunity to thank all of them, and women across Canada, for the contributions that they make to making our country and our province great.

1020

SICKLE CELL DISEASE

Ms. Laura Mae Lindo: Last week, while the government prepared an awareness bill on sickle cell and thalassemia, I was contacted by Reverend Regena Ward-Provost. Regena wrote, "I am dealing with some serious systemic racism to the point where I'm being weaned off my pain meds as a sickle cell patient." When I called Regena, she explained that she was struggling. She was on ODSP, and during the pandemic she had fallen behind in her bills and her rent.

Without health care professionals understanding what to look for to diagnose sickle cell, Regena had been misdiagnosed time and time again. But in May 2019, she met a doctor who understood her illness, and for two years, she participated in a specialized clinic to help her manage her pain. And then a visit to a hospital in St. Catharines changed everything. She was deemed a drug-seeker. They didn't believe the intensity of her pain, and they placed a call to the clinic. She was banned from accessing any services from the program.

Mr. Speaker, Regena is palliative now, and even as she walks this leg of her sickle cell journey, she is fighting for the sickle cell protocol that was developed by experts and people with sickle cell to be made mandatory for all

hospitals across the province. The Liberals didn't implement it, and now Conservatives are making posters.

Posters will not save Regena or others who are suffering these indignities in our health care system. But do you know what will help, Mr. Speaker? The immediate implementation of the sickle cell protocol across all of our hospitals.

ONTARIO FILM AND TELEVISION INDUSTRY

Ms. Donna Skelly: I want to take some time this morning to brag about my hometown of Hamilton's popularity with movie and television producers. Last year alone, 32 film and television companies brought their productions to Hamilton, and this year that trend continues, with about half a dozen shoots already in production.

Broadcast and streaming giants such as Netflix, CBS, Lifetime and Disney have chosen Hamilton for their products; for example, the very popular, and my favourite series, *The Handmaid's Tale* has been shooting scenes for its fourth season at Hutch's, a Beach Boulevard landmark.

In fact, Hamilton landmarks attract attention from many, many producers. The superhero show *The Umbrella Academy* has been shooting at Dundurn Castle, Liuna Station, Gage Park, Ottawa Street and Dymont's farm market in my riding of Flamborough-Glanbrook. The crime drama *In the Dark* was filming at the Hamilton airport in January, and the Netflix fantasy *Slumberland* is filming at Mohawk College. The director of that production, Francis Lawrence, also directed *The Hunger Games*.

Hamilton has a thriving film industry. A massive multi-million-dollar studio is set to open this year inside an old manufacturing site. Aeon Studio Group is planning a 14-acre film and television production hub. It's a Hollywood North dream. Hamilton is the third largest film cluster in Canada, employing thousands of people. I'm so proud.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Since February 1, 2021, I've been to fly-in First Nations across Kiiwetinoong to support the COVID-19 vaccine rollout. There was vaccine hesitancy in some First Nations and its members. There was hesitancy because First Nations people have never been in the front of the line when it comes to services like health care. We're always in the back of the line, Mr. Speaker. Most of our communities do not have access to full-time doctors, clinics, pharmacies or even clean running water.

I knew I had to help, because people were unsure that the vaccine was safe and that it must be taken to protect the health of our families, our languages and our way of life. It took many people to make the vaccine rollout in our communities happen. Miigwetch to the vaccine teams, and especially those in our communities who made sure everyone was on the list to be vaccinated and that the clinics were ready to go. I'd like to do a shout-out to Ornge's Dr. Homer Tien and all the doctors and the nurses

who came up north, many for the first time, to vaccinate the people.

It is a relief to know that we've completed phase 1. The vaccination, however, cannot roll out to replace the vast disparities to health care access that people face, but Operation Remote Immunity is a move in the right direction.

LAND USE PLANNING

Mr. Mike Schreiner: This weekend I had the honour of speaking at a protest march against the government's plans to destroy the Lower Duffins Creek wetland. It is clear that people do not want wetlands paved over. They don't want their homes and businesses threatened by flooding. They want their drinking water and the Great Lakes protected.

People are disgusted by the government's utter lack of concern for the environment. They're asking why the Premier and the MPP for Pickering are not listening to their concerns; why the government is taking such extreme measures to overturn decades of planning laws and environmental protections to benefit a deep-pocketed developer; why the government has failed in its duty to consult the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation.

Just yesterday, the government put out a release on Ontario's Flooding Strategy, which clearly points out the importance of maintaining existing wetlands to protect us from flooding. Why is the minister forcing the TRCA to issue a development permit by March 12 to destroy a wetland against all evidence?

I'm strongly urging the government to listen to the people who want this MZO revoked, to listen to the people who want Duffins Creek protected, to listen to the people who don't want their homes and businesses put at risk due to flooding.

MARIAN SUNNEN

Mr. Rick Nicholls: One hundred years: A lot can happen in a hundred years. Less than a hundred years ago, we witnessed the invention of the TV, the Great Depression, prohibition, World War II, putting the first man on the moon, a nuclear arms race, the expansion of the Internet, cellphones and self-driving cars. It's incredible. Now imagine if you were alive to see all of that. That would be the case for 99-year-old Marian Sunnen from my riding of Chatham-Kent-Leamington. On Sunday morning, February 28, Marian was excited to receive her first dose of COVID-19 vaccine at the John D. Bradley centre.

Marian now lives by herself at the Chatham Retirement Resort, having lost her husband, August "Augie" Sunnen. They were married for 75 years, and she lost him about four years ago. She is excited to be able to see her grandchildren and great-grandchildren more often now, as she will be more protected during the pandemic. Marian will be turning 100 on April 5.

This isn't Marian's first pandemic, though. When she was young, she and her family were alive during the third

wave of the Spanish flu outbreak. She, her brother and her sisters all contracted the virus. Sadly, her two-year-old brother passed away from it, but she and her sisters all survived.

The pandemic has been tough on all. We've seen the impacts it is starting to have on people's mental health, especially our older citizens. We are working hard to roll out the vaccines and we're able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. If Marian can do it, we all can do it. We are strong together and we'll all be celebrating when we can return to our new normal.

ELDERCARE FOUNDATION

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: It's a pleasure to rise today to recognize the great work being done by the Eldercare Foundation of Ottawa. In 2008, at the age of 34, Adam Nihmey created the Eldercare Foundation to enhance the quality of life of our seniors in non-profit long-term-care homes. Adam was motivated to establish Eldercare after witnessing his grandmother's experience. He wanted to address a number of issues facing seniors like his grandmother, including lack of stimulating activity, issues of isolation and poor equipment in homes. He felt compelled to make a difference.

Adam lives in Qualicum in my riding of Ottawa West-Nepean, and his wife, Jessica, and two daughters, Tahlia and Elliora, all have worked together to establish this foundation and do some tremendous work. The charity now provides funds for the 13 non-profit long-term-care homes in Ottawa, two of which are situated in Ottawa West-Nepean. They have raised approximately \$1 million so far.

In 2020, Adam needed to step back due to work demands, and a new chair was voted in, Oriana Trombetti. Together with Linda Garcia and Dan Saikaley, they are continuing the good work of the Eldercare Foundation.

Retired board member Betty Hope-Gittens recently celebrated her 80th birthday. To mark the occasion, she organized Betty's Walk, an 800-kilometre walk of the Camino de Santiago, where she raised \$200,000 for Eldercare.

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To all the supporters of Ottawa's Eldercare Foundation, thank you for all you do to make life better for our seniors.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): That concludes our members' statements for this morning.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN PROVINCIAL PARLIAMENT

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I would ask for the House's attention while I give a brief statement. Yesterday, we celebrated International Women's Day, and I wanted to take a moment this morning to recognize the truly remarkable assembly we have here at the Legislature and acknowledge the outstanding contribution of women here at Queen's Park.

More and more, women and girls can see themselves represented here at the assembly, in our A Remarkable Assembly: Women at Queen's Park exhibit; in the portrait of Ontario's first female Premier, the member for Don Valley West, Kathleen Wynne; and through the hard work and dedication of the women who represent their communities here at Queen's Park, both past and present.

Two of our colleagues have also assumed new roles to further the representation and inclusion of women in Parliament here in Ontario and indeed across Canada. I am pleased to congratulate the Honourable Lisa Thompson, who has assumed the role of Chair of the Canadian region of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, and Waterloo MPP Catherine Fife, who is the new representative for Ontario.

The Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians was created in 2005 and is comprised of women parliamentarians from the provincial and territorial Legislatures and the federal Parliament. The CWP is a non-partisan initiative. It works as part of the larger Commonwealth Parliamentary Association towards better representation of women in Legislatures across Canada and throughout the Commonwealth.

I've had the privilege of working with both the Minister of Government and Consumer Services and the member for Waterloo throughout their time here in the Legislature, and I know that they will continue to represent us well as part of the CWP. Please join me in congratulating these two members.

Applause.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I understand the member for Kitchener Centre has a point of order.

Ms. Laura Mae Lindo: Speaker, I seek unanimous consent to bring forward a motion requiring the government to implement paid sick days legislation to help protect workers across Ontario from COVID-19 and so no one has to make the difficult choice between staying home when sick and being able to pay the bills.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member from Kitchener Centre is seeking the unanimous consent of the House to bring forward a motion requiring the government to implement paid sick day legislation to help protect workers across Ontario from COVID-19. Agreed? I heard a no.

QUESTION PERIOD

LONG-TERM CARE

Ms. Andrea Horwath: We've seen almost 4,000 people lose their lives to COVID-19 in long-term care. So my first question is to the Premier: Does the Premier believe that he did everything he could to save people's lives in long-term care?

Hon. Doug Ford: Through you, Mr. Speaker, the science table just came out and told everyone in Canada how many lives we did save, and that's so important. The

table showed the residents of long-term care are not only being prioritized in the phase 1 rollout of the vaccine, but 2,079 more infections could have occurred if we didn't do that, of which 249 would have resulted in hospitalizations and 615 deaths if we didn't go in there immediately to vaccinate all the folks in long-term care.

Not only did we throw everything we had at it, but so did all the doctors, the PSWs, hospitals—everyone went full steam ahead, and we did everything in our powers to make sure we protected the long-term-care residents.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Well, Speaker, in fact, there is new evidence that was unveiled last night from the testimony at the long-term-care commission. I'm going to speak to it right now: the testimony of Dr. Allison McGeer, a very well-respected public health expert who sits on the science table. When asked in response to a question from the commission about why the second wave was worse in long-term care than the first wave, she said this: In the lead-up to the second wave, "a number of proposals went to the ministry about what could be done; and all of them were deemed by the ministry to be too expensive." They were deemed by the government to be too expensive.

More seniors died in the second wave than in the first wave, Speaker. Why did this Premier choose saving money over saving lives?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Minister of Long-Term Care.

Hon. Merrilee Fullerton: I refute the premise of that question. Our government has taken every action possible, even up to making sure that we address the long-standing issues in long-term care left behind by the previous government.

Some \$1.38 billion has gone to our long-term-care sector to shore it up. We were able to hire over 8,600 people during the first wave using the pandemic pay. We used the surveillance testing when it was available to us. We used the rapid testing when it was available to us. We established a specialized care centre. We deployed staff from hospitals to address the long-standing and emergency staffing issue. We had an integrated response with Public Health Ontario, the hospitals and public health.

This has been an integrated response. I want to say this issue was long-standing, and when COVID-19 hit, we used every measure possible. There was no expense spared. I am absolutely confident of that.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): And the final supplementary?

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Speaker, one year ago, the Premier said this—it was just repeated, unbelievably, by the Minister of Long-Term Care: "No expense will be spared. We will consider every option to support those Ontarians in need during this crisis." Dr. McGeer testified the exact opposite. Options were ignored. Almost 4,000 people lost their lives in long-term care because the Ford government didn't want to spend the money.

So while the Premier was watching, people died in long-term care and families were mourning the loss of their loved ones. Why did he still decide to not spend the money to save those seniors' lives?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will please take their seats.

The Minister of Long-Term Care.

Hon. Merrilee Fullerton: I absolutely reject that mischaracterization of the actions of this government. As the Minister—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'm going to ask the minister to withdraw.

Hon. Merrilee Fullerton: I withdraw.

As the Minister of Long-Term Care, I can tell you no expense was spared. Everything we did was in response to a crisis of staffing, a crisis of capacity, overcoming the structural inadequacies left behind by the previous government; \$1.38 billion for COVID response alone, and \$1.9 billion in the works to make sure that we have, on an annual basis, the staffing that's required, making sure that we address the staffing shortage, both on an emergency level and on a stabilization level, and a long-term issue with the staffing. Over 8,000 staff were hired, with the pandemic pay, to stabilize this sector.

Our government used rapid tests that had to be approved by Health Canada. Were there delays with approvals? Were there delays getting—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you.

The next question.

LONG-TERM CARE

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Speaker, my next question is also for the Premier. But I have to say I'm astounded that this government is responding in this way, when we know the pain and anguish that family members—the worry, the fear—had for their loved ones in long-term care as they watched the second wave come upon us.

Here is what Dr. McGeer said: In the lead-up to the second wave, "Quebec ... hired a large number of additional staff." That would be last summer, not a month ago or a week ago. "We chose not to do that in Ontario."

Quebec hired 10,000 PSWs. Experts did say that that saved lives. The Premier could have saved lives by spending the money to staff up last summer. Why didn't he spend the money to staff up and save the lives of vulnerable seniors in long-term care?

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The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Long-Term Care.

Hon. Merrilee Fullerton: It's very clear that there's information missing from the narrative across the chamber. Our government, with its pandemic pay and the emergency and stabilization process that we used, albeit different from Quebec's, achieved 8,636 hires during that time. We stabilized the sector. We worked desperately and frantically around the clock—many, many people working to stabilize this.

I want to clarify that Quebec did not hire 10,000 PSWs. They trained orderlies in three months, in 12 weeks. They did not create 10,000 PSW positions. They did not hire 10,000 PSWs. They hired orderlies and got to about half the amount, of which many of those wanted to leave.

We need a process by which we create a better place to live and a better place to work. That's exactly what we're doing in long-term care, after years of neglect.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. The supplementary question?

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Speaker, I'll tell you what's missing here in Ontario. What's missing is the iron ring the Premier promised around long-term care. But there's an iron ring around the Premier; there's an iron ring around the Premier when it comes to answering questions.

Here's what Dr. McGeer said: "Dr. Stall and Dr. Brown also put forward a number of proposals for trying to empty out the four-bed rooms, so that we didn't have three or four residents in a room throughout the second wave ... there was no hope that anything that cost that amount of money was going to be undertaken."

The minister at the same time in this Legislature was saying they were "using every possible measure" when responding to my colleague from Timiskaming in his questions in question period.

My question to the Premier again is, why won't the Premier admit that as he watched people dying in long-term care, he still couldn't bring himself to spend the money to save their lives?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will please take their seats.

The Premier to reply.

Hon. Doug Ford: Through you, Mr. Speaker: The only person who was missing and missing and missing was the Leader of the Opposition, who was nowhere to be found—disappeared for a year, did absolutely nothing for people in long-term care, did nothing for the people of Ontario. As we were working our backs off 24/7, she was Shangri-La-ing somewhere. Don't ask me where, but there was nowhere to be found with the Leader of the Opposition.

It's easy to sit here and play the armchair quarterback. As we were making sure that we accelerated the build program by 30,000 beds—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order.

Hon. Doug Ford: Can I continue, Mr. Speaker?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Opposition, come to order.

Please conclude your response, Premier.

Hon. Doug Ford: As our government has approved nearly over \$2 billion—never been approved before in the history of this province, \$2 billion in staffing up to 27,000 people. We're already in the process of hiring 8,600, as the minister mentioned. We are all over this.

Again, Mr. Speaker, where was the Leader of the Opposition—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. Please take your seat.

Final supplementary?

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Imagine how those families are feeling today. Imagine the pain and the anguish they're feeling, knowing that their government didn't spend the money necessary to keep their loved ones safe. It is absolutely horrifying.

Will this Premier now admit that in fact there was much more he should have done and there was much more he could have done to prevent the pain, the anguish, the horrors that families faced, thousands of families, as 4,000 people lost their lives to COVID-19 when the Premier didn't want to spend the money to save them?

Hon. Doug Ford: Because you always want to quote doctors, I'll start quoting doctors as well. Researchers estimate that there was roughly a 90% reduction in cases among residents and nearly an 80% reduction in staff eight weeks after the vaccinations began on December 14.

"Prioritizing the vaccination of long-term-care home residents was highly efficient in resolving the province's most tragic problem during this pandemic," said Dr. Peter Jüni, scientific director of the provincial COVID advisory table.

I'm sure when you have an advisory table, Leader of the Opposition, you have different points of view. We're taking the point of view that we've done everything in our power—and on top of it, when you're doing it, you're insulting the doctors, you're insulting—

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Evidence doesn't back it up.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Leader of the Opposition will come to order. Thank you.

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'm going to ask the Premier to withdraw.

Hon. Doug Ford: Withdraw.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The next question.

LAND USE PLANNING

Ms. Catherine Fife: My question is to the Premier. Last night, the Ford government secretly, quietly signed six new minister's zoning orders behind closed doors. We've had a look and, once again, prominent PC donors are among the people who stand to benefit. An NDP analysis previously shows that at least 19 of this government's previous MZO's benefit PC Party donors and insiders. Why is this government using MZO's to bulldoze wetlands and green spaces to let its buddies make more money?

Hon. Doug Ford: Through you, Mr. Speaker, so many different governments, including the previous government, would hide MZO's. We're proud to announce that we have MZO's, because it's about the economy. Once we get through this, people are going to be looking for jobs. We can't wait four years—and by the way, Mr. Speaker, we only sign an MZO once we get a letter from the mayor of the region or the chair of the region, the mayor of the city and council. Once it gets approved, it's

an ask by them. We don't go into towns and all of a sudden just issue MZO's. It's an ask from each region and each city, and I want more MZO's to stir the economy, to get jobs out there, because the Leader of the Opposition—they don't worry about jobs. They all get their big fat paycheques. They don't worry about the hard-working working-class folks. We do.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I want to point out to the Premier that municipalities have said that this decision-making process is being done under duress, and you are authorizing the destruction of wetlands under the cover of COVID.

This government has used MZO's more than any other government in the province's history, and they're doing it not for the benefit of the people; it appears like they're doing it to help their friends make more money. Big donors like Flato Developments are getting priority status thanks to this government's decision to quietly sign a whopping six new MZO's late last night. Why is this government putting money and politics ahead of the province and our environment?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Before I invite the Premier to reply, I'll remind the members that the standing orders prohibit imputing motive. I'm going to ask the member from Waterloo to withdraw.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Withdraw.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): And the Premier now to reply to the issue that was raised.

Hon. Doug Ford: They say one thing and then they say another. They flip-flop back and forth. My issue with that is, right now, we're building four rapid long-term-care facilities to make sure that we have the beds that long-term-care patients need.

I guess everyone in this room has heard the escalating cost in housing. It's no longer just that young people can't afford housing; it's everyone. And something that they don't understand is something called supply and demand. We want more houses out there, more condominiums, more townhouses to make sure that people can afford it. You put a greater supply; what happens? A huge supply: The number starts flattening out, the cost of it. It will make it more affordable.

We will never stop issuing MZO's, for the people of Ontario, the people that need housing. There are 40,000 people moving in the GTA, the fastest-growing region in North America. And guess what, Mr. Speaker? If it was up to them, they'd be living in mud huts right now. They wouldn't be—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. The next question.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Mr. Toby Barrett: My question is to the Minister of Health. With each passing day, there seems to be obviously more light at the end of the tunnel when it comes to COVID-19. Whether it be more vaccines being approved or an increase in shipments of the Pfizer vaccine,

Ontarians have good reason to feel more hopeful with each passing day.

I will say, my constituents are anxious to get their COVID-19 vaccine, and I know we're working around the clock to make sure they get that. We have the most effective vaccination campaign in the country. My question: Would the minister please provide an update to this House on the progress of our province's COVID-19 vaccine rollout?

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you to the member from Haldimand–Norfolk for your question. Our government has said from the beginning that we are committed to having one of the most effective immunization campaigns in the country, and we are well on our way to achieving that goal. By the end of this week, we will have administered over one million doses of COVID-19 vaccine to eligible Ontarians all across our province. This early success is yet another sign of how effective our government's vaccination plan continues to be as we receive more doses of the vaccine from the federal government.

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In order to build from this success, we recently announced our second phase of the vaccine rollout. Starting on March 15, we will be launching an online booking system and a provincial customer service desk to answer questions and support appointment bookings at mass immunization clinics.

Our government will continue to work with all of our partners around the province to ensure that all Ontarians who want to receive a vaccine will get one.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question?

Mr. Toby Barrett: I thank the Minister of Health for that update and that explanation. My supplementary question is to our Solicitor General.

Solicitor General, in my own riding of Haldimand–Norfolk, I do hear from people—and we hear from people from all over the province—who are concerned about our most vulnerable: people living in remote and isolated Indigenous communities, who oftentimes face a disproportionate risk with respect to the virus. Can the minister please provide this House with an update on what's referred to as Operation Remote Immunity?

Hon. Sylvia Jones: Thank you to the member for Haldimand–Norfolk for your interest in this, because it is exciting news, as the Minister of Health said. We've reached a key milestone in protecting remote and isolated Indigenous communities against COVID-19 by visiting all 31 fly-in communities in northern Ontario and Moosonee to offer first doses for the vaccine as part of Operation Remote Immunity. This important milestone could not have been achieved without the tremendous effort of Indigenous leadership, community members, Ornge and front-line health care workers coming together to stop the spread of COVID-19 in these fly-in communities.

As of March 7, 2021, Operation Remote Immunity has administered 15,324 doses, including 12,660 first doses and 2,664 second doses. This truly is a team effort, Speaker, and I am so proud of the work that Operation Remote Immunity has done.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

M^{me} France Gélinas: Ma question est pour le premier ministre. The Conservative government's entire pandemic response has been to show up kind of a day late and a dollar short. But when it comes to the vaccine rollout, that strategy is causing chaos and confusion across our entire province, because the Conservatives still cannot get a website online.

Cities and towns are left to pick up the slack. They are scrambling to get their own booking systems up and running. To add to the confusion, we have hospitals, family health teams and community health centres also all launching their own sites. We even have a website that collects all of the other websites together.

Premier, we have been in this crisis for over one full year. Why wasn't that enough time to set up a website?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Health.

Hon. Christine Elliott: Well, I would say to the member opposite that we do have a plan. We have a website that we'll be launching on March 15. We want to make sure that it's robust enough to be able to handle the large volume of calls that we know it will receive. We know that in several other provinces, their websites crashed very early on. We want to make sure that our system will not do so.

But what is happening is not at all unexpected. It was part of the plan from the beginning that each of the 34 public health units was going to be responsible for the running of their own plan. There is a central plan, but it's going to look different in each of the 34 public health units, because they know the particulars of their own geographic area. Many of them have already started up their own websites. It's anticipated that most of them will then merge into the central website as of March 15, but some of them will not; they already have websites that are up and running and are serving their own purposes.

I think the fact that we will have administered a million vaccines by the end of this week speaks for itself about the success of this—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you.

And the supplementary question.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I'd like to point out the families in Rexdale, a neighbourhood right in the Premier's own backyard and one of the hard-hit COVID hot spots in this city. They are currently paying the price for the Conservative government's struggling with their vaccine rollout.

Folks who are over 80 years old are eligible to get vaccinated, but they still have no idea how, where or when they are going to book their appointment. There is still no plan to help people who don't have access to the Internet or who have language barriers or who don't have a mass vaccination clinic close by. How could it be?

The entire Rexdale area has been described as a no man's land for vaccines by health officials. If families in the Premier's own riding cannot get access to COVID-19 vaccines—I'm asking you, Premier, what is going on?

Hon. Christine Elliott: We are committed to making sure that every Ontarian who wants to receive a vaccine in any part of the province is going to receive one.

However, it is important to note that Toronto, because of the large volume of people in long-term-care homes and front-line health care workers—all of those people who were included in phase 1, they still have to finish that. They are not quite ready in every part of Toronto to move into phase 2 and the vaccination of people over 80 years of age. So this is coming forward.

There is going to be the online booking tool as of March 15. There is going to be the customer centre that people can call to make an appointment. We recognize that a lot of people don't have access to the Internet, don't feel comfortable making bookings that way, so they will be able to do so by phone.

I can also advise that all of the information relating to booking, which will become immediately available when they are ready to start doing those vaccinations of over-80 people across the city, has been translated into 59 different languages, so everyone will have—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. The next question.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Mr. John Fraser: My question is for the Premier.

Ontario is expected to receive AstraZeneca vaccines this week. The government said last week that they're launching yet another pilot during a pandemic, distributing the AstraZeneca vaccines through pharmacies in three regions. Well, it's Tuesday, and the pharmacies haven't been identified, and it's unclear as to how we can book an appointment. The Premier said they'll be launching in 500 pharmacies, yet the pharmacists' association says it's actually 380 locations. So this is just another important announcement that leaves more questions than answers.

What's most concerning is, 114,000 of these doses are set to expire on April 2.

Speaker, through you: Can the Premier confirm when the details of this rollout will be put forward and assure Ontarians that none of this AstraZeneca vaccine will be wasted?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Health.

Hon. Christine Elliott: I thank the member for the question.

Yes, I can assure the member that these vaccines will not be wasted. There is a central plan. They are going to be distributed in three locations: in Toronto, in Windsor-Essex, and in the Kingston area.

Because of the fact that the 190,000 vaccines that we are expecting to receive—today, as a matter of fact; a day earlier—are time-limited, you're absolutely right, we want to make sure that they can be delivered quickly and efficiently through the over 300 pharmacies that have been identified. This list should be available tomorrow—it is because there are some agreements with the individual pharmacies that have yet to be finally signed that we are finalizing. If the ones that aren't signing right now haven't

been done, we will find another 20 or 30 pharmacies that will be able to deliver it.

But this plan is ready to go. We'll be receiving applications and online bookings as of Friday, to start the work on these vaccines to ensure that they are—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. The supplementary.

Mr. John Fraser: Speaker, it always seems like we're weeks behind other provinces.

The Premier said in November that when vaccines arrived, we'd be ready.

Here's what happened: The government took a vaccine holiday over Christmas. Then they took nearly 60 days and half a million doses to get to the 70,000 residents of long-term care—a first dose to them, the people we said we had to get to first. They were two weeks behind other provinces. Imagine if vaccines had gotten to Roberta Place two weeks earlier.

The central online booking system—well, it wasn't ready at the beginning of March, like other provinces. And then the head of the vaccine task force says that your doctor is going to be calling you if you're over 80—except the problem is, nobody told the doctors.

And now there's a pharmacy pilot with almost no details.

I just don't know why we weren't ready. I'm trying to understand why we're not ready and we're always playing catch-up. It's frustrating for Ontarians. By any objective measure, we're not ready.

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Speaker, through you, what I heard the minister say—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you.

Mr. John Fraser: —can she ensure that the doses—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order. The House will come to order. The member for Ottawa South will take his seat.

The Minister of Health to reply.

Hon. Christine Elliott: I can assure the member that we do have a plan, that the plan is rolling out as it was intended to. We will be ready. We have been ready to receive the AstraZeneca vaccines. We will be able to deliver them before their expiry, and we can quadruple the number of vaccinations that we're doing per day in very short order. But what we need are the large doses of the vaccines to come in. We know that we're going to be receiving larger doses of Pfizer, we're receiving Moderna, we're receiving AstraZeneca, and we are ready to deliver them.

As a matter of fact, I was at a mass vaccination clinic yesterday in Scarborough with the Premier. They are processing several thousand people per day, but they can double, triple, quadruple as they need to. So we are ready. As soon as we get those large doses of vaccines in, we will be getting them into people's arms as quickly as we can, which means the day after we receive them.

BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. Toby Barrett: To the Minister of Infrastructure: As the minister will know, Ontario is a vast province. We're home to a number of urban areas, both large and small, northern regions, beautiful lakes and, of course, sprawling rural areas.

Minister, as someone who represents one of those rural areas, I can tell you that the peace and tranquility found in rural small-town Ontario comes with a price. It comes with a downside. Many of the services, like Internet, that people in the cities take for granted just are not available in rural areas. Without access to adequate broadband and Internet services, many people who live and work in rural Ontario are at a disadvantage. They can't compete.

Minister, ensuring access to broadband right across the province will create a level playing field for Ontario businesses, including those living and operating in rural areas. Participating in the digital economy is vital to the continued success. Many people are suffering because of unreliable service.

Minister, as we move forward in the digital economy, what can we do to ensure that rural—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. The Minister of Infrastructure.

Hon. Laurie Scott: I'd like to thank the member from Haldimand-Norfolk for his question and his advocacy for his constituents. He is quite right: Ontario farmers, like so many people living in our province, will benefit from the steps our government has taken to improve broadband service to the many unserved and underserved communities across Ontario.

Almost immediately upon being named Minister of Infrastructure, I began to take immediate action to help close the digital divide, beginning with the release of Up to Speed, our broadband and cellular action plan, and then quickly followed up by making investments to accelerate expansion of broadband projects right across the province.

In the provincial budget presented last fall, we continued our positive steps forward by announcing historic investments in broadband infrastructure, and today, we have legislation beginning debate in this House that, if passed, will help us bridge the digital divide.

We're taking action to remove barriers, and I expect we'll have broad support in the House for our broadband legislation.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Thank you, Minister, for what you have done so far to help ensure rural Ontario is able to get connected.

I'd like to read a portion of a letter I received from Bob. He's a resident of Haldimand county:

"Dear MPP Barrett,

"Like so many other residents of rural Ontario, we've been able to enjoy a better quality of life thanks to the many technological advancements of the past number of years.

"The Internet has opened up an entire new way of doing business. I can monitor stock remotely. I can reach new customers who are located hundreds of miles away. I can process orders quickly, track my shipments and ensure they are delivered to my customers' door on time. However, ensuring this happens smoothly only works with reliable broadband signals.

"And in many rural communities like mine, we simply don't have adequate reliable service."

So my question again to you, Minister: Aside from the steps you have taken to improve access to reliable high-speed Internet, what else can be done to get our rural communities connected?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I'd like to thank the member for his supplementary question. I want to say to this House that I understand the difficulties people in unserved and underserved areas experience. Like Bob, I live them too. That's why, even though broadband is a federally regulated telecommunications, Ontario has not waited for the federal government to take action. We are making historic investments to improve Internet service in Ontario communities that currently lack adequate service. We've introduced legislation that, if passed, will remove barriers to help build infrastructure faster, strengthen our rural communities and lay the foundation for growth and renewal. We will also continue to call upon the federal government to properly fund broadband, not just in Ontario, but across the country.

Mr. Speaker, through you, I'd like to call on all members of the House to support Bill 257 and to work with us to ensure that every Ontarian, regardless of where they live, can participate in the digital economy.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Ms. Marit Stiles: Good morning, Mr. Speaker. This question is for the Minister of Education.

The reality of the pandemic and this government's weak plan have had serious consequences for students with complex needs and their families. That includes families at the Beverley School here in Toronto who are worried that their children are falling behind developmentally after a year of disruptions to the daily supports and the therapies they receive at that school. The minister will recall that a variant case shut down classes in late February, and parents told the Globe and Mail this weekend that without regular testing and a plan to vaccinate staff, they expect these disruptions and closures are going to continue.

Can the minister tell the House what steps he's taking to mitigate these impacts on students with complex needs and why families are still waiting in March for a comprehensive asymptomatic testing plan?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Some of the great feedback we've heard from the developmental disability community was that they often felt ignored in government decision-making processes. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on those parents was heard by this government when we decided, with the support of the Chief Medical

Officer of Health, to allow the most exceptional children back into our schools in January.

And which political party supported us in this House? Not one. The member opposite, her party and the Liberals criticized—in fact, I had calls from members opposite personally asking me to rethink the decision based on risk, when we knew it was the right thing to do for those very children to give them opportunity, access to therapy and the supports that their parents simply could not provide remotely. That is what our government did: We listened to the science, we listened to parents, we listened to the developmental disability community and we took action to ensure that they have support, that they have access to therapy and, most importantly, to provision of in-class supports, which they deserve.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Mr. Speaker, I can assure you the students at Beverley School and their families don't feel safe right now. The minister's comments are just not accurate.

By Friday, the government's own reporting site showed that only 416 asymptomatic tests had been conducted in Toronto schools over the past seven days. That's the most populous region, one of the hottest spots. Across the province, it was just 3,294. We are hearing that only about a quarter of English public and Catholic school boards have a plan in place, and that number is even fewer when you look at francophone boards. We are nowhere near the 50,000 tests a week that were promised here, and students and families in this province deserve to know why. What could possibly be more important than keeping the children, the most vulnerable children in our province, safe in their schools?

I'm going to ask again: Will the minister please explain why he can't meet his own 50,000-a-week target—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. Minister of Education.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: It is not lost on any member of this House who recalls that the opposition New Democrats and Liberals called on the government to close schools for the most exceptional children in January. They urged us not to reopen until the stay-at-home order was lifted. They have been on the wrong side of this debate every step of the way.

It is this government, this Premier, this party that ensured schools opened safely. We have 99% of schools open in this province. We have a program of testing, under the leadership of the Ministry of Health, which has ensured 37,000 tests under the age of 17 last week alone, thousands more in the Ministry of Education program. In that program, where 563 schools were identified last week, we had a positivity of 0.36%, safer than the communities that they operate within.

What that demonstrates is that our program—informed by the best science, supported by the Chief Medical Officer of Health, funded by our province—is working to keep schools safe, and we will continue.

1110

LAND USE PLANNING

M^{me} Lucille Collard: My question is for the Minister of Municipal Affairs regarding the use of the ministerial zoning orders.

Bill 257, recently introduced, includes a small section, schedule 3, with potential huge impacts on the environment. We've had discussions here in the House very recently about the intended purpose of ministerial zoning orders, which is to accelerate the approval process of necessary projects when they are considered a priority for the well-being of Ontarians. The overwhelming use of such MZO's by the minister over the past year has raised concern and criticism, because non-urgent projects were fast-tracked without the benefit of consultations regarding the impact on our environment. And now, the government is moving to invalidate any potential for oversight with Bill 257, making these MZO's final decisions without the possibility of appeal.

How can we trust the government not to use their proposed full discretionary power to their own benefit, with no regard for the environment?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The government House leader to reply.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I want to thank the member for the question. As the Premier said earlier today, MZO's are a very important tool in helping us to build very important infrastructure, infrastructure that includes long-term-care homes, hospitals. I know the NDP raised a concern about them earlier. I note that one of the MZO's supported affordable housing in the leader of the official opposition's own riding.

So we are going to continue to ensure that this very, very necessary infrastructure, infrastructure that supports our economic recovery, infrastructure that supports the very important needs in communities and infrastructure that has been asked for by the local municipalities—as the Premier said, they have come to us, asked us to expedite these proposals through MZO's, and we're doing that after they have done that.

It is good policy. It makes sense. We will, as the Premier said, continue to do that to the benefit of the people of the province of Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Mr. Speaker, we can all agree that in the crisis we find ourselves in, there are some important decisions, swift decisions that are required to address the dire needs that have been exposed. However, cutting both the public and experts out of the process is not in the interest of Ontarians when it comes to ensuring we make decisions that will not negatively impact the future of our children.

The provincial policy statement was developed with a vision, with the future generations in mind. Yet the government is deciding today that the provincial policy statement is no longer important, giving itself the power to

allow for the destruction of protected farmlands, wetlands and natural features. What kind of message is the government sending to our youth?

When speaking about the removal of the requirements to comply with the PPS, the Minister of Municipal Affairs has said, “There cannot be unnecessary barriers put forward.” Schedule 3 of Bill 257 shows that this government believes protecting the environment is an unnecessary barrier that needs to be overcome in the name of development. How can the minister justify schedule 3 and put—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. Government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, I would thank the member for—I truly thank her for her question, but I think I would disagree with her. Obviously, the environment remains extraordinarily important. Again, this is the government that brought in the Oak Ridges moraine. This is the government that created the Ministry of the Environment.

When you’re talking about MZOs, they are informed by local municipalities which have approached the government in order to expedite important infrastructure in the area. That does not mean that we set aside environmental considerations.

Mr. Speaker, we have heard for months and for years that the environment and the economy can work together. In every instance where this government has shown that we can protect the environment, we can advance the economy—something that was sold to us by the federal Liberals and by the Liberals opposite. Every time we have shown that we can do that, they have systematically turned their backs on both the environment and the economy. We can do both, and we’ve shown through this that we can and we will.

MINING INDUSTRY

Mr. Toby Barrett: A question to the Minister of Energy, Northern Development and Mines and Indigenous affairs: Yesterday marked the beginning of PDAC—that’s the world’s premier mineral exploration and mining convention. It’s held right here in Toronto. Typically, the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada would be welcoming representatives from over a hundred different countries. I know I’ve certainly attended in the past. However, this year, because of COVID-19, the conference has moved online. Attendees can join from anywhere around the world.

Samantha Espley, president of the Canadian Institute of Mining, Metallurgy and Petroleum, recently noted, “Ontario’s mining industry is an instrumental component of the economic strength of Canada and the pandemic has highlighted the essential nature of the industry.”

My question: Will the government please tell this House how we’re supporting the mining sector and reducing barriers with respect to mining exploration?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Peterborough–Kawartha and parliamentary assistant.

Mr. Dave Smith: I’d like to thank the member from Haldimand–Norfolk for his question. As an industry providing materials that are at the front end of our health care, manufacturing and supply chains, mining was deemed essential by our government and has operated throughout COVID-19. From the very beginning of the pandemic, Ontario’s mining operations have made sure that they’ve had a commitment to protect the health and well-being of all of their workers, their families and the adjacent communities.

It’s important for our government to support the mining companies that operate in this province and create good jobs that boost the local economy across northern Ontario. We’d like to thank the mining sector for their determination throughout this pandemic in keeping their employees safe over the past year.

Through the Better for People, Smarter for Business Act, our government has cut red tape and found efficiencies, supporting the mining industry and exploration and supporting over 75,000 jobs in Ontario. These changes will modernize the online mining staking system and address gaps—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. Supplementary question?

Mr. Toby Barrett: I very much appreciate that response to my question. It is encouraging to hear that our government is remaining active and remaining engaged in keeping Ontario open for business and open for jobs as we continue to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we know, Ontario is home to some of the top-producing mines, and more will be opening soon. Despite the pandemic, it has been a monumental year as Iamgold’s Côté Gold project and Argonaut Gold’s Magino project were the latest to be given the green light to start construction.

Speaker, we know that it’s people who make mines, not governments. Projects like these will create thousands of quality jobs not only to create the site, but also thousands of jobs to staff the site once it’s operational. My question: Will the government please tell us what other tools are available for miners in Ontario to make doing business easier?

Mr. Dave Smith: Even during COVID, we have been launching new products specifically for the mining industry. The Ontario Geological Survey Focus is Ontario’s new, innovative online geoscience tool. It merges all of the historical information that we have on exploration into an easy format that anyone can use. It is a free, publicly accessible tool that allows all parties, from Indigenous communities to exploration companies and prospectors, to have access to all of the same information.

Now more than ever, our government is committed to ensuring that we support the ongoing prosperity of our province’s mineral exploration and prospecting industry. The OGSFocus tool is a state-of-the-art, customer-focused product that will further solidify Ontario’s position as a leading global jurisdiction in mineral exploration and production.

SMALL BUSINESS

Mr. Ian Arthur: My question is to the Acting Premier. Small business owners in Ontario are terrified that they are not going to survive this pandemic and, as you are likely aware, they are struggling to access the Ontario small business grant, which, although welcome, is miniscule compared to need and excludes more businesses than it includes.

Mohamed, who owns the Jiffy Grill in Hastings–Lennox and Addington, has grown increasingly frustrated. According to the government website, approved businesses were to receive payment in about 10 business days. He applied on January 29, and finally, late on Sunday night and 38 days after he applied, he found out that he was approved, but he has not yet received his money.

This is after five requests for information from our office to the ministry. We've been told that the wait-list has grown to over 100,000 applicants, and processing times have slowed to a crawl. Can the minister explain why Mohamed and others are being left on a wait-list so long, when the nature of this situation is so urgent?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Flamborough–Glanbrook and parliamentary assistant.

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Ms. Donna Skelly: Our government recognizes that small businesses have been hit hard because of the measures we put in place to ensure that Ontarians remain safe. That is why we launched the small business program, the Ontario Small Business Support Grant. It is providing a minimum of \$10,000 and a maximum of \$20,000 to eligible small businesses that were forced to close or significantly restrict their services.

Mr. Speaker, I'm very proud to say that to date, we have been able to approve grants for 90,000 small businesses across Ontario, and we have made almost \$1.3 billion in payments so far. Eligible small businesses that are expected to experience a minimum 20% decline in revenue may qualify for this grant, and they can use that money any way they see fit.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary.

Mr. Ian Arthur: Let's take a moment to talk about that eligibility. The grant is for businesses that were affected by the closures in December, excluding the large number of businesses that were actually forced to close in earlier lockdowns. In other words, it excludes those who have been hit the hardest and longest by public health measures. The program criteria excludes many, seemingly arbitrarily.

Much like the failed provincial commercial rent subsidy, this program seems to be an attempt to say, "Look, we're helping," while in reality designing a program that obligates the government to help as few businesses as absolutely possible.

As the CFIB pointed out, Ontario's small businesses are struggling more than other provinces. Here, the average COVID-related small business debt is almost 20% higher than the national average. Every penny of Mohamed's

grant will go towards his federal relief loans, loans that are incurring hundreds of dollars in late fees and interest due to the uncertainty around the delivery of this business grant.

It is clear that more needs to be done, Mr. Speaker. Will the government right now commit to expanding the criteria, increasing the funding level and renewing the grant for another round?

Ms. Donna Skelly: I want to say, Mr. Speaker, that I'm proud of the work that our government has done. I have worked with small business owners in my riding of Flamborough–Glanbrook and right across the city of Hamilton who have reached out to me, and they were grateful. They found that this money was a life-saving measure for them. I've worked with businesses right across the province, in northern Ontario. Sometimes they didn't realize that they were eligible, but we worked with them and they were able to gain access to these grants.

Not only are businesses eligible to apply for the Small Business Support Grant, but there are other grants. I would encourage them to apply for the \$1,000 Main Street Relief Grant for PPE, the Digital Main Street program to help businesses go online and transition to a digital process, the property tax and energy rebates and mental health supports available to all small businesses. Visit ontario.ca/covidsupport to apply.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: My question is for the Premier. Last October, the government's regulations for stages 1, 2 and 3 of a lockdown, under the general compliance sections, mandated that masks be worn for anyone over the age of two. This regulatory policy has been in place for months now.

Can the government tell us whether it has any data that proves whether mandating that children three, four and five years of age wearing masks has resulted in a decline in COVID-19-positive reported cases?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Health.

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you to the member for the question. We know through the recommendations made by Dr. Williams, our Chief Medical Officer of Health, as well as the preventative measures table, a number of public health experts have recommended that masks be worn to prevent the transmission of COVID-19.

It's important, even as people receive their first dose of the vaccine—we still need to follow those public health measures to keep Ontarians safe and healthy, and that includes keeping a physical distance, wearing a mask when indoors, frequent handwashing and the other provisions, until all Ontarians who want to receive a vaccine have received both doses of those vaccines that require two doses. Johnson and Johnson is different and only requires one. But the mask wearing is going to continue to be important for some months yet.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: It appears the government has no such proof, data or facts to support mandating children of the ages of three or four to wear masks. Even the World Health Organization states in its official position that children under the age of five should not be required to wear masks. This is based on the safety and overall interest of the child and their capacity to use a mask appropriately.

Why in this instance, when it comes to children under five years of age wearing masks, does this government have a requirement that is crueller than what the WHO recommends? What science is the regulation based on?

Hon. Christine Elliott: These are the recommendations that we have received from Dr. Williams and all of the other public health experts who are advising us.

It is remarkable how children are adapting to wearing a mask, that they are wearing them at very young ages. They don't seem to be suffering from cruelty, as the member has suggested.

We all need to follow these public health measures to make sure that all Ontarians are safe and healthy until everyone who wants to receive a vaccine has received those two doses.

CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

Miss Monique Taylor: My question is for the Premier. The outbreak at Hamilton-Wentworth Detention Centre is only getting worse. Right now, there are 63 cases of COVID-19 at the jail, making it the worst outbreak in Hamilton. Workers, inmates and families say that they need better communication, transparency and a real strategy to end the outbreak.

Can the Premier tell us why he has allowed the situation to get so bad and what he's doing to help workers, inmates and families of Hamilton-Wentworth Detention Centre get through this horrible outbreak?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Solicitor General.

Hon. Sylvia Jones: I think we all appreciate and understand, when there is a COVID-19 outbreak, how challenging it is for friends and family, which, frankly, is why we must continue to adhere to and respect the health advice.

Specifically related to the Hamilton-Wentworth corrections centre: We are working directly with the Hamilton public health unit. They are ensuring that we have all of the information, and we're sharing that with our corrections staff. They are doing an exceptional job during challenging times.

We know that when there are positivity rates in the community, it travels. It travels into our long-term-care homes. It travels into our hospitals. And, yes, it travels into our corrections facilities. So I think, at the end of the day, what it reinforces is how critically important it is that we continue to respect and adhere to the health advice.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question.

Miss Monique Taylor: Hamilton-Wentworth Detention Centre is just the latest correctional facility to suffer an outbreak. Across Ontario, detention centres have faced outbreak after outbreak after outbreak. This government's failure to safeguard staff and inmates from COVID-19 is being felt everywhere.

In Hamilton, families are saying that inmates and their families are being kept in the dark about the response and that there is growing frustration, mistrust and concern about the conditions inside. These families are desperately demonstrating outside the jail in protest to this situation.

Why has the government allowed the situation to worsen and when will it start listening to families and workers?

Hon. Sylvia Jones: As the member opposite knows, I trust, when new intakes are received in our corrections facilities, those individuals are offered a test and they are self-isolated from the rest of the community for 14 days to make sure that we are not spreading COVID-19 unnecessarily.

Again, I have to say that the work that our corrections officers—the work that is happening within those facilities continues.

Yes, it is challenging in congregate settings, which, frankly, is one of the very important reasons why we have said that congregate settings need to get the vaccines as soon as the supply is here. We are putting that work in place. In fact, the Kenora Jail started to vaccinate their corrections officers last week. We are continuing to do that work.

I am working, as I said, directly with the Hamilton public health unit.

We will continue to ensure that staff, family and inmates are protected.

TRUCKING LICENSING

Mr. Stephen Blais: My question is for the Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Speaker, as a result of new SPIF regulations that came into effect on January 1, dump truck operators have been forced into extreme financial difficulty, especially now during the pandemic. These regulations require that trucks manufactured prior to 2011 undergo expensive retrofits of between \$20,000 and \$40,000. The average lifespan for a dump truck is 20 to 25 years, so a \$40,000 retrofit near the end of its life is simply beyond the reach of most independent operators. The ministry has cut deals for all other affected construction vehicles, permitting their existing vehicles to be grandfathered into the regulations.

1130

Small dump truck drivers are at risk of losing their jobs—they are at risk of losing their jobs, Mr. Speaker. Will the minister commit to supporting dump truck operators during this challenging time by permitting them to operate closer to the lifespan of their vehicles, as they have done with all other affected trucks?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I know this is a regulation that has been on the books for a significant amount of time—

if I'm not mistaken, brought in by the previous Liberal government. I think it really underscores just how bad a government that previous Liberal government was. This is a former government and an opposition party right now that, if they had their way, would close down construction altogether, putting all of these dump truck operators out of work.

We had an opportunity in this House just last week to show our support for hundreds of thousands of jobs across this province. The Liberals decided, when it came to line 5, to stay home, sit down and do nothing.

When it comes to supporting jobs, when it comes to supporting jobs in construction and in resource development, they can count on the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario to do the right thing, especially those dump truck drivers who are so important to our economy. Because of the investments we're making in transit and transportation, they will be busy for many, many years to come.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'm going to remind members: You can't make reference to the absence of any member. Supplementary question?

Mr. Stephen Blais: I'm glad the government is committed to supporting dump truck drivers. They'll be surprised, though, because the government has yet to meet with them after months of requesting these meetings.

The government brought these regulations into force in the middle of a pandemic—a pandemic that has affected the construction industry as much, if not more, than many other sectors. In fact, I'm glad the House leader mentioned the Liberal record. It was Steven Del Duca, as Minister of Transportation, who committed to open and transparent consultations with the dump truck industry in 2016. But at their first opportunity, this government decided to target dump truck drivers and bring these regulations into force, in the middle of a pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, will the government commit to meeting with the industry to hammer out a deal to ensure that these dump truck drivers don't lose their business?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I know I've certainly met with representatives of the dump truck industry, as have a number of members from this caucus. But talking about Steven Del Duca, a leader who decided to build a pool in his backyard—against all of the recommendations, he illegally built a pool in his backyard. This is the gentleman that this person brings forward to this House, a Minister of Transportation who forgot to listen to any of the advice, ignored the advice of his officials and decided, “Well, I'm going to build a GO train station where it's convenient for me”? We will take no lessons from Steven Del Duca when it comes to being ethical.

The members opposite had the opportunity to support resources. They had the opportunity to support thousands of jobs. The NDP, thankfully, after 50 years of ideologically blocking pipelines, voted with us, voted to save those jobs. The Liberals voted against those jobs, voted against the environment, voted against the economy. We'll take no lessons from Steven Del Duca on building—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. The next question.

ACCÈS À LA JUSTICE

ACCESS TO JUSTICE

M. Michael Mantha: Ma question est pour le procureur général. Alors que le seul juge bilingue du district d'Algoma prend sa retraite, le gouvernement décide de le remplacer avec une juge unilingue anglophone, laissant les francophones d'Algoma sans aucun juge pouvant présider un procès dans leur langue. C'est une décision très décevante pour la communauté franco-ontarienne, qui voit son accès à la justice en français encore une fois réduit.

Est-ce que le gouvernement va revenir sur la décision et garantir qu'il y ait au moins un juge bilingue dans le district d'Algoma?

Hon. Doug Downey: I'm pleased to rise to talk a little bit about some of the great work that we're doing with our French communities, our francophone communities across Ontario, as with the bill that's in front of the House now—the ability to file civil forms and family forms in any courthouse anywhere in Ontario. There are a whole string of things that we're doing.

When it comes to judicial appointments and judicial administration, that's really part of the independence of the courts. I hear the member opposite and his concern for his area; I will undertake to have that conversation, to raise the issue with the Chief Justice of Ontario. I will respect the independence of the judiciary to administer their judges as they see fit, but I will note it for the Chief Justice.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): That concludes our question period for this morning.

DEFERRED VOTES

CONCURRENCE IN SUPPLY

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): We now have several deferred votes, the first being a deferred vote on government order number 48.

On March 8, 2021, Mr. Calandra moved concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Long-Term Care, including supplementaries.

The bells will now ring for 30 minutes, during which time members may cast their votes.

I'll ask the Clerks to prepare the lobbies.

The division bells rang from 1137 to 1207.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The vote on government order number 48, concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Long-Term Care, including supplementaries, has been held.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 36; the nays are 18.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion carried.

Next we have a deferred vote on government order number 49, concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Education, including supplementaries.

Interjection: Same vote.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Same vote.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 36; the nays are 18.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion carried.

Next we have a deferred vote on government order number 50, concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, including supplementaries.

Same vote?

Interjection: Same vote.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 36; the nays are 18.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion carried.

Next we have a deferred vote on government order number 51, concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries.

Interjection: Same vote.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Same vote.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 36; the nays are 18.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion carried.

Next we have a deferred vote on government order number 52, concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Health, including supplementaries.

Interjection: Same vote.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Same vote.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 36; the nays are 18.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion carried.

Next we have a deferred vote on government order number 53, concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Infrastructure.

Interjection: Same vote.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Same vote.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 36; the nays are 18.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion carried.

Next we have a deferred vote on government order number 54, concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines.

Interjection: Same vote.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Same vote.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 36; the nays are 18.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion carried.

Next we have a deferred vote on government order number 55, concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, including supplementaries.

Interjection: Same vote.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Same vote.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 36; the nays are 18.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion carried.

Next we have a deferred vote on government order number 56, concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade.

Interjection: Same vote.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Same vote.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 36; the nays are 18.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion carried.

Next we have a deferred vote on government order number 57, concurrence in supply for the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility, including supplementaries.

Interjection: Same vote.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Same vote.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 36; the nays are 18.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion carried.

Motions agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): There being no further business at this time, this House stands in recess until 3 p.m.

The House recessed from 1210 to 1500.

REPORTS BY COMMITTEES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I beg to inform the House that today the Clerk received a report on intended appointments dated March 9, 2021, of the Standing Committee on Government Agencies. Pursuant to standing order 111(f)(9), the report is deemed to be adopted by the House.

Report deemed adopted.

STANDING COMMITTEE ON REGULATIONS AND PRIVATE BILLS

Mr. John Fraser: I beg leave to present a report from the Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills and move its adoption.

The Clerk-at-the-Table (Mr. William Short): Your committee begs to report the following bill without amendment:

Bill 173, An Act to proclaim Ontario Day / Projet de loi 173, Loi proclamant le Jour de l'Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Shall the report be received and adopted? Agreed? Agreed.

Report adopted.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The bill is therefore ordered for third reading.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

SUPPLY ACT, 2021

LOI DE CRÉDITS DE 2021

Mr. Bethlenfalvy moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 261, An Act to authorize the expenditure of certain amounts for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2021 / Projet de loi 261, Loi autorisant l'utilisation de certaines sommes pour l'exercice se terminant le 31 mars 2021.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? Carried.

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Would the President of the Treasury Board care to explain his bill?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: He sure does, Mr. Speaker. Thank you. The Supply Act is one of the key acts in the Ontario Legislature. If passed, it would give the Ontario government the legal spending authority to finance its programs and honour its commitments for the fiscal year that is to close at the end of March.

PETITIONS

TORONTO TRANSIT COMMISSION

Ms. Marit Stiles: It's a pleasure, as always, to rise here on behalf of my constituents in the great riding of Davenport and present the following petition:

"To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Whereas the TTC has owned, operated and maintained Toronto's public transit system since 1921; and

"Whereas the people of Toronto have paid for the TTC at the fare box and through their property taxes; and

"Whereas breaking up the subway will mean higher fares, reduced service and less say for transit riders; and

"Whereas the TTC is accountable to the people of Toronto because elected Toronto city councillors sit on its board;

"We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

"Reject legislation that allows for the breakup and sell-off of any aspect of the TTC to the province of Ontario, and reject the privatization or contracting out of any part of the TTC;

"Match the city of Toronto's financial contribution to the TTC so transit riders can have improved service and affordable fares."

I support this petition. I'm going to affix my signature and hand it to the Clerk.

LONG-TERM CARE

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank the residents and families of Red Oak Villa, a retirement home in Sudbury, for these petitions. They read as follows:

"Ban Retirement Home PPE Charges

"To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Whereas Ontario's retirement homes are largely privately owned corporations; and

"Whereas these profitable businesses have a responsibility" to provide personal protective equipment to their employees;

"Whereas many retirement homes are adding PPE charges to the residents' monthly bill, but the PPE is not for the resident but for the employees of the" retirement "home; and

"Whereas residents of some Sudbury retirement homes have effectively organized letter-writing campaigns and actions to have these PPE charges to residents cancelled and recognized as a retirement home's cost of doing business;"

They "petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

"Treat our province's seniors with respect and ban any additional COVID-related fees, including PPE, to retirement home residents."

I support this petition, will affix my name to it and send it to the Clerk.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Mr. Dave Smith: I have a petition entitled "Combating Human Trafficking."

"Whereas human trafficking is one of the fastest-growing crimes worldwide and the majority of police-reported incidents of human trafficking in Canada happen right here in Ontario; and

"Whereas it is important that Ontario is equipped to fight this growing crime and support victims and survivors with every tool at our disposal; and

"Whereas everyone deserves freedom from exploitation, fear and violence;

"Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

"Pass Bill 251, Combating Human Trafficking Act, 2021, so that:

"(1) There is increased awareness of the issue, supporting a long-term provincial response and emphasizing that all Ontarians have a role to play in combatting human trafficking;

"(2) We strengthen the ability of children's aid societies and law enforcement to protect exploited children;

"(3) More survivors and the people who support them in obtaining restraining orders against traffickers are supported, with specific consideration for Indigenous survivors;

"(4) The government's ability to collect non-personal data to better understand the impact of the strategy and respond to human trafficking is increased;

"(5) Law enforcement is provided with more tools to locate victims and charge traffickers."

I fully agree with this petition, will sign my name to it and send it to the table.

TENANT PROTECTION

Ms. Marit Stiles: I am pleased to stand on behalf of my constituents in the great riding of Davenport to present the following petition on behalf of Sophie Palmer. It reads as follows:

“Stop Landlord Negligence.”

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas some landlords are negligent in maintaining their properties in a reasonable state of repair;

“Whereas tenants pay for maintenance as part of their rent; and

“Whereas failure to adequately maintain rental properties exposes tenants to risk of displacement, personal injury, and property loss;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows: To require that landlords set a portion of each month’s rent aside for the purpose of maintaining their rental units, and require that landlords provide a partial refund of rent when they fail to meet their maintenance obligations to their tenants.”

I support this petition. I’m happy to affix my signature and hand it to the Clerk.

LIFE INSURANCE

Ms. Donna Skelly: This petition is regarding Bill 219, Life Settlements and Loans Act, 2020.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas at a time when many people, especially seniors, are struggling due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, more needs to be done to meet the needs of vulnerable people;

“Whereas important updates in order to modernize the Insurance Act are required;

“Whereas changes are needed to allow Ontario seniors to access the fair market value of their life insurance policies which could potentially give seniors tens of millions of dollars more than they now receive, each year;

“Whereas, if passed, Bill 219 would:

“—modernize the Insurance Act to create a well-regulated secondary market in life insurance;

“—provide access to an alternative financial resource and allow Ontario seniors to access the fair market value of their life insurance policies;

“—ensure consumers are protected by requiring full, true and plain disclosure;

“—require a 10-day cooling-off period;

“—ensure the right to consult a financial or legal adviser;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to support the Life Settlements and Loans Act.”

I support this petition and will affix my signature.

1510

ANTI-VAPING INITIATIVES
FOR YOUTH

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank Mr. Al Deschenes from Hanmer in my riding for this petition:

“Protect Kids from Vaping.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas very little is known about the long-term effects of vaping on youth; and

“Whereas aggressive marketing of vaping products by the tobacco industry is causing more and more kids to become addicted to nicotine through the use of e-cigarettes; and

“Whereas the hard lessons learned about the health impacts of smoking, should not be repeated with vaping, and the precautionary principle must be applied to protect youth from vaping; and

“Whereas many health agencies and Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada fully endorse the concrete proposals aimed at reducing youth vaping included in Bill 151;”

They “petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“To call on the Ford government to immediately pass Bill 151, Vaping is Not for Kids Act, in order to protect the health of Ontario’s youth.”

I support this petition, Speaker. I will affix my name to it and send it to the table.

SMALL BUSINESS

Ms. Donna Skelly: This petition concerns the Ontario Small Business Support Grant program:

“Whereas small businesses required to close or significantly restrict services under the province-wide shutdown have suffered significant losses in revenue;

“Whereas small businesses need urgent relief to help navigate through the challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic;

“Whereas ... the small business support grant program would:

“—give struggling small businesses a minimum grant of \$10,000;

“—offer eligible businesses a grant up to \$20,000;

“—help businesses pay their bills and meet their financial obligations;

“—help businesses continue to employ people and support their local communities when it is safe to do so;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, support the Ontario government’s initiative to help struggling small businesses through the Ontario Small Business Support Grant program.”

I support this particular petition, and I will affix my signature and give it to a page.

EDUCATION FUNDING

Ms. Marit Stiles: It's a pleasure as always to stand on behalf of my constituents in the great riding of Davenport and present the following petition on behalf of Vincent Faucher:

"Stop Ford's Education Cuts.

"To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Whereas Doug Ford's new education scheme seeks to dramatically increase class sizes starting in grade 4;

"Whereas the changes will mean thousands fewer teachers and education workers and less help for every student;

"Whereas secondary students will now be forced to take at least four of their classes online, with as many as 35 students in each course;

"Whereas Ford's changes will rip over \$1 billion out of Ontario's education system by the end of the government's term; and

"Whereas kids in Ontario deserve more opportunities, not fewer;

"Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to:

"Demand that the government halt the cuts to classrooms and invest to strengthen public education in Ontario."

I support this petition. I'm going to affix my signature and pass it to the Clerk.

CONSUMER PROTECTION

Ms. Donna Skelly: This petition concerns the Trespass to Property Amendment Act, 2020:

"To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Whereas since the start of the pandemic, the growth of e-commerce has exploded and online shopping has doubled in Canada;

"Whereas with the dramatic increase in doorstep deliveries, thieves have more opportunities than ever before to steal packages addressed to consumers;

"Whereas one in three online shoppers in Canada say they've had a package stolen from outside their home;

"Whereas, if passed, the Trespass to Property Amendment Act would:

"—make Ontario the first province in Canada to impose provincial fines for package piracy;

"—impose a minimum fine of \$500 for a first offence, \$1,000 for a second offence, \$2,000 for each subsequent conviction, up to a maximum of \$10,000;

"—create a deterrent for package pirates while offering more protection to consumers, retailers and couriers from this costly crime;

"Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to support the Trespass to Property Amendment Act, 2020.

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank Mike Byrnes from Capreol in my riding for this petition.

"MS Specialized Clinic in Sudbury

"To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Whereas northeastern Ontario has one of the highest rates of multiple sclerosis (MS) in Ontario; and

"Whereas specialized MS clinics provide essential health care services to those living with multiple sclerosis, their caregiver and their family; and

"Whereas the city of Greater Sudbury is recognized as a hub for health care in northeastern Ontario;"

They petition the Legislative Assembly as follows:

"Immediately set up a specialized MS clinic in the Sudbury area that is staffed by a neurologist who specializes in the treatment of multiple sclerosis, a physio-therapist and a social worker at a minimum."

I support this petition. I will affix my name to it and send it to the Clerk.

LONG-TERM CARE

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank Moe Scott from Val-Thérèse in my riding for these petitions.

"Support Bill 153, the Till Death Do Us Part act.

"To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Whereas there are 35,000 people on the wait-list for long-term care; and

"Whereas the median wait time for a long-term-care bed has risen from 99 days ... to 152 days in 2018-19; and

"Whereas according to Home Care Ontario, the cost of a hospital bed is \$842 a day, while the cost of a long-term-care bed is \$126 a day; and

"Whereas couples should have the right to live together as they age; and

"Whereas Ontario seniors have worked hard to build this province and deserve dignity in care; and

"Whereas Bill 153 amends the Residents' Bill of Rights in the Long-Term Care Homes Act to provide the resident with the right upon admission to continue to live with their spouse or partner;"

They petition the Legislative Assembly as follows: "to direct the Minister of Long-Term Care to pass Bill 153 and provide seniors with the right to live together as they age."

I support this petition. I will affix my name to it and send it to the Clerk.

FISH AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

Mr. Dave Smith: I'd like to thank the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters for this petition. It has been around for a while now, but I think it's still very relevant.

"To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Whereas the ban on hunting and trapping in sections of Ontario to protect the eastern hybrid wolf was put in place without regard for the overall ecosystem;

“Whereas this ban has adversely affected the ability of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR), hunters and trappers to properly manage animal populations and Ontario’s ecosystem;

“Whereas this ban is no longer needed and is in fact causing more damage to Ontario’s ecosystem and increasing unnecessary encounters between wildlife and Ontarians;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“That the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry immediately lift the ban on hunting and trapping set in place to protect the eastern hybrid wolf.”

I very much agree with this. We had one in my backyard this morning and my dogs were in jeopardy as a result of it. I’ll sign my name to it and send it to the table.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

SUPPORTING BROADBAND AND INFRASTRUCTURE EXPANSION ACT, 2021

LOI DE 2021 SOUTENANT L’EXPANSION DE L’INTERNET ET DES INFRASTRUCTURES

Resuming the debate adjourned on March 9, 2021, on the motion for second reading of the following bill:

Bill 257, An Act to enact the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021 and to make other amendments in respect of infrastructure and land use planning matters / Projet de loi 257, Loi édictant la Loi de 2021 sur la réalisation accélérée de projets d’Internet à haut débit et apportant d’autres modifications en ce qui concerne les infrastructures et des questions d’aménagement du territoire.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I recognize the member from Oshawa.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I am pleased to have this opportunity to stand in this fine Legislature on behalf of the official opposition and bring voice to Bill 257, the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act. I have the opportunity to serve the official opposition as the critic for infrastructure, transportation and highways—although we do have an esteemed critic with his eye on the broadband world, and he will have the opportunity to bring his voice to this debate, as well.

I’m going to break my speech into two parts, as the government has done with their bill. This bill has three schedules: The first two have to do with broadband, and schedule 3 has to do with the environment and the Planning Act.

1520

Speaker, I’ll start out with the broadband section. I think everyone, not just in this room but across the province, knows how important broadband is. Certainly, with the pandemic, that has been brought into sharp focus. Areas that are rural, northern, agricultural, downtown—it

really doesn’t matter where you live; everyone has an opinion on broadband right now. But I will say, Speaker, that the rural and remote northern, First Nations communities really are light years behind where many other communities are when it comes to broadband and service. Unfortunately, we don’t see the word “rural” in this bill, but more on that later.

This particular bill allows cabinet to designate “broadband projects of provincial significance.” That isn’t defined. That will be left to regulation. We have some stakeholders—broadly, the Association of Municipalities Ontario—who are hopeful that underserved communities will be encompassed in that definition. We’ll wait with bated breath to see if that happens. It allows the Minister of Infrastructure to order the co-operation of electricity distributors, transmitters, municipalities and owners of underground infrastructure to facilitate the deployment of such projects as a backstop to negotiate agreements.

The purpose of the act, as stated, is “to expedite the delivery of broadband projects”—as I said—“of provincial significance.” It’s actually ironic—and I’ll come back to this—but in schedule 3, when we’re talking about provincially significant wetland, that no longer has meaning. Provincially significant wetland is now going to be moot, but we’ll come back to that. But here, we have “provincially significant projects.” Anyway, it’s a neat term. I can’t wait to find out what it means in this case.

Municipalities will have questions as well, because we already have federal law requiring municipalities to provide telecommunications companies with access to their rights-of-way. This bill echoes that but also gives the minister additional powers that they can notify a municipality that the construction or operation of one of these designated projects requires either access or use of or modification or temporary closure of a municipal service, real property or an interest. And by the way, if the negotiations fail with said municipality, the minister can order them to provide access. It will be interesting to see how smoothly that unfolds.

One other thing: As I had mentioned, Speaker, the word “rural” is not in this bill. Cabinet could designate a broadband project for a new GTA subdivision, for example, as a provincially significant project if they want to. Again, we will wait for regulations.

But Speaker, while I’m still talking about broadband, I wanted to remind the government members of a letter sent back in April, which seems like such a long time ago. The issue still hasn’t been addressed, though. It was sent by northern NDP MPPs to the Premier about broadband. I’ll quote a bit of the letter just to refresh:

“In two years of being in government, there has been no public mention whatsoever of investing in broadband for northern Ontario. And now that a pandemic is forcing everyone to work from home and depend on their Internet, the damage is done and people are stuck without high-speed Internet, putting our region once again at a disadvantage to the rest of the province....

“Premier, take the necessary steps to ensure providers grant the same enhancements for all customers, so that we all have access to the adequate Internet....

“It is unacceptable that companies continue to apply the ‘normal’ rules and to charge people hundreds of dollars extra because they went over their monthly limit, while enhancing Internet services for urban customers and denying rural and northerners the same enhancements. This is unfair and unacceptable to people living in rural and northern communities.”

That’s from the MPPs from Timmins, Mushkegowuk–James Bay, Nickel Belt, Kiiwetinoong, Thunder Bay–Atikokan, Algoma–Manitoulin, Timiskaming–Cochrane and Sudbury. Maybe that will be addressed in the next bill.

Speaker, I have some comments here from the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. I know that everyone in this room appreciates agriculture, appreciates food, appreciates grown in Ontario, but we need to do better to support them when they ask for things. For example, Keith Currie, director of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, has said:

“Many living in rural communities with limited or no access to reliable Internet have faced significant challenges when logging on to the virtual world.

“The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) believes access to fast, reliable and affordable Internet is a necessity in our modern world and needs to be considered an essential service. Much like electrification in Ontario over 80 years ago, broadband expansion must be a prioritized and rapid process.”

He goes on to say, “As we fast forward to today, farm businesses and rural communities continue to struggle to find Internet capable of supporting their needs. Results from OFA’s recent 2020 broadband survey reflect the growing frustration of Ontario farmers....

“Unfortunately, rural residents often face competitive disadvantages when it comes to Internet accessibility as there tends to be only a handful of service providers that cater to rural markets. Therefore, with limited options, the customer is at the mercy of the service provider when it comes to cost and delivery. More than 70% of survey participants reported they believe they are not getting sufficient value for the services they pay for from Internet providers.... Therefore, OFA continues to lobby both the federal and provincial governments to invest in expanded broadband for all rural, northern and remote communities.”

Speaker, it’s interesting, as I said, that those communities are not named by name. They’re not explicitly named in this bill. We’ve had this conversation in this room before, about “if you mean it, say it.” As I look around the room and I see the Minister for Government and Consumer Services—who, I will give full credit, was a bright and vibrant voice for the agricultural communities through the years when she was on opposition benches—I remember; she was the critic. But now she’s government and consumer services, and when I’m hearing that 70% of those residents, the farming community, are not being well served and they’re not getting what they’re paying for, I challenge the minister to pick up that mantle and maybe have a conversation with the Minister of Infrastructure and see what we couldn’t work out for them, because our rural

and agricultural community members don’t have what they need.

Another voice I’d like to get on the record here—and I have already alluded to this—is the voice of AMO. On this bill, one of the quotes I have here is, “The definition of a ‘provincially significant project’ will be determined through regulation. If this term is scoped to mean projects in rural and northern areas receiving provincial broadband funding, this act could help to ensure projects are delivered faster to the benefit of local communities that are currently unserved or underserved.”

Again, nowhere in this bill do we see the word “rural,” so I think AMO, if I am interpreting their comment here, if the definition “is scoped to mean projects in rural and northern areas receiving provincial broadband funding,” then the act could help. But Speaker, if it doesn’t, then I don’t know where we find ourselves. Word to the wise: When people want to see their asks reflected in legislation, maybe you could try that.

I have a fantastic region that has been advocating for all folks when it comes to broadband and Internet. The Minister of Infrastructure talked about the ICON program, and funding announcements will be hopefully forthcoming. Well, she said “forthcoming,” but hopefully soon. But the region of Durham, like many communities, has put forward a competitive application, and that is to support the needs of everyone when it comes to broadband, because, Speaker, I know that you think of Oshawa as being a booming metropolis—and we are—but we have lots of neighbours in the Durham region that wouldn’t claim to be booming metropolises. Even some of the fine folks in Oshawa are reaching for Internet that they can’t afford or isn’t reliable.

From Chair John Henry: He says, in a letter, “In Durham and across the country, COVID-19 has exacerbated the inequities experienced by people who don’t have access to adequate broadband. Businesses are unable to take full advantage of digital platforms, residents are unable to work from home and children can’t participate in virtual learning activities. Broadband is critical infrastructure for the ongoing prosperity and success of our residents and businesses.”

I do hope that the government has had a chance to get really familiar with that application, because it’s a partnership application with local utilities, and I think it, like many others, deserves not just the consideration of the government, but everyone does deserve Internet. While we’re looking at this bill in front of us, it’s a start—schedules 1 and 2—in the right direction, but we do need to see these projects be approved.

1530

Another opportunity that this government had—and it was just the other day, just on Monday, that the member from Algoma–Manitoulin brought forward a motion. I’ll read to you a little bit from Elliot Lake Today. The quote from the member from Algoma–Manitoulin was: “People have been more reliant on the Internet than ever before. Usage has gone up and bills have hit the roof. People in rural and northern Ontario pay some of the highest rates in

the province for Internet access, and it's time for some relief. I am calling on the ... government to help lower the bills, take the HST off for residential users and small businesses and make sure no one loses Internet service during this crisis."

The paper goes on to say: "In northern Ontario where broadband is limited, many northerners rely on expensive services and face monthly bills of hundreds of dollars. New Democrats have been fighting for broadband access for all northerners and communities, but the ... government has failed to act."

In fact, despite the fact that there was so much support for that motion because people are begging for affordable Internet and, as the member from Algoma-Manitoulin said, northerners are stuck paying the highest bills in the province at a time when they can least afford it—the least the Premier can do is take the HST off their Internet bills, but sadly, it was defeated.

However, the government has passed the bill of the member from Timiskaming-Cochrane through second reading. The member from Timiskaming-Cochrane introduced and debated Bill 226, the Broadband is an Essential Service Act. It would set a 2030 deadline for making affordable high-speed Internet available province-wide, and the bill builds in accountability—I'm going to say that word again, because we don't often get to hear that word in this room. The bill builds in accountability by calling on the government to create a strategy for meeting that target and requiring the Minister of Infrastructure to make regular progress reports. He said—and he arrives just in the nick of time to be quoted: "No matter where you live in Ontario, you should be able to access affordable high-speed Internet. But many northern and rural families have been left behind as broadband has become widely available in the rest of the province."

Also: "The ... government didn't invest a single penny of the \$30 million it earmarked for rural broadband in 2019-20, according to the Financial Accountability Officer."

So at least that went through the second reading, but now it's somewhere in the ether. We'll see what happens with that. We will have folks stay tuned.

Speaker, I'm going to start to make the connection between schedules 1 and 2 and schedule 3. Don't blink, because there isn't much of one, but I'm going to endeavour to find it right now.

I have an article here from the Haliburton County Echo. I was interested to read this because I've had the opportunity, as many of us in this room have, to visit lovely parts of Ontario. In my family history, I have some family connections to the Stoney Lake area and also to Kennis Lake in Haliburton. So when I read about that area, I feel connected and I am well-acquainted with the beauty and water of that region.

With that in mind, I'm going to just share a bit from an article, "Need for Greater Broadband Service Dominates 2021 ROMA Discussions."

"A need for further investment in broadband Internet services, improvements to long-term care and issues

surrounding blue-green algae in local lakes were some of Haliburton County warden Liz Danielsen's key takeaways from last week's virtual Rural Ontario Municipalities Association [ROMA] conference."

What she said was that there was one topic in particular that was a recurrent theme and, of course, as no one is surprised, it was broadband and the lack of broadband access for rural communities across Ontario. I'm sure that the member from Haliburton-Kawartha Lakes-Brock, who also serves the province as the Minister of Infrastructure, is well-acquainted with that need in her area, hence schedules 1 and 2 of the bill.

The county warden went on to say, "Blue-green algae is a huge concern for us in Haliburton county.... And if a lake has been contaminated, the water can be toxic."

I'm not making light of that, because I know that many communities around the province are struggling with algae, with blooms and with nutrient pollution, and, Speaker, I had the opportunity to serve on behalf of the Speaker, actually, at the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Legislative Caucus and part of that binational nutrient task force, and we focused on nutrient pollution. I'm not going to give anyone a science lesson, although maybe a lunch-and-learn can be arranged.

Something interesting about algae and about nutrient pollution: An important part of stemming the flow of the nutrients into the lakes and into the rivers are wetlands, and there is the connection, because in Haliburton county, as with many other areas, they've got toxic algae and blooms that they're concerned about. Then here we have, in this same bill that's talking about broadband, an attack on wetlands, and wetlands serve as lungs. I'm going to get into this more at length here, but they serve as lungs and they filter, not just sequester carbon but it is a chance to filter the runoff, to filter the nutrient pollution and the phosphorus loading that we're seeing in the lakes.

Isn't it ironic? I really do challenge this government to stop, reverse course and take a science class. I'm saying that and it sounds rude, and I kind of mean it that way right now because I feel like this is the basics—basic biology, basic ecology. It's something that we all can access. I'll read some letters from students later on who are happy to share that knowledge with this government.

That actually brings me to the end of the broadband part of today's discussion, because the bulk of this bill really does have to do with schedule 3.

As we're here debating Bill 257, which, as I had said before, is the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, we see schedule 3 put into this bill. I asked the minister this morning—I have to wonder how she's feeling, the Minister of Infrastructure—how she's feeling about having schedule 3 that has nothing to do with broadband inserted in her bill. I will say it must be disappointing, because I know that broadband is such an important topic for people across this province. It must be so disappointing for folks to have that conversation changed to one of protecting the environment against this government's blatant attacks.

Speaker, if you have some time, if you would like to learn a bit about Duffins Creek, there are a number of

videos that have been put out on the Internet from youth, from community, from kayakers. Lower Duffins Creek Wetland is a remarkable and beautiful area on the Pickering/Ajax border. I have taken the opportunity to speak about it in this room. I've had the chance to do some paddle boarding. It's a place where folks and families go, and that's at the coastal part of the wetland down by Lake Ontario—a beautiful area.

Not too far from there, though, north of there—upstream, so to speak—is a part of the wetland complex, and it's all an interconnected complex. It doesn't mean that you can see it aboveground, but these are water systems that have been around for millennia. The groundwater's all interconnected, the water systems are all interconnected, and it is at risk.

So, as I have said, wetlands serve as the lungs, essentially, though they breathe water. They filter water, they sequester carbon and they are invaluable when it comes to flood mitigation. They provide habitat for species at risk, for flora and fauna. They don't always have to be pretty. I think that the part of the wetland that is slated for demolition—I don't know if that's as beautiful as the other parts of it, but it doesn't matter, because it's functional, and it is what we need, especially in that area.

1540

I'm going to read a fair bit into the record today from different experts and organizations who explain just how important this area is when it comes to flood mitigation—especially in that area, which is prone to flooding. We should be doing everything that we can to protect this area, not to pave it.

Speaker, I'm certain that you're aware—I'm not sure if all of the folks across the room tuned in, but this past weekend—in case you missed it, I have a copy, or I can email a copy to all government members. I know that they were eagerly awaiting the NDP's climate, jobs and justice plan. The Green New Democratic Deal finally hit newsstands, so you can check it out, if you haven't already. I'm not going to take the opportunity today to read all of it into the record, although it does make for some excellent, inspiring reading, but I'm going to highlight the difference here on this particular issue.

Part of this plan—protecting our water and green spaces. I'll just read a little bit: “Past governments have renewed the water-taking permits of large water bottling corporations like Nestlé, allowing companies to extract local well water in the face of conditions like drought, and of detriment to the Ontarians that live there.

“The NDP views water as a basic human right, a public trust. We will never put the interest of companies over the needs of Ontarians. We will ensure everyone in Ontario has access to clean drinking water, clean water for sanitation and growing food, and that access is sustainable.

“We'll work with farmers, Indigenous peoples, and rural Ontarians to protect and restore our natural spaces. We'll preserve Ontario's natural resources and beauty, respect and mobilize traditional land knowledge, and remove and sequester GHGs—lowering their concentration in the atmosphere.”

Speaker, the collaboration with Indigenous peoples is an important piece—“to ensure traditional territories and foods are well-managed and protected.

“—work with members of Ontario's farming community to maximize their potential as land stewards, providing food for Ontarians and sequestering carbon;

“—expand the greenbelt and work with farmers and municipal leaders to protect Ontario's farmland from encroachment by land speculators....”

And of course, “increase protection of Ontario parks and expand access to green spaces and parks across Ontario, while protecting ecosystems and biodiversity...;

“—rehabilitate our wetlands, forests and vegetation”—and it goes on and on.

I am really looking forward to being in government and watching this unfold. While it will take a while—unfortunately, we may never be able to undo all of the damage that this government is so pointedly doing, but we're sure as heck going to try.

Speaker, I'll give you a little bit of history about Duffins Creek. I told you how lovely it is. Historically speaking—although this government and its folks have said that while this particular wetland is going to be devastated, they're going to do a one-for-one replacement or some such. But this particular wetland was created about 10,000 years ago, with gravel and sand making its way from melting glaciers. It has taken a while to get to this point. So I'm going to wish them good luck with this one-to-one replacement strategy. It won't yield the same results as Mother Nature. It formed a giant wrinkle in the land, the Oak Ridges moraine, and from that area, rivers, streams, smaller rivulets like Duffins Creek, flow through farmlands and cities, now highways and subdivisions, and through the wetlands, and they make their way to Lake Ontario.

This is an article from Marsha McLeod: “‘Poster Child for Destruction’: The Fight to Save the Duffins Creek Wetland from Developers.” According to Rebecca Rooney, a wetland ecologist and associate professor at the University of Waterloo, “Those wetlands act almost like a Plinko board, slowing the passage of water as it travels downward, with their vegetation sucking water up like a straw. Wetlands also create spaces for water to pool, so it's less likely to do so in property owners' basements....

“Andrea Kirkwood, a freshwater ecologist and associate professor at Ontario Tech University whose research includes study of the Duffins Creek wetland, says that if the warehouse is built, Pickering will likely need to build stormwater ponds—which are not as effective as wetland—to deal with the increased flood risks: “It's a flood plain, so they have to deal with heavy rains or heavy snow melt. Where's that water going to go?” Great question.

Speaker, as has been reported here and elsewhere, the ecological report that folks are using to justify this minister's zoning order or to support its claim—I haven't seen it. That doesn't matter. I hope other people have seen it. It turns out that anyone who has requested it hasn't been able to get it, because the ecological study—even the city, in my understanding, didn't have a copy of it at the time

of this printing—was commissioned by the developers, by the company that wants to build the warehouse, so—

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I'm sorry to interrupt the member from Oshawa.

The member from Oshawa is having difficulty hearing because of the conversations from her own members. She has the floor.

I'll return to the member from Oshawa.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you, Speaker. I know how excited we are to save the environment.

Interjections.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Don't make me come over there.

Speaker, continuing on: I'm going to jump ahead in time. I know I took us back to the glaciers, but I'm going to bring us forward, and then I'm going to walk us back a couple of months. So, everyone, just hold on.

This is from a few days ago, March 4: "Statement from Environmental Defence, Ontario Nature and Ecojustice on Bill 257 Regarding Legislation to Exempt MZOs from Planning Laws and Policy."

As I mentioned, schedule 3 in this particular broadband bill has nothing to do with broadband but is a new law that would allow environmentally destructive projects to go forward even if they are in contravention of the basic planning rules of the province.

I'll read from this article, and then I'll give you the sordid history of how we got here.

"Today, the government of Ontario placed provincially protected wetlands, farmland and forests across Ontario in line for development, as the province launched yet another sneak legislative attack on environmental protection and public participation rules.

"Hidden within a bill entitled 'Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, Bill 257,' are proposed changes to the Planning Act that will allow minister's zoning orders (MZOs) to override key provisions of the Planning Act. If this legislation becomes law, when a MZO is used to permit development, it will no longer have to be consistent with Ontario's fundamental planning principles—set out in the provincial policy statement (the 'PPS')....

"These proposals ... appear designed to retroactively legitimize the unlawful decision by the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing to allow the destruction of a large part of the provincially significant lower Duffins Creek coastal wetland complex in Pickering. This 50-acre wetland is slated to be bulldozed to accommodate a proposed warehouse, authorized through a MZO. Environmental Defence and Ontario Nature, represented by Ecojustice, are challenging this MZO in Divisional Court."

So this group, through Ecojustice, is taking this government to court—and now we find ourselves with this schedule in this bill that would actually maybe make that go away. It would make that piece of the law no longer the law. It would, essentially, override their right to seek redress in the courts. So it's quite a big deal, which is why

we're hearing a lot about this issue in the broader community.

In fact, here's a letter from a constituent—fun fact: We all got this one. This was one of those letters that was sent to all MPPs in the Legislature, so I'll just remind folks—because I'm sure that they've been reading them. This is from Susan Girvan. She said, "Your government's assault on the wetlands at Duffins Creek is wrong. And now, thanks to amendments to the Planning Act buried in Bill 257, all Ontarians know that you know it is wrong. The passage of a retroactive measure ... is, aside from a frank admission that what you're doing is wrong, a fig leaf that fools no one. Furthermore, Ontarians must assume it's a red flag that more environmental destruction is planned." That's the general opinion.

Taking us back to November: The government allowed a minister's zoning order—and as we've been hearing a lot about minister's zoning orders, for the folks at home, MZOs bypass planning and expedite development. There are many different examples that this government has given us. I have lost count of how many we have. Are we at 40 yet? It was like 33 the other day or somewhere in there—anyway, a lot. Things are moving quickly, and it's hard to know where to look, especially with a pandemic facing us.

1550

I'm reading here a letter from the Williams Treaties First Nations, dated November 11:

"I am writing on the request and approval by the Chiefs of the Williams Treaties First Nations. We are writing with great urgency in response to the recent news of the proposed development of the Pickering wetlands....

"On today's announcement of the wetland development in Pickering, the Williams Treaties First Nations want to state in no uncertain terms that reconciliation must mean more than land acknowledgements and flag flying. To develop the Pickering wetland amounts to anything but restoring harmony to the land, or harmony to the relationship with the local Indigenous community....

"As holders of treaty and Aboriginal rights, it was devastating to learn that the city of Pickering plans to launch a large-scale development project on 57 protected acres of wetlands."

They go on to say, "We were not consulted, nor asked to hold a seat at the decision-making table. Our ancestors have sought to protect these wetlands since the Gunshot Treaty of 1788—there is a long history of our people serving as stewards of these lands. We hereby put the city on notice that the said wetlands are an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCA).

"Destroying this land and water source is sending a message to First Nations. The message is that there is no respect, no regard for First Nations treaty rights, or any type of reconciliation and that the city, and province for that matter, feel that they have no obligation to consult with First Nations, even when the courts have stated otherwise....

"It is our position that the city of Pickering is without the right to engage such a development—this is a matter

over which the treaty signatories and federal ministries of Crown-Indigenous Relations, DFO, NRCan and the Toronto region conservation authority would have carriage.”

And it is signed by Chief Kelly LaRocca, portfolio chief for the Williams Treaties First Nations.

Speaker, around that time, in November, town of Ajax Mayor Shawn Collier wrote this letter to Premier Ford and the then Minister of Finance:

“There is one element contained in Bill 229 that I cannot support. Schedule 6 regarding conservation authorities (CA) act.

The changes proposed to the authorities act would effectively strip CAs of their ability to build climate resilience in Ontario in favour of development in areas that have been identified as best suited to remain naturalized in an effort to mitigate risks of flooding, erosion, water quality degradation and biodiversity.

“The Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA) asserts that ‘the package of amendments as proposed are likely to set back watershed planning and implementation of an ecosystem-based approach by decades.’”

Speaker, why am I reading about Bill 229 and schedule 6? Well, because I promised that I would take you back in time and I would frame this story.

Bill 229 and schedule 6—everybody was up in arms. The government would remember it well; I’m sure we all do—not just environmentalists, everybody. Friends and neighbours were very concerned because it basically took away the rights of conservation authorities to make decisions in the best interests of conservation, frankly. We didn’t really know what that would look like, which brings us to today.

The worst-case scenario we knew and imagined—and in fact I will remind us from the CBC article entitled, “Six Members of Ontario’s Greenbelt Council Join Crosbie and Resign, Citing Proposed New Rules.” That was back in December.

So remember, the MZO was awarded. It was going to be for a warehouse in Duffins Creek, and then we have schedule 6 of Bill 229, which came on the heels of that—I forget; a month or six weeks after that, something like that. From this article:

“Six members of Ontario’s Greenbelt Council have stepped down—joining David Crombie, the council’s chair—to protest proposed government rules they say would gut environmental protections in the province....

“Crombie contends that schedule 6 of the bill would strip power from local conservation authorities and expand ministerial authority on zoning and other potentially sensitive environmental issues.” He said, “This is not policy and institutional reform. This is high-level bombing and needs to be resisted.”

That was back in December, and people were warning that the conservation authorities would be hobbled and wouldn’t be able to do their jobs. Well, here we find ourselves, and we’re watching it play out. What we have

here with schedule 3 in Bill 257 and this attack on Duffins Creek is the first test case playing out.

By the way, back then, “Crombie said he didn’t resign because the government did not take the council’s advice—since it never has taken the council’s advice” but said that it was a “matter that’s ‘fundamental to the future of environmental stewardship.’”

Speaker, just a reminder that schedule 6 of Bill 229 set out a plan to weaken the powers of conservation authorities to protect Ontarians from flooding and from other hazards that result from development within conservation areas. It turns out that was correct. It also included narrowing conservation authority objectives and programs, reducing CA powers to investigate illegal activities and enabling new processes to let developers get permits for activities that would otherwise be prohibited. So if they weren’t allowed before to build on a protected wetland, for example, well, now they can, and here we find ourselves. That’s exactly what would happen.

Oh, Speaker, I had started out with the Green New Democratic Deal. Just so that you have another thing to look forward to, when the NDP forms government, we have committed that we will repeal schedule 6. Unfortunately, by then, it will likely be too late for Duffins Creek and many other environmental gems across communities, but that is still the plan, and folks can look forward to that.

MZOs: “Minister’s zoning order” sounds a bit political. The average neighbour might not really have been following it, except that there has been so much talk across all communities about minister’s zoning orders. Even the Premier this morning—and I’m not being diminutive—was excited to share that the government has more plans for more MZOs because he wants to fast-track development and growth and whatever it was that he said. This government sees it as a good thing and makes no bones about it.

Well, what we are seeing and hearing from community members is that people are really, really upset about the lack of access to process. In fact, I’ve got a letter here from a Pickering resident who has been paying very close attention to the political machine that is Queen’s Park and has been watching very carefully the government decisions. He actually made a list for me to share about MZOs. This is from Mike Borie, a strong voice in Pickering, who has said:

“MZOs override requirements for public consultations under the Planning Act and the Environmental Bill of Rights, 1993.

“MZOs allow the government to escape public notice and scrutiny when it approves the destruction of precious wetlands....

“MZOs can be issued/revoked without public notice.

“MZOs circumvent expected public participation in important land use planning decisions about the future of our community.

“MZOs are not subject to appeals to the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal (LPAT).

“MZOs unfairly circumvent the normal planning process and override the province’s own policies....

“MZOs are meant to be an extraordinary measure.

“MZOs override the Williams Treaties and First Nations were not consulted and have voiced concerns.

“MZO for development at Duffins Creek does not comply with legally binding provincial policy and is therefore” considered “unlawful”—although, Speaker, we’re here today, and this government is changing that.

“MZOs would allow Pickering to bypass the process and outcomes of the Durham region municipal comprehensive review.

“MZOs could impair the quality of drinking water or the health of our watersheds.

“MZOs go against provincially delegated responsibilities to protect people and property from natural hazards.

“MZOs prevail over any other zoning bylaw in the area, giving minister the absolute authority to regulate land use on specific lands.”

He goes on to say, “In recognizing your authority”—so I’ll say “government authority”—“and unique legislative opportunities I turn to your oversight and request that you exert all of your abilities to repeal or greatly amend the MZO granted to the city of Pickering that will ultimately substantially destroy and eliminate the lower Duffins Creek wetlands. Persistent opposition to this proposal will only continue to grow. I request you repeal the MZO and preserve the lower Duffins Creek wetlands.”

1600

Thank you, Mike. Mike and some folks have also organized a lot of community action and community education on this issue.

Speaker, there’s more. There’s so much more. In February, Environmental Defence—Tim Gray is the executive director. I had a chance to meet with him. Actually, on this side of the House, we’ve been meeting with a lot of important, strong environmental voices. Environmental Defence and Ontario Nature have an Ecojustice lawsuit. This was back in February, before we knew what was coming with this bill. They’ve outlined why they’re going to court to save the lower Duffins Creek wetland—because as I mentioned, there’s a lawsuit. They said:

“Wetlands are key to reducing the impacts of floods and droughts. They also clean our water, offer homes and food for wildlife and provide recreation areas for people.

“Rare coastal wetlands along the Great Lakes are particularly important for these values as well being breeding areas for fish and key stopover areas for migrating birds.

“It’s important to protect all wetlands—and crucial to protect the few remaining in the Greater Toronto Area....

“And protecting them is why Environmental Defence and Ontario Nature, represented by Ecojustice, are headed to Ontario Divisional Court....

“The minister’s decision seeks to override the requirements of the Planning Act and its associated provincial policy statement that require that all provincially significant wetlands be protected from all forms of development.... Our view is that the minister acted unlawfully by ignoring the requirements of the Planning Act and should

not have issued an MZO to allow for development on the ... Duffins Creek wetland.”

So Speaker, they took them to court. And then—the last couple of days have all been such an environmental blur—on March 4, the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry signed his name and basically allowed for the paving of the provincially significant wetland.

Man, I’m jumping all over here in the timeline, but at the beginning of this, the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry had sort of been looking into and had, I think, been talking to the conservation authority folks and was trying to figure out how to reclassify this provincially significant wetland. And “provincially significant” is not just a fun thing to call it; it’s an actual classification. The ministry deems, based on various criteria, that it is provincially significant and therefore must be protected. So we have these foundational policies in the province that you have to factor into planning under the Planning Act. They were looking into maybe reclassifying—I guess that went away or wasn’t something they could do, because that isn’t where we landed. So it hasn’t actually been reclassified. It’s still provincially significant, and it still is protected, and up until this bill, no one was allowed to develop it. It’s protected. So by law, they can’t be touched, hence the lawsuit. They’re saying the MZO violates this and therefore it’s unlawful.

So the Minister for Natural Resources and Forestry hasn’t reclassified it, but basically said, “We’ll go ahead,” to the conservation authority because, remember, schedule 6 changed what they’re allowed to do. Now he’s told the conservation authority, “Thou shalt issue the permit” to allow the paving of this provincially significant protected wetland.

This is from the Star:

“In a statement issued Friday afternoon, the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority said it was being forced to issue the permit ‘under duress’ and ‘would ordinarily decline permission of such a permit.’ It added that its only option was to add conditions to the permit to ‘lessen negative impacts’—conditions the developer is now challenging....

“The development of the Duffins Creek wetland—approved through a ministerial zoning order (MZO)—has become the first test of the new conservation authority regulations.”

I had mentioned Tim Gray from Environmental Defence. He has said, “‘If this law passes, the minister can just waltz in with one of his developer friends and wipe away all restrictions on developments’....

“‘Nothing that is currently protected by planning rules in Ontario—wetlands, river valleys, forests, endangered species habitat—is protected now,’ added Gray.”

The government has made it so that the conservation authorities that—up to this point, their mandate has been to conserve and protect; they are making them issue the permit for its destruction. It’s almost poetic if it weren’t so unlawful. Anyway.

Speaker, I have another piece here. This is from the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation on March 5.

Their statement is, the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation chief and council “strongly object to the province’s decision to circumvent its own provincial processes through the conservation authority so as to facilitate the development of an unnecessary warehouse development.

“On March 4, Ontario’s Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry ... issued a regulation to force the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) to approve a development permit without community consultation or environmental studies. The decision removes the conservation authority’s ability to make evidence-based decisions about environmentally devastating projects.

“The ... government needs to put the interests of the people and community above that of developers,” said Chief Kelly LaRocca. “Durham residents have made their position abundantly clear—we do not condone this deliberate habitat destruction.”

She goes on to say, “We are alarmed by the Ford government’s attacks on wetlands and environmentally sensitive areas across Ontario,” said LaRocca. “The province’s efforts to change the rules to help a developer demonstrate an absolute disregard for our Indigenous and treaty rights, and the democratic process. COVID-19 has provided the Ford government with a shield to hide behind while they implement this legislation to override the provincial conservation processes—and our community won’t let it happen.”

It’s interesting, because there is still more. The story just keeps unfolding. I know it’s hard to keep track, especially with the pandemic.

On March 5, CBC News had obtained an internal memo showing that the government is making this change that we see here in this bill specifically to undermine a lawsuit that aims to halt a development. Parts of the memo that folks got to read—we have raised it in question period. We asked the government specifically about it. This memo warned the government that if they didn’t bring in amendments such as these, they would, in all likelihood, be found to be in contravention of the Planning Act, as I had mentioned earlier. That’s the crux of this, that if they were actually going to be found in contravention, well, then, they darn well better do something about it. Here, I guess we find the amendment that goes back and retroactively changes it so that the law that is the law today—well, it was never there—retroactively, like it just never happened. What does that mean going forward?

I’ve got a few things I wanted to share. We have heard it talked about in this House. On the 6th, there was a demonstration. Reports are that over 300 people walked by the Minister of Finance and the President of the Treasury Board’s office, the MPP for Pickering–Uxbridge. But this is a wonderful treasure in this community; I sure wish that he would join us in protecting it.

There was quite a demonstration that particular day, but it’s folks all across the province who have been engaged in this. Environmental Action Now Ajax-Pickering, or the EANAP group, is grassroots. They’re just folks—and I met a few of them who are not New Democrats. I met a few of them who are not Green Party supporters. I met a

few who came up and took the time to tell me that they wouldn’t vote for me because they’re hard-core Conservatives, but they’re so mad about this that they travelled from different ridings. If I were the government, I would be listening to some of those folks, because people are not happy.

Speaker, I am going to read an open letter from two youths I met. They have written it on behalf of youth—Ally Zaheer and Devin Mathura, two university students. They actually had a shoe-collecting program because they couldn’t have a gathering with as many people as wanted to support them, so they had people send pairs of shoes. They collected 920 pairs of shoes that they have since donated, literally to be the stand-ins for people who support Duffins Creek and oppose its destruction.

They have written an open letter I’d like to share with the Premier and other decision-makers.

1610

“We are heartbroken that we have to write this letter. We are speaking on behalf of the disappointed, confused, anxious, and scared youth across Ontario. Your lack of concern for our future has been demonstrated through your drive to destroy our environment, which you justify as an economic boost. The lower Duffins Creek wetland provides habitat to over 41 species, acts as a carbon sink and reduces flooding. Greed is the only explanation for the destruction of this wetland. You pride yourself on acting ‘for the people,’ yet it is clear you’re only serving the people that support your toxic environmental agenda. You are abusing your power and shutting out our voices....

“Building a warehouse on this 57-acre wetland will increase greenhouse gas emissions from concrete and construction, vehicular traffic, industrial heating/cooling, waste and waste water treatment. Furthermore, the natural carbon capture mechanism provided by the wetland itself will be eliminated. This development plan is contrary to Canada’s goal to mitigate climate change as indicated in the April 2020 greenhouse gas emissions report.

“Your promise to reproduce the benefits of this wetland by expanding and remediating other wetlands within Pickering is not possible to achieve. The purchase of 21 acres of contaminated land at the end of Sandy Beach Road is not equivalent to the 57 acres of productive wetland that already exists after years of natural formation. We ask why other available lands nearby were not considered for this warehouse? It is time that your decisions support the reality that the climate and biodiversity crises are real. We relied on you to advocate for our future by committing to sustainable policy actions that guide us towards a resilient community, rather than destroying our fragile environment. The impacts of climate change respect no borders, or political affiliations. We must do our part to make responsible environmental decisions—in Pickering, in Ontario, in Canada....

“On behalf of the future generations of Ontario, we ask that you change your ways before it is too late. Stop the destruction of the lower Duffins Creek wetland! Become leaders of sustainable change rather than leaders of concrete and sprawl. Time is running out. In order to

ensure a livable future for ourselves, and generations to come, we need your government to start prioritizing the environment and protecting Ontario's green spaces. After all, it's yours to discover, not yours to destroy."

Again, Ally Zaheer and Devin Mathura have sent that around the province, so I think we should all be watching for that in our inboxes.

Some more constituent voices: Crystal Fielding, I believe, lives in Pickering, but she had written to her Pickering-Uxbridge MPP and said, "It's unfortunate that you did not come visit your constituents and fellow community members on Saturday March 6...."

"It's also unfortunate that considering the government of Ontario proclaims to be a 'government that listens' you don't seem to be hearing the message from the people and continue along the environmentally destructive path with an un-asked-for environmentally destructive legislation.

"In the middle of a pandemic, an extraordinary number of Ontario residents clearly voiced their opposition. Will you listen? Do you hear?"

"My four- and six-year-old children have questions about the legacy you are leaving for them. They would like to discuss their concerns with you."

Well, Speaker, she got a response from the President of the Treasury Board's office, and I'll just share a part of it. I'm sure we will be hearing this message over the rest of the debate from the government benches, but I'll quote from his office's answer:

"The environmental study conducted by the proponent—that's the developer—"found that the existing wetland is dominated by invasive species, which is likely to continue to decline and provide limited ecological functionality over time. The agreement with TRCA will create environmental benefits that meet or exceed any impacts from the development.

"Our proposed changes will ensure that priority projects that play a key role in our province's economic recovery do not face unnecessary barriers and delays after an MZO has been made."

That is the line, so I just thought I would get it on the record first since I'm sure that every government member will repeat a version of that. There was the answer from the parliamentary assistant this morning when I asked a question, or yesterday—all the days are blending together—when I asked a question about Duffins Creek, talking about this agreement with the conservation authority. As I have said, the authority has made it very clear that they are being forced, that it's "under duress" that they are being made to issue this permit, that if they could have it their way, they would certainly not be paving an irreplaceable wetland—a wetland that we rely on.

Since I'm not holding the government members' attention, I'll read something else. Maybe this will do it. From Angela Perreault, who is a constituent:

"Dear Ms. French,

"I am writing to express how concerned I am that the province passed a special regulation ordering the TRCA to issue a permit to build a warehouse on the Duffins Creek wetland site. As a recently retired teacher who taught in

Durham for 30" years, "I took many wonderful field trips to Duffins Creek over the years. I know what a valuable resource it is in terms of educating our youth, as well as its importance to the environment. My husband and I also enjoy hiking at Greenwood Conservation Area and are concerned about the water in that area.

"This issue will impact all constituents in Durham region, not just those in Pickering. Surely there is another, less environmentally sensitive area where a warehouse can be built if it is truly needed.

"I understand this permit may be issued in the next few days. I would appreciate you expressing concern about how quickly this is being pushed through and requesting a proper inquiry is held instead. Thank you for the work you do on behalf of all of the citizens of Oshawa."

I'm sorry to tell Angela that I don't think that this government is going to slow down—I really don't—not with the speed that we have seen.

I'm going to add something here about flooding, because I know that—I think it was yesterday that Ontario's Flooding Strategy was again highlighted by this government, and I thought it was so interesting. In fact, I couldn't resist tweeting the minister who had tweeted. It's a weird thing to be a grown-up in the Legislature talking about tweeting, but I'm going to do it anyway. The Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry had tweeted, "We know we can't prevent flooding; we can only become better prepared. Ontario has made steady progress towards the priorities and actions set out in Ontario's Flooding Strategy."

I couldn't resist, so I read much of the strategy. There's a section in this strategy, and I asked him if he had read it—it's weird he hasn't answered. Part of the strategy—this is the government's strategy. Priority number two—again, this is from the government's own flooding strategy—"Maintain wetlands and pervious surfaces.

"Develop policy tools and approaches to prevent new wetland loss and work towards the net gain of wetlands in Ontario, focusing on areas where wetland loss has been the greatest, including:

- "maintaining and improving policy and approaches to encourage wetland conservation"—they're not.

- "developing best management practices for wetland creation/restoration as part of green infrastructure or alternatives to traditional drainage works and infrastructure to help build resilience and improve other ecosystem services;

- "maintaining and strengthening partnerships...;

- "continuing to support Great Lakes policies and initiatives for wetland conservation aligning with the commitments made in the Canada-Ontario Agreement on Great Lakes Water Quality and Ecosystem Health."

Anyway, the point is, Ontarians, as we're looking at spring, are always wondering about flooding. A lot of Ontarians have been devastated by flooding and they will continue to be. This is a minister who said that "we can't prevent flooding in Ontario—we can only reduce the impacts when it happens."

He said, “But in order to succeed, we can’t act alone. We all have a role to play to become better prepared for flooding. Our government will work in collaboration with municipalities, the federal government, homeowners, conservation authorities”—I’m going to read that again—“conservation authorities, industry and Indigenous communities, and together we can build a stronger Ontario.”

Wetlands are a big part of that flood mitigation strategy, and it’s the minister who is responsible for the flooding strategies to combat flooding, who literally signed his name to allow the conservation authority to issue the permit to pave over a massively important part of a wetland complex, all in the name of a warehouse.

I have stood in this House before and I’ve talked about this government’s obsession with devastating the environment. They can wear the “I heart the greenbelt” T-shirt, but you’ve got to walk the walk. The thing is, every chance you have to do harm to the environment to do good for somebody that you have made an agreement with—and I don’t know what those agreements are; maybe they will tell us. That’s the wrong way to do things. We need to ensure that we protect our green spaces, and this is not how to do it.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for questions.

Mr. Lorne Coe: I thank the member for Oshawa for her presentation. In the early part of the presentation, the member referred to the region of Durham and our regional chair, John Henry. This particular legislation, Bill 257, talks about expanding access to reliable broadband. The member for Oshawa will know that the extension of broadband and the connectivity of broadband in the region of Durham is a key plank of the region’s economic recovery plan.

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Does the member for Oshawa support the expansion of broadband and the effect that will have in the region of Durham?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Well, let’s find out. A response from the member from Oshawa?

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you. I’m very pleased to have that question, and to stand up and unequivocally say that all of the members of the Durham region, all of the constituents across Durham region, deserve reliable and affordable access to Internet. Certainly when we heard—we’ve heard the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane talk about this—that there was going to be a broadband bill, we were waiting with bated breath. We couldn’t wait to read it. It’s disappointing, about schedule 3.

But the ICON application that the region of Durham has in, that we’re waiting for that approval on—I know that there have been so many people and partnerships involved in the planning for that, and I hope that we will be successful. I hope that the Minister of Infrastructure will give that fair consideration, because all folks across Durham region, whether in the booming metropolis of Oshawa or Whitby, deserve access to affordable and predictable Internet.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Waterloo.

Ms. Catherine Fife: When you look at the Duffins Creek situation that Ontario is currently facing, and you relate it to Bill 257 and you look at the timeline—on October 30, the MZO was issued. On February 24, the Triple Properties owners made some donations. On March 4, the Ministry of Natural Resources made regulations forcing the warehouse to be built on top of a wetland. On March 4, the same day, this piece of legislation was tabled in this House, which would likely stop a lawsuit against this whole thing, and allows the minister to ignore the previous planning laws by applying it retroactively to this one and all previous ministerial zoning orders. The Toronto and Region Conservation Authority issued on March 5 a late-afternoon release calling the new law “unheralded” and says that their decision-making is being done “under duress.”

How does this compromise confidence in progressive planning principles in the province of Ontario?

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Well, that is the question. The provincial policy statement, Speaker, and for those at home, is sort of that foundational policy piece under the Planning Act that even the Association of Municipalities of Ontario has pointed out is something that has always held up the best interests of Ontarians. And so this government is now making adjustments to that retroactively.

I don’t know what kind of confidence that could possibly foster in anyone looking to invest. What does that mean for rural municipalities, as well, and for those who are looking at the other MZOs and the challenging planning that everybody else is undergoing? I mean, this government is swooping in, bypassing process, and it’s a “you could be next” kind of thing.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Chatham-Kent–Leamington.

Mr. Rick Nicholls: I listened intently to the member from Oshawa and her one-hour leadoff pertaining to Bill 257. Of course, we’re talking about building broadband faster. Years ago, there was a comedian—you know who he would be, Flip Wilson—who said that you’ve got to crawl before you walk, walk before you run and so on. To build broadband faster is going to take some time.

Now, in my area down in the Windsor-Essex area—and your area, Speaker—as well as in the Chatham-Kent area, we’ve made some substantial announcements regarding funding for these areas for broadband, and I’m very excited about it. The farmers and the rural community are very excited about that as well, because they have a lot of farm equipment that can use satellite and the Internet.

So my question to the member from Oshawa is, simply, will you support our bill pertaining to building broadband faster?

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Everybody keeps talking about “rural” on that side of the House, and I wish that they would take that word “rural” and put it, with all of its letters, into the bill, so that the folks who they purport to be representing and speaking to about broadband—and I’m not suggesting they don’t represent their communities,

but they're not representing their interests if we don't see it in the bill.

This is talking about building broadband faster; my colleague from Timiskaming–Cochrane has a bill that has passed through second reading of this House that had timelines and accountability measures for the minister to ensure that broadband moves forward and gets built, but also that the money that has been allocated gets spent. The government agreed-ish but hasn't brought it to committee. So if we're going to talk about having that accountability and actually building the broadband, let's see it; I don't just want to hear about it.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Davenport.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you to the member from Oshawa for your comments this afternoon. I really liked the way you told the story and you brought the voices, I think, of so many people in the communities that are going to be the most impacted. I really appreciated that.

I also noted that you mentioned Mr. David Crombie. I want to say, I've worked with Mr. Crombie on a few projects. I find him a very practical person, a person of high morals.

This issue seems to have really united people of a lot of different political persuasions. I wondered if the member from Oshawa would care to comment in light of that. We are hearing from young people, from seniors, from Conservatives, from Liberals, from New Democrats. Who does this change to the MZOs benefit?

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Well, I'm not invited into those back rooms, so I don't really know who's there. I don't know if there's a deal or what it looks like. I can only imagine how much fun billionaires are to hang out with. I really don't know.

The government is going to say that there is no MZO that has been done that a municipality hasn't requested. But when I was standing there with all of these community members who have been blindsided, who have been caught off guard, who are very, very upset, I'm wondering if other municipalities—I'm thinking of Stratford.

Let's think about Stratford: The mayor and the community were not on the same team there, and we've all learned a valuable lesson about MZOs in that community. But are other communities taking a look and seeing what is happening with the MZOS and who is benefiting? Because the list of who is benefiting, it's folks who already have a lot, who have a lot of power, who stand to gain a lot. Those seem to be the people this is made for.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Barrie–Innisfil.

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: It's become clear that the members of the opposition are not supporting this bill, because it falls in line with their non-support for previous bills on jobs. They didn't support line 5, with hundreds of thousands of jobs being on the line; broadband with hundreds of thousands of jobs and future jobs for those students who are in university. I don't know if you have colleges or universities in your backyard, but that connectivity, that equality of opportunity that they can

experience by having proper broadband access and connectivity—again, leading to them being successful and leading to a job.

I believe the opposition, it's a bit of a—maybe there's a war on jobs happening here. But I know our members are very keen to reach that balance so we can have, as mentioned many times in this Legislature, a really healthy, clean environment and a good economy—but economy relies on jobs.

Speaker, will the member support this bill and support jobs throughout the province?

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Speaker, I wish I had brought my list of all the MZOs, because there is a surprising number that are connected to the community of the member from Barrie–Innisfil, so she is well-acquainted with the MZO process and community interest in that. It would be a neat conversation for us to have in this room around the different MZOs, the different communities and who supports what, going forward.

This particular bill, with schedule 3 in it—I'm going to read something from AMO. They had said, specific to schedule 3, "There are also proposed amendments to the Planning Act that ministerial zoning orders made under section 47 are not required, and are deemed to never have been required, to be consistent with the provincial policy statement (PPS), except in the greenbelt.

"While this amendment, if passed, may clarify some legal matters"—for the government; sorry, I'm editorializing—"it raises questions as to why the province would not want to abide by the provincial policy statement which articulates provincial interests."

I don't know, I've got the same question as AMO: Why? I mean, this is overkill.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We don't have time for further questions, but we do have time for further debate.

Mr. David Piccini: I appreciate the opportunity, as always, to rise in this place and talk about the importance of this specific bill and the importance of broadband and connectivity in the 21st century and in the community that I represent.

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Mr. Speaker, the importance of broadband in rural Ontario—yes, R-U-R-A-L, rural Ontario—can't be overstated, be it getting our goods to market in an agricultural community such as mine, be it a young boy or girl just trying to get connected to continue their studies in the unprecedented realities of COVID-19, be it a small business that wants to sell globally, across Canada, that's trying to unlock the potential of a world of opportunities. I want those goods and those services provided globally, those done right here, creating jobs in the province of Ontario. I don't want to have to go online and get stuff from China. That's the reality in an interconnected world: free trade. But supporting jobs in this province, supporting a young boy or girl in a digital economy, equipping them with the skill sets and competencies: That, this government is doing—but also the backbone ability to connect, to grow a business.

I think of, in my role as parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Colleges and Universities, the opportunities I've had to see the Digital Media Zone, the DMZ, at Ryerson, a number of our colleges: Loyalist, Fleming, Trent, Ontario Tech University, Durham College. The examples are endless in terms of the talent pipeline to connect our next generation with the jobs of tomorrow, but quintessential to that is broadband.

Since being elected, our government has invested over \$45 billion in infrastructure, and over the next decade that number is going up to \$143 billion, to be exact. This money will continue to build Ontario's infrastructure, including strategic investments in broadband connectivity, transit, highways, schools, hospitals.

Mr. Speaker, I look to the riding of Northumberland–Peterborough South—and we see examples everywhere. We see accelerated builds on long-term-care homes. We see Digital Main Street unlocking the economic potential of quite literally hundreds, thousands of businesses in Northumberland–Peterborough South. We see amendments to support processing capabilities so that our farmers can get their goods to market. We see increasing investments in hospitals. All of this in a rural setting requires adequate broadband, and so I'm really proud to be part of a government that's making transformative change on this.

I think of the many members I'm looking at who joined me in Roseneath for that first step. The cell connectivity: I think of driving past Robins convenience, driving past the Roseneath Carousel as you dip down and you head up 45—on my way to Norwood, for example—and losing reception. I can't think of the countless calls I've had with constituents where I've lost reception.

Well, that wasn't good enough, that was unacceptable for Minister McNaughton when I brought that to that minister, when we talked as a community about how to work collaboratively with our municipal partners at EORN to address that. Do you know what, Mr. Speaker? We stepped up and we invested \$71 million to address that cellular and that broadband gap. In fact, I'm pleased to say that thanks to the quick investment here—shortly thereafter there was a federal election, and guess what? The feds quickly thereafter made the same announcement, to commit that money in the riding.

Well, do you know what? Mimicry is the greatest form of flattery, and I'm so glad to say that after the leadership of Premier Ford, we saw the feds join us too and step up and fund that project. I'd like to thank the municipalities. I'd like to thank the EORN network for their leadership on this. Now, Mr. Speaker, we're continuing that investment. We're continuing to invest in broadband and continuing the collaborative partnerships with our municipalities.

The pandemic has really highlighted the divide between urban and rural Ontario, and I don't need to write the word "rural" in this bill for folks in rural Ontario to see the benefit of access to hydro poles, unlocking that benefit. In our round table in Codrington—some of the greatest ideas I have actually don't come from this place; they come from the constituents I represent. And when those folks in

Codrington and Brighton packed that community centre and said: "Dave, why aren't we leveraging our hydro poles?" I think to champions like the MPP for Hastings–Lennox and Addington, MPP Kramp. I think to other champions locally who join me—MPP Smith in Peterborough–Kawartha. All of us understand the need to unlock the potential in these hydro poles. It doesn't take writing "rural" in this bill for constituents to understand the importance of acting on what they asked us to do as a government, and that's what we're doing.

In addition, municipal rights-of-way, working with our municipal partners, reducing the barrier to quickly get access—and I'll draw a tenuous analogy. I was just at the launch of the Colborne rural health hub clinic. That clinic was made thanks to the Ontario health team investment of this government. Providing better care in rural Ontario to the folks in Colborne, in rural Ontario, was made thanks to an investment by Premier Ford, thanks to Ontario Health Team Northumberland being one of the first 24 health teams in Ontario.

I spoke to Mayor Martin there, and she spoke to me about challenges between the municipality and the utility company. Why I draw that analogy is that these are sort of the same challenges that we face when we're just trying to get fibre in the ground, and working with municipalities to expedite this process is so critical.

Mr. Speaker, that's why I got elected to this place. I'll be the first to say that I don't have all the answers, but working with the constituents I represent is how we bring good ideas to this place. It's how we're delivering better health care in a rural setting. It's how we're better connecting rural Ontarians. I note to the people at home, if you're watching—I don't think there's too many in Northumberland–Peterborough South, but hopefully they'll catch this later. Maybe I'll send them the link. They can watch.

I know that it's not just about the money, but they see, "Dave, a billion dollars," and they recall fondly the feds committed \$1.7 billion, I think it was, nationwide. They're tired of the billions. They're tired of the dollar signs. They want shovels in the ground, and they know that by unlocking the potential with our hydro poles, by working with our municipalities to expedite shovels in the ground, they're going to get that. That's thanks to this government. That's thanks to Minister Scott. That's thanks to the Minister of Infrastructure introducing this legislation today.

Mr. Speaker, today, 700,000 households across Ontario lack access to reliable high-speed Internet, and although broadband delivery, again, is a federal responsibility, our government simply cannot afford to stand by and wait. We've seen an absolute failure in leadership at a national level to make the critical investments in broadband that we need to see.

But Premier Ford will not stand by and sit silently on this subject, which is why we will see a billion-dollar investment, as I said, locally here in Ontario, which stands in stark contrast to virtually that same commitment made nationwide. In Ontario, people need access to reliable

broadband. That commitment that we've made is an important commitment, and that commitment means that it's not just about making a fiscal commitment, it's about unlocking the tangible barriers to increase reliable broadband service to folks in rural Ontario.

Again, I'll go back to hydro poles. I'll think to working with our farmers, our municipalities to get fibre in the ground. I'll think to the commitment through ICON, improving connectivity for Ontarians. That billion-dollar investment: What does that mean for folks at home? I want to know. Well, for the folks in Cobourg, in Hamilton township, it means one of the applications under intake 1 of the ICON program was to expand connectivity for those residents. It means that despite the challenges we've had pushing the federal government to make that investment, we'll still double down, and it means you'll see—again, putting partisanship aside to really push and to work together in a collaborative manner to support the CENGN project that Northumberland county submitted, working collaboratively with that.

It means working with ISP providers—Xplornet, Cogeco, Rogers, just to name a few—that have come to my office through ICON intake 1 and 2 and submitted viable projects that are going to benefit hundreds, thousands of residents in rural Ontario. That's so important. At the end of the day, that's our job: to roll up our sleeves.

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I still vividly recall cold-calling ISPs in our region, asking, "Are you aware of the ICON program? Are you submitting applications? Are you working with our municipalities?"—bringing it up in dialogues, like the biweekly calls I have with the mayors and First Nations Indigenous chiefs in the riding, who I work collaboratively with in Northumberland—Peterborough South. I think of Chief Carr and Chief Mowat, who want to unlock the economic potential in those Indigenous communities that I work collaboratively—the teachings that I've had the benefit of learning from those two leaders in those respective communities, working with them to expand broadband connectivity.

I think of the resort businesses on Rice Lake. I think of those business owners who've said that for us to really unlock the potential of the beauty of Rice Lake and in Northumberland—Peterborough South, we need reliable Internet access.

These ICON applications are where form meets function. It's where you start to see actual dollars being corralled around local projects. That's going to get fibre in the ground, and that's going to end the digital divide.

I had the opportunity, when I worked for the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons, to do various projects for medical education. I remember arriving at Kanti Children's Hospital in Kathmandu and getting on my phone. I distinctly remember the feeling of being in a beautiful country, in Nepal. I remember messaging my family and showing them Everest in the background, all through my cellphone.

How is it that in far-off corners of our globe, like in rural Nepal, they have more reliable access than we have here in Ontario?

Well, that ends. Premier Ford will not stand by and continue the decades of neglect. The Premier and I—and I don't think anybody on this side will say we've got all the answers today. But we're open to those answers. We're open to listening to EORN to support those projects—like the \$71 million that I announced in Roseneath, alongside so many of my colleagues. We'll work with them. We'll work with our municipal partners on local projects, through the two ICON intakes.

Again, it's the fundamental responsibility—we can put our political grievances aside—of every member of this place to ensure that local ISPs, that the municipalities you have the opportunity to represent are making applications through intakes 1 and 2 of ICON.

Yes, you can highlight legitimate concerns with this bill—and we can talk about that; that's what this debate is for—but surely we can all agree that we need to make these investments in broadband.

And I think, honestly, we can all agree that we've never seen a government in this place taking such aggressive action to end the digital divide, in the history of this province.

Premier Ford has not even been elected for four years, and we've made historic investments in broadband. We've funded local projects like the \$71-million EORN announcement I referenced, in Roseneath. We've launched two intakes through ICON to lead to tangible investments, and we're making important strides. We've expanded Digital Main Street programming to support businesses, bringing their platforms online. We've worked, as a government, with our post-secondary institutions to help ensure that we're expanding.

I think of the important work Minister Romano is doing on micro-credentialing—a \$56-million commitment made in the budget to help people.

I worked in medical education. Education, we often said, in medicine is a lifelong endeavour.

For my father, who is an architect—lifelong education.

I would submit that for Ontario to be ahead of the curve, education for everyone, no matter what profession you're in, is a lifelong endeavour. And this government recognizes that, which is why we've launched a micro-credentialing strategy, to help people continue to learn as they work. Do you know what they're going to need to continue to learn, to do CPD, continuing professional development, while they learn? They're going to need broadband. That's why it's so important that we all get to this place and support these efforts.

As I look across to the NDP, I'm not saying you need to support everything all the time. Highlight concerns with the government. But I heard a 20-minute speech before me. Not once did the member talk about important broadband elements that are in this bill. Yes, highlight concerns with a specific schedule, but can we not for a moment come together and spend some talking about the important investments we need to make in broadband, the important barriers we need to reduce: hydro pole access, municipal rights-of-way, working with ISPs, working with non-profits, working with our Indigenous communities, working with important regional networks, like EORN in my

region, the SWIFT community that the member for—Bruce, I think? Anyway, forgive me. I'm going to butcher it—but working with those important communities.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Huron—Bruce.

Mr. David Piccini: Huron—Bruce.

It's really important that we work with these networks and these communities, and that's exactly what we're doing. We are accelerating those critical projects.

Some of those barriers and delays—municipalities have come to the province and said, "Help us address those delays." That's why we've worked on issuing MZO's, at the request of the municipalities: to work with them. What that has meant is that we have unlocked historic investments into affordable housing. I think it's something like over 3,000 long-term-care beds right now, affordable housing projects, economic generators. I think to a recent MZO issued in our community, in the region of Durham, that is unlocking jobs for our agriculture sector, skilled jobs. It's going to create construction and employment. And that has been at the request of a unanimous vote of council.

I draw that in stark contrast to the Green Energy Act that completely bypassed them. We are working with municipalities. We are working with them, at their request, to issue MZO's to expedite shovels in ground. We are not going to stand by and let Ontario—the Ontario of old, the Ontario government that dealt with papers and pens. It's like literally rubbing sticks together to light a fire in the 21st century. We are not going to exacerbate those problems of old. We are not going to ask people who want to deal with government to have to give up half a day to go somewhere to wait in line, to take off time at work. We are going to bring government to them at the click of a button. To do that, we need broadband.

We're going to make sure that we're going to support Ontarians to continue in their lifelong education journeys. We're going to need to do that by expanding broadband. We're going to ensure that a young boy and girl, even outside of their educational journeys in K to 12 during the week, if they want to expand access and continue to learn online on their weekends, on March break, with their parents, they have the access to do it through broadband; they have the tools and resources through great programming provided by TVO and a number of others. We're going to work with partners like eCampusOntario to unlock continuing credits and programming, to design curriculum so that students can continue to learn while they work, so that that young single mom, that single dad, that 65-year-old who's going back to pursue a few additional credits, who wants to continue to grow in their profession, can do that while they work and they can do that online, from the comfort of their own home, around the hours that are convenient to them so that they can get both live instruction and asynchronous learning. They can continue to do this online, while they work. That's important in this province of Ontario.

Mr. Speaker, as I draw to a close here, it is important that we take giant leaps forward to make investments in critical broadband. It's more than the dollars and cents, the

historic \$1 billion that this Premier has invested. It's about reducing barriers. It's about working with our utility providers, working with our municipalities, ensuring we accelerate municipal projects, leveraging existing municipal projects to put fibre in the ground. We're going to do that, Mr. Speaker. We're going to unlock the economic potential that this province has to offer.

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The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for questions and comments.

Ms. Catherine Fife: The member from Northumberland—Peterborough South says that he doesn't have all the answers.

Bill 257 bill gives the provincial government new powers to mandate municipalities and utility companies to co-operate with broadband developers over hydro poles, for instance, but it also includes a completely unrelated schedule that retroactively makes an unlawful ministerial zoning order lawful in order to block an ongoing lawsuit.

Why has the government dropped schedule 3 into Bill 257 when it's supposed to be about expanding broadband access in Ontario?

Mr. David Piccini: I'm glad the member opposite brought up the fact that I don't have all the answers, because those hydro suggestions and some of the great ideas about unlocking the potential with our utility providers came from important consultations that I've had—and that I hope she has had, as well, with her constituents—in Codrington. So we brought that forward—and it's important that we do that, as elected members of the communities we serve.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Why is schedule 3 there?

Mr. David Piccini: I'll add about schedule 3 and about the importance—a tool MZO's have provided. It has led to over 1,000 affordable housing projects. It has led to 3,700 long-term-care beds in this province. It has led to the expansion of Sunnybrook hospital.

Interjection.

Mr. David Piccini: She'll continue to heckle me because she doesn't want to hear the facts. She's so driven by ideological hatred towards this that she doesn't want to hear the facts.

The new municipal housing project in the city of Toronto, the widely successful CafeTO project, projects that are going to unlock jobs in rural Ontario—like the MZO recently issued in Clarington. That's what this does—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you. The next question.

Mr. Dave Smith: One of the things that was brought up by the opposition was that we didn't have the word "rural" in it at all. I want to talk specifically about the EORN gigabit project that is proposed. It would serve about 750,000 people in a land mass that is larger than Germany. Germany has 83 million people in that same—I would say that pretty much defines a rural section.

What we would be doing is allowing broadband providers to put fibre optic on telephone poles, on hydro poles. Right now, with the proposal that's put forward, it's

about a 20% higher cost to do it. This is something that would make an adjustment. Could you speak to how important that is?

Mr. David Piccini: I'd like to thank the member from Peterborough–Kawartha for that important question.

A county he is very familiar with, Northumberland county, actually wrote to me, asking if they could expand the ask on their ICON project. Do you know why they wrote to me asking that, Mr. Speaker? Because when they got the costing per hydro pole, it was exorbitantly higher.

This legislation is critical to unlocking that potential in eastern Ontario through the EORN proposal that he referenced in his question. It's important that we work on this. I've got to say, this legislation addresses exactly that.

I thank the member for his question.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Ms. Doly Begum: I want to thank the member for his passion. I just really wish he would translate it into action.

Interjection.

Ms. Doly Begum: Yes, it is funny. I really wish it did translate into action.

I agree: I think kids need broadband. I think that person who is trying to go back to school, the single mom, the single dad—they all need broadband. When I think about the fact that we don't have broadband in many parts of the province, it's almost unbelievable, but it's a reality for many, many Ontarians.

The sad part is, we actually have bills in the House right now—my colleague from Timiskaming–Cochrane brought a bill forward. It passed second reading. It has a timeline. It's got a—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Ask your question, please.

Ms. Doly Begum:—and we could have passed it if the government had the will; whereas in this bill, we see schedule 3, for example—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you. The member for Northumberland–Peterborough South to respond.

Mr. David Piccini: I'm not sure there was much of a question there, but the member asked about action. I'll talk about action—action like the \$56-million micro-credentialing strategy to support lifelong learning that is going to support that single mom, that single dad that the member referenced.

Talking about leveraging investments in broadband to support sustainable agricultural practices so that the farmers can actually connect: That's action that this government is doing.

We'll talk about the eastern Ontario cell gap project so that people can actually connect to international markets. That's a \$71-million investment this government has made. That's action. We're actually about to launch shovels in the ground.

Action like the \$5-million increase in medium-sized hospital funding for Northumberland Hills Hospital: That's action this government has taken.

Mr. Speaker, I just wish the member opposite would act and support this government and get reliable broadband to Ontarians.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The Minister of Government and Consumer Services.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I very much appreciate the passion and the desire to see action come to fruition from the member from Northumberland–Peterborough South.

I want to thank him for recognizing the action that SWIFT is taking in southwestern Ontario. The past chair of SWIFT is Jim Ginn, mayor of Central Huron. Jim came to me, frustrated with the lack of action that he was receiving from the federal counterpart, and for the first time in my nine years, he facilitated a three-pronged meeting. All of the MPs from southwestern Ontario, all of the MPPs from southwestern Ontario and every municipal leader joined him on a Zoom call to identify how we can move forward.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Pose your question, please.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I was wondering if the member could tell us how Bill 152 will actually move SWIFT and the rest of Ontario forward.

Mr. David Piccini: I appreciate the question from that member—a member whom I recall fondly my first few days in the Legislature taking me under her wing, mentoring me, sharing a similar riding as mine—and the importance of that dialogue with our municipal counterparts.

She wrote about really finding common purpose with all levels of government, and that's what we did similarly in Northumberland–Peterborough South. We joined Indigenous leaders, municipal leaders, the MPP, the MP, in signing a joint letter to the federal government, saying, "Act now." We're still waiting for that action, but this province is acting with that billion-dollar investment, the two streams of ICON intake that we're taking and measures in this bill to unlock the potential of hydro poles to reduce the high costs, that 20% increase that the member for Peterborough–Kawartha talked about. We're acting, and it's because we're coming together as communities in rural Ontario, and I'd like to thank her for her leadership.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Kiiwetinoong.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I know, certainly, that Bill 257 talks about action, talks about MZOs, but since I've been here for just over two years, almost three years, in the House, as a First Nations person I see how this functions. I see how this building functions when we talk about colonialism, when we talk about racism, oppression.

The member talks about a \$71-million investment. To me, \$71 million—I have 14 water-boil advisories in my communities, and that would fix four water-boil advisories in my communities.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Pose your question, please.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: So when we talk about free, prior and informed consent, what's your position on respecting treaty rights and Aboriginal rights?

Mr. David Piccini: I thank the member for that question, and I thank that member personally for showing us his community and the reality in northern Ontario in the many fly-in communities that he represents on finance committee.

What I'll say is that I believe section 35 of the charter stipulates that we have a duty to consult with our Indigenous partners, and that's exactly what this government is doing.

With respect to the water-boil advisories that he rightly highlights, Mr. Speaker, we have those as well in my riding, and we had two critical water projects in Hiawatha First Nation and then Alderville First Nation. We worked under the ICIP program to nominate those projects to the federal government—two years, and crickets. Now, that's not good enough. That's not good enough for the Indigenous partners I work with in my riding, but I'm pleased to say that those investments, we just received federal approval for those.

I would work with him and any members of this place to make sure we have clean drinking water, which is a fundamental right for all Ontarians, regardless of where you live.

1700

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for further debate.

Mr. John Vanthof: It's always an honour to be able to rise in the House and speak on behalf of the good people of Timiskaming-Cochrane and on behalf of my party; specifically, as it pertains to agricultural and rural issues.

Bill 257, An Act to enact the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021—it is certainly important in rural Ontario.

When the Minister of Infrastructure made her ministerial statement regarding this bill, I happened to be in the House, and I had the opportunity to respond. In my response—I can't remember exactly how I said it—I said I looked forward to working with the minister on improving broadband access throughout Ontario, specifically in rural Ontario.

I continue to look forward, hopefully, to working with the minister on a bill that the NDP has put forward—it was under my name, but it's part of the NDP broadband strategy: the Broadband is an Essential Service Act. The real goal of that is, when the funding runs out—right now, everybody wants to talk about broadband, and rightfully so. There is a digital divide. That digital divide is made even bigger now by COVID-19. For health care, education, Zoom—anything you have to do—the digital divide is there. But we all know, and specifically, in northern Ontario, we know—and no one knows better than the member from Kiiwetinoong—that when almost everyone has something, the people who are left never get it, just like clean water for some people in this province. The same thing is going to happen with broadband unless we are very careful. That's what the Broadband is an Essential Service Act is meant to combat—that once most people get broadband, there's actually a strategy in place and legislation in place to ensure that all people in this

province have access to affordable broadband. I hope that the minister continues—that bill is now waiting to go to committee. I hope that bill goes forward. I think it would make a difference.

That's why, when the minister announced this bill in the House, I thought that, finally—because this is a divisive place—on broadband, we will be able to work together, 100%.

As I read the first couple of sections of the bill, there are some things that I think I've heard in my community—access to hydro poles. You would think that's not a big issue; it is a big issue. It has been brought up in my community, as well, and I think it's something that will make a difference. So the first couple of schedules—and there are things that, if this bill passes, are going to help.

I've heard a couple of times about how farmers need agriculture—we all need agriculture; farmers especially, to make their living. I'm a farmer by trade and always will be. But access to broadband is very important to farmers, as well.

As I read through the bill, I came to schedule 3, and some things just don't fit. Maybe I can bring your memories back—when this government was first elected and we walked in for the first throne speech, they had the brass band, and it was playing the theme song to Game of Thrones. It was pretty ominous. I will never forget that. This bill is a bit like Game of Thrones. The first few seasons of Game of Thrones were pretty fantastic, but the last season went right to nothing. You couldn't figure out where it was going—and that's schedule 3. Schedule 3 has nothing to do with the rest of the bill.

Now, when you get looking, you're wondering why, and then we see it: "Ah, news reports." When I'm looking, the explanatory notes in this bill kind of tell the whole story. Now, for those at home, there's the actual bill, which has got all the legalese, but at the front they've got the explanatory notes, basically the—I was going to say the Coles Notes, but in newer terms, the bill "for Dummies."

For schedule 3, the explanatory note: "The Planning Act is amended to provide that ministerial zoning orders made under section 47 are not required and are deemed to never have been required to be consistent with policy statements issued under subsection 3(1)." This is a retroactive law, so obviously something happened that they're trying to fix, and I don't think they're trying to fix broadband here. I asked the Minister of Infrastructure this morning what broadband project was covered by schedule 3, specifically the retroactivity. I deeply respect the Minister of Infrastructure; I didn't get an answer. I didn't.

Why this is so egregious, and why it's so incredibly important—the members across the way mention agriculture a lot, and I commend that. Like I said, I'm a farmer. The broadband part of this bill, I think the agriculture community and the rural community will be fully behind. Schedule 3, maybe not so much, because schedule 3 has to do with ministerial zoning orders.

For those of you who really—"So what are they talking about? The minister makes a decision, and on we go. What

are you talking about? Jobs, jobs, jobs”—okay. We’re not anti-job, but we have a pretty good system in Ontario, a provincial policy statement, of making sure that when you build something, that it doesn’t hurt things you want to do in the future. You want to protect your environment. You want to protect a lot of things, and a ministerial zoning order basically says, “No, all of that doesn’t matter. The planning doesn’t matter. We want to do X.” That’s what a ministerial zoning order is. It was not used much before; it’s used a lot by this government. They want to do X. No, it doesn’t matter about the rest of the equation, the “X² plus Y equals.” They just want X and it doesn’t matter what happens to the rest. In the provincial policy statement, in that process, you take everything into account.

On this issue, we’re specifically talking about one wetland. Now, wetlands are incredibly important. When you have climate change—even if the climate wasn’t changing, but the climate is changing—you have huge weather events, and wetlands protect you from those events. One of those big weather events we had was Hurricane Hazel, and that’s when we created conservation authorities, because, “Well, gee, we’re not having that happen again, the flooding.” That’s why we protect wetlands, and that’s why in the provincial policy statement wetlands are very important. That’s why some of them are provincially significant, and that’s why they’re protected.

But the government decides, “No, we want to pave over X,” no holds barred, and someone says, “Are you sure that’s legal?” And a memo says, “No, we’re not sure that’s legal. We’ll fix that. We’re the government. We’ll change the law.” Now, we’re concerned about that. A lot of people are concerned about that. A group that’s very concerned about that are farmers.

1710

This bill is what you would call—and it’s a political thing, but this is a wedge bill. It’s got some things that are obviously supportable, and it has got one issue that is very, very, perhaps, unsupportable. So we’ll marry them together, the government will marry them together, and they’ll keep talking about the supportable ones—how could anyone not support this wonderful initiative?—and try and bury the unsupportable one. It’s common in politics. It happens all the time, I’ve learned.

I was surprised with this one. I didn’t think they would do it this with one. I thought, you know what? We all want broadband to go ahead. Nowhere more than in northern Ontario in my riding is it so frustrating for people who live the digital divide, who are told, “You can’t go to school. You have to do it online,” and there is no online; who are told, “You know what? Telehealth is great.” Yes, that would be great, if it was there.

So this is a wedge bill. And I can understand: They’re trying to wedge the opposition. That’s the way this works, right? What I don’t understand is why they’re wedging the same people who they’re saying they’re supporting. So—and bear with me; this might take a minute for me to lay out. It might take eight minutes for me to lay out.

Do you know who are the groups that are most concerned about the provincial policy statement and about

MZOs? Farmers. Everyone should be concerned. Did you know that in Ontario, every day, even with the provincial policy statement, we lose 175 acres of farmland? Every day there is farmland being paved over, being built on. Every day we lose 175 acres. Now, the MZO in Stratford, that was once times 175 acres. But we lose that every day, and that’s something you can’t build back. You can’t build farmland back. You can build all kinds of other things. You can’t build farmland back. That’s why farmers and the groups that represent them are very concerned, because sometimes MZOs don’t think of minimum distance requirements and all kinds of stuff, and in the end it ends up hurting them.

Now, again, if that’s just the agriculture critic from the NDP, who claims to be a farmer, saying this, okay. But we have a letter from the OFA to Minister Clark regarding use of minister’s zoning orders. This is the commentary to their members. This isn’t the letter itself; the letter is long. But this is the commentary, how they’ve described it to the members. I believe they have 36,000 and change. I used to be a member when I was actively farming.

“OFA expressed its deep-seated concerns to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing regarding the recent proliferation of minister’s zoning orders (MZOs) issued for municipalities with robust planning systems, official plans and zoning bylaws. This frequent use undermines Ontario’s long-established system of land use planning under the Planning Act, provincial policy statement (PPS) and municipal official plans and zoning bylaws. It deprives citizens impacted by these MZOs the ability to be consulted on proposed amendments to municipal official plans and zoning bylaws. OFA noted that certain MZOs seem to ignore the application of key criteria and ... guidelines; whether proposed growth can be accommodated through intensification, redevelopment and in designated growth areas; and the completion of an agricultural impact assessment (AIA). OFA firmly believes in the widespread use of AIAs to ensure that any negative impacts of proposed developments are first avoided, then minimized and lastly mitigated. OFA requested Minister Clark’s support in deterring the use of ministerial zoning orders for municipalities with well-developed, ministry-approved official plans and zoning bylaws.” That’s not happening, Speaker. They’re not only wedging the official opposition; they’re wedging the people they claim to support. That’s a problem. If they want to make this quick and easy, they should just pull schedule 3.

The Premier said this morning in question period that he was proud of those zoning orders and he was going to issue more of them to get the province going. Well, if there’s something wrong with the provincial policy statement, let’s talk about that. Let’s bring that in the House and debate that. But let’s not ignore it and just pick and choose depending on what appears to be who has the closest association with the Premier. Let’s talk about the provincial policy statement, but being proud of issuing MZOs and ignoring the provincial policy statement and wondering, 20 years from now or 30 years from now—

hopefully, I'll still be around but not here. We'll have a natural disaster, and someone will go, "Gee, where did all the wetlands go? Who knew that they were important?" Do you know who knew? We knew. We know now. We have a policy statement that says it, and this government is doing its best to ignore it.

Now, if it was just the OFA, then the government could say, "Well, the OFA are off-side on this one." I don't think so.

I've got another letter here from the Christian Farmers Federation, the National Farmers Union—it's a co-sponsored letter—Ontario Nature, Environmental Defence and Ontario Farmland Trust.

I don't know the exact saying, but sometimes a big issue creates strange bedfellows, and this one is one of those, because often—and I can speak as a former farm leader in Timiskaming who fought a huge issue, the Adams Mine landfill—environmental groups and farm groups don't see things the same way. Usually when they do, there's something pretty big going on. When you get environmental groups and farm groups writing to the minister and saying, "You know what? These MZOs are a problem," that's a pretty big issue. That's a pretty big issue.

If you want to truly represent the farmers and the huge agricultural industry—and I think we can agree on some of the things in this bill about broadband, some of them—take schedule 3 out. And let's do everything we can to service those people, to make sure that farmers—and I'm going to stick to farmers—actually can have the access to broadband to run their equipment. Let's do that.

But as the people in this Legislature, let's also recognize that we're losing 175 acres a day of farmland, and we're being told we need MZOs because, you know, we just might need some more quicker. I think we would be better off if we actually talked about how we can slow it down and how we can protect our wetlands so that we don't have floods and how we can use the resources we have.

I know why. In my last few seconds: I drive to Toronto every week, and every week I see farmland being built over. And why do they like building on farmland? It's easy to build, right? But you'll never get it back. You'll never get it back. And 30 years from now, when somebody's standing there saying, "Who knew? Who knew?"—they will be able to go, "Well, you know what? The official opposition at that point said something," said that we should be looking into that, and hopefully the government will listen.

1720

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for questions. The member for Barrie–Innisfil.

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you, Speaker. I wanted to ask the member opposite—he talks about his experience in agriculture, obviously being a member of OFA in the past, so what would his vision be in terms of the agriculture sector and job creation and the future of agriculture?

I know the member from Chatham-Kent talked about GPS technology. I remember when I went on a tractor with

a local onion farmer; he also uses GPS technology, and so very much embracing more of the Internet of Things to complement farming. But you can't have the Internet of Things and farming if you have no Internet connection.

Where do you find that can be improved in the farming culture, and what improvements do you see in the future of farming with the increased usage of broadband?

Mr. John Vanthof: I truly appreciate that question because the future of agriculture is hugely dependent on Internet connections.

I used to milk cows. I had a milking parlour, double-4, and one of the reasons we sold the farm was because I was too old to invest in robotic technology. I didn't mind if my kids wanted to borrow the million dollars for robots, but I felt I was too old, and you needed connection for that.

I appreciate that we need better broadband connection in rural Ontario. Do we need to put legislation in, in the same bill, to pave over our wetlands, to pave over provincially significant wetlands? I haven't heard the answer from the government why that is necessary to improve broadband in Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Waterloo.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Schedule 3 exempts minister's zoning orders retroactively, and over the course of two months, Canada's National Observer examined all 38 of these directives, using municipal planning documents and local news reports, to identify the 14 cases where MZOs were used to push through projects where there were environmental concerns. Some allow developers to pave over protected wetlands; others involve endangered species and several allow the loss of agricultural land.

The member from Northumberland–Peterborough South, when I talked about protecting our natural environment, called this ideological hatred. Where do you put that kind of ideology when you're actually turning your back on your fiscal and environmental responsibility to this province?

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you for that question. To me, this isn't about—there's a saying, and I love the saying: When Peter says something about Paul, it often says more about Peter than Paul. When the member opposite starts talking about ideological hatred, there's four fingers pointing back at you, my friend.

This isn't about ideological issues. This is about that we need connectivity, but we also need wetlands and farmlands, and we need to respect the provincial policy statement.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member from Flamborough–Glanbrook.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and good afternoon. We just heard members across the aisle talking about the M-Zed-Os—not the M-Zee-Os, but the M-Zed-Os—and that municipalities have not requested these MZOs. I just want to clarify for the record that in the Leader of the Opposition's riding, I was very proud last Friday to inform city council, who had requested the MZO, that they were going to be getting the MZO to help expedite a process to apply for funding from the federal

government to meet their deadlines so they could build affordable housing.

So, to put on the record, MZO that we have issued that are not on provincial land have been requested by municipalities.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Pose your question, please.

Ms. Donna Skelly: My question is, to the member opposite, do you believe it's necessary to ensure to expedite the process—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you. Back to the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane to respond.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you very much for that question. I will focus on the last part. Do I believe it's necessary to expedite the process at the cost of not taking in factors around? That's a very dangerous way to go when we have a provincial policy statement, when we're already losing 175 acres a day of farmland. We need to be able to take everything into account so that the minister down the way, a good friend of mine—so that in 30 years, we have lots of houses, but we wonder what happened to our parks and we wonder what happened to the farmers. That is what we have to think about.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Next question.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Like the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane, I live in a northern rural area where the Internet service is very, very limited. Like the member mentioned, we appreciate the small steps that are in the bill to gain access to poles so that you can bring Internet, but do you really believe that these steps will bring broadband to all of the people of Timiskaming–Cochrane? Because I can guarantee you, Speaker, that it's not going to work for the people of Nickel Belt. When I think about all my outfitters, when I think about all the campground operators, there isn't a pole to be seen for a long time.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Conclude your question, please.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Sure. Do you think that more should be done to bring broadband to northern rural Ontario?

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you very much for the question from the member for Nickel Belt. There are portions in this bill that might help a little, but we need help a lot. We would be very supportive of aggressive initiatives on Internet. We'd be very supportive, especially if they didn't try to weave other things in and hide their mistakes. We're very supportive. That's one of the reasons why the NDP put forward the Broadband is an Essential Service Act: to ensure that once the glitter is gone from getting it to many places—and I encourage everyone—that the 10% at the end, the 10% on the last mile, that they get service as well.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Member for Chatham–Kent–Leamington.

Mr. Rick Nicholls: A question to the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane: Just wondering, actually, how do

you plan to explain to your constituents why they must continue to suffer due to the socio-economic inequity that exists because of the years of inaction by the previous government that you supported, that the NDP supported, in order to deliver broadband?

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you very much for that question. I don't know where to start with that. You have a majority government. You do what you want. We don't support you. The Liberals had a majority government.

Interjection.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes, they did, the last term. Yes, they did. They did have a majority government the last term, and they didn't need our support, just like you don't need our support. And actually, figures showed that the Conservative Party in opposition supported the Liberals 50% of the time.

Interjection.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes. Look it up. Look it up: Who is supporting who?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for one more question in this section of political science and history 101. I turn to the member from Oshawa.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: A quick question to the member: I appreciated all of it, from Game of Thrones all the way on down. I was interested in the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry's comments yesterday about the flooding strategy. Can you talk to me, as a farm guy: How can we mitigate flooding and why do we need our wetlands for that—or do we?

1730

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): You have 30 seconds to respond.

Mr. John Vanthof: That was a very good question. I'll give you an agricultural example: tile drainage. It's fantastic. It makes our crops grow better, especially in northern Ontario. I can speak as a farmer. Farmers aren't concerned about the drain once it reaches past their farm. We've had trouble with tile drainage because it creates huge erosion problems. That's why you need a planning process to make sure that wetlands and gullies aren't severely eroded by that. And that's important for a planning process. That's why you need a strong provincial planning process.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for further debate. I recognize the member from Ottawa–Vanier.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will be sharing my time with my colleague from Orléans.

Alors, je prends la parole aujourd'hui en tant que porte-parole de mon parti en matière d'environnement pour soulever des préoccupations importantes concernant l'annexe 3 du projet de loi 257.

Le projet de loi 257 est le prolongement d'une tendance marquée du gouvernement de présenter un projet de loi avec un titre et des mesures positives, mais en y ajoutant une pilule empoisonnée qui rend difficile, voire impossible, de collaborer et d'appuyer le gouvernement. Cette pratique est profondément préoccupante pour des

raisons de processus démocratique en plus d'avoir des impacts négatifs sur l'environnement.

En adoptant ce projet de loi, le ministère aura le plein pouvoir discrétionnaire de complètement ignorer les principes de planification fondamentaux de l'Ontario. Cela permettra au ministère de détruire des terres agricoles protégées, des terres humides d'importance provinciale et des éléments naturels basé sur des considérations qui ne pourront pas être contestées à toutes fins pratiques.

L'utilisation de ce pouvoir exceptionnel sans justification ni consultation des populations touchées, y compris des communautés autochtones de l'Ontario, donnera libre cours aux promoteurs de négocier des projets sans égard pour leurs engagements et obligations en matière de gestion environnementale et de consultation communautaire.

This government has a blind spot for the negative impacts of these development projects on our communities and on our environment. It simply fails to strike a balance between economic benefits and our commitments to make this province a habitable, sustainable and equitable place to live for us and for future generations. The government is acting as if economic development is an overriding priority that must come at the expense of our environment. This is a tired and uninventive approach to thinking about how we can get our economy moving again, and it will continue to resolve in preventable and thoughtless environmental mistakes, such as the ongoing lower Duffins Creek coastal wetlands complex project tragedy in Pickering.

This project represents everything that's wrong with this government's approach to land use planning and environmental stewardship. Let's consider where this project currently stands. First, the government used a ministerial zoning order to fast-track a casino development on protected significant wetlands and, in doing so, avoided all significant study or public consultation.

Then the government changed the rules governing the conservation authorities and passed a regulation forcing the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority to approve the project under pressure. The conservation authority's board of directors described the ministerial directive as being in violation of the authority's mandate to conserve and manage watersheds within its jurisdiction using science-based decision-making.

Next, we find out through a leaked cabinet note that the government knows that it has very likely violated its MZO rules and several legal obligations, including its duty to consult with local Indigenous communities. What does the government do in response to this realization? It sneaks a clause into this bill to retroactively change the rules surrounding MZOs to move the goalposts after having violated the law to protect itself from litigation from public interest organizations. This is our present state of affairs, Mr. Speaker.

Ce n'est pas de la gouvernance; c'est de la manipulation. C'est une façon d'agir qui est irresponsable et irrespectueuse des intérêts de la population de l'Ontario. C'est la raison exacte pour laquelle nous ne pouvons pas

permettre que ce gouvernement s'attribue encore plus de pouvoirs discrétionnaires.

En utilisant l'excuse de la pandémie pour complètement ignorer les mesures de protection environnementales pour accélérer les projets qu'il favorise, le gouvernement fait preuve d'abus de pouvoir et commettra des erreurs environnementales massives et irréversibles qui seront léguées à nos enfants.

Ce gouvernement démontre clairement qu'on ne peut pas lui faire confiance pour protéger les intérêts environnementaux de notre société. On ne peut lui faire confiance pour écouter les Ontariens et les Ontariennes.

Tout semble indiquer que c'est plutôt ses donateurs qui ont la priorité. Ce n'est pas une surprise que Triple Properties, les promoteurs du projet Duffins Creek, ont fait des dons substantiels, totalisant environ 5 000 \$, au Parti conservateur quelques jours avant que le gouvernement n'utilise la réglementation pour forcer l'Office de protection de la nature de Toronto et de la région à approuver le projet, malgré ses objections.

We strongly ask that the government immediately halt the lower Duffins Creek coastal wetlands project in recognition of its failure to consult both the public and affected Indigenous communities and its failure to recognize the development's harmful effects on large tracts of provincially significant wetlands.

Removing schedule 3 of Bill 257 is the only right thing to do. By doing this, the government can correct its lack of consideration for the strong opposition on this part of the bill, not only because of its negative impacts on public lands but also for the way it tries to fool the public in trying to make them believe that the bill is about improving access to the Internet. Ontarians deserve honesty and transparency.

It has been a legal principle since Confederation that the law must be applied fairly, clearly and consistently to all parties. Changing the rules retroactively after you've already broken them is a blatant violation of this principle that degrades trust in our justice system and allows governments to act irresponsibly without consequence.

Finally, I ask that the government respect the critical role of our province's conservation authorities, planning principles and commitments to environmental stewardship and remove schedule 3 from this legislation entirely.

As I mentioned this morning at question period, I am also very concerned about the message the actions of this government send to our youth, to the future generations, not only about the negative impact on the lands we are passing on to them, but also about the way government can use its powers to arrange the cards to suit its personal plans without regard to what people think. It is no wonder that people have become so cynical about politicians. You can do better, and Ontarians expect better.

Unfortunately, despite good measures proposed in this bill, I cannot in good conscience and by respect for my constituents and my kids support a bill that constitutes bad news for so many Ontarians. Malheureusement, malgré certaines bonnes mesures proposées dans le projet de loi, je ne peux pas, en toute bonne conscience et dans le respect

de mes électeurs et de mes enfants, appuyer un projet de loi qui constitue une mauvaise nouvelle pour autant d'Ontariens et d'Ontariennes.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you. The member did say she would be sharing her time. We turn to the member from Orléans.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Ontario's infrastructure needs are not limited to highways, bridges or community centres. The lack of access to reliable Internet connectivity has hindered the ability of rural Ontarians to work and learn from home. It has hindered economic growth and the ability for businesses big and small to undertake commercial activities in many rural and remote communities.

COVID-19 has taught us many lessons about the resilience and the weaknesses of our economy, and broadband access is both. In areas of the province with fast, reliable broadband, many have been able to continue to expand their businesses and their revenues. Children have been able to learn from home. But for too many, across too many communities, this has not been the case.

In my own riding of Orléans, the village of Carlsbad Springs does not have access to fast, reliable Internet. You can drive from the heart of the village to Parliament Hill in 20 minutes.

Imaginez qu'à une courte distance du siège du pouvoir du Canada, l'accès à l'Internet est si ténu.

And while the Ford government has announced broadband funding many times, they've been slow to get the broadband dollars out the door. In fact, a recent application to the vaunted ICON program for Carlsbad Springs was rejected by the Ford government. And according to the Financial Accountability Office, of the \$32 million budgeted in 2019-20 for broadband and cellular access, not a single dollar was spent.

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Ontario must treat broadband as an essential service. In today's Ontario, broadband is as essential as running water. Students count on it to complete their homework. Small business owners count on it to maintain their daily operations. Employees working from home are dependent on it, especially during this pandemic.

Investments in digital infrastructure and expanding broadband connectivity will play a critical role in our economic recovery, and ensuring that small, rural and remote communities do not fall behind will be critical to that success. Unlike the government, who talks and talks and talks, our caucus believes that delivering high-speed, affordable and reliable Internet to all Ontarians is an urgent priority.

So let's look at the government priorities for broadband. The first principle of the government's broadband and cellular action plan is to put people first. However, this government for the people continues to demonstrate that they're not interested in listening to the people.

This bill expands the government's powers to bypass the traditional planning consultation processes and fast-track any project they want, completely unrelated to broadband or cellular infrastructure. If the government wants to build a casino or a warehouse and destroy

sensitive wetlands or class 1 farmland to do it, this bill will give the minister unfettered power to do that. Worse, it backdates that power to get the government out of a legal jam. To say that is dubious is, I think, being polite, Mr. Speaker.

By expanding this power, the government is expanding the opportunity to take Ontarians out of the decision-making process and give more power to push forward projects that could greatly harm the environment. So in reality, the government is taking its key principle and they're converting it to, "The people are the first to be ignored." I find it unconscionable that the government would attempt to give itself such powers by using such an important issue as expanding broadband and cellular access across the province.

L'Ontario mérite mieux. Il mérite un gouvernement qui contribuera à élargir l'accès à l'Internet à large bande et à l'Internet rural. Une question aussi cruciale ne peut être laissée sans réponse. On a besoin d'un gouvernement qui s'assurera que l'Internet à haute vitesse, abordable et fiable, est une priorité urgente pour nos résidents.

Now is a time where Ontarians are relying on this government to do what's right. They decide to sneak in legislation that expands their powers to override local decision-making, and it kicks residents to the curb as part of that process. It's shameful.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I thank the members. We have time for questions. The member from Ottawa West—Nepean.

M. Jeremy Roberts: Je veux remercier mes deux collègues pour vos remarques au sujet du projet de loi 257. Avec mes collègues d'Ottawa—Vanier et d'Orléans, j'ai l'honneur de représenter une circonscription à Ottawa.

La ville d'Ottawa est une des plus grandes villes au Canada. Vous pouvez mettre les villes de Toronto, Montréal et Vancouver en dedans des frontières d'Ottawa. Avec une grande communauté rurale, l'expansion de l'Internet à haut débit est essentielle. Est-ce que la députée pour Ottawa—Vanier peut parler à propos de l'importance d'accélérer la distribution de l'Internet à haut débit à tous les coins de notre ville?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Merci pour la question de mon collègue de la région d'Ottawa.

Effectivement, nous comprenons tous, puis je pense que tout le monde est d'accord ici dans la Chambre pour s'entendre que l'accès à l'Internet de qualité est important partout dans la province. On en dépend beaucoup. Je pense que la pandémie nous a appris que c'est quelque chose d'essentiel, comme mon collègue a mentionné, aussi essentiel que l'eau, qu'un logement, que tous les services essentiels dont on a besoin. On en a besoin pour travailler. On en a besoin pour aller à l'école. On en a besoin pour fonctionner, pour gérer nos entreprises, pour gérer le gouvernement.

Alors, définitivement, c'est quelque chose qu'on a besoin d'améliorer, parce que c'est encore loin d'être parfait. On utilise beaucoup l'Internet pour toutes sortes de réunions, puis il y a encore beaucoup de problèmes au niveau de la connectivité. Je dois encore choisir les

moments et les endroits où je peux me connecter pour tenir les réunions. Alors, une expansion, définitivement, je suis d'accord avec vous que c'est important—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Merci. Thank you.

The member for Nickel Belt.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I fully agree that access to Internet should be available to everyone: people who live in Nickel Belt, people who live everywhere in Ontario. But we know that there are areas of Ontario where it is not profitable, which is why Ontario had Ontera. Ontera was there when there was no money to be made and no for-profit wanted to come. They would come into our communities and make sure that we had Internet.

The Liberal government gave Ontera to Bell in 2014, with the promise that they would continue the service. They continued the service, but they never updated. We have the same now-covered-in-dust equipment for Internet from Ontera that was given to Bell. Bell does not allow anybody else to go on. God forbid you don't pay for a month or two: You're off. You're never going on again.

If the Liberals think that it was that important for everybody to be connected, why did they give the provincial Ontera to Bell?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Ottawa–Vanier.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you for the question from the member for Nickel Belt. You know, I'm a person who does realize that we can't live in the past; we have to live in the future. We are just going through a pandemic. We are learning some very important lessons. We are learning about what we need to do better, and I fully recognize the need for the region in the north to have better access. I fully know that because in my previous life as a school trustee, with schools all over the province, it was certainly a problem that we were very conscious of, and we were making representations to the government to do better.

So to your point, we haven't done perfectly in the past, whatever government was there, obviously, because we still need to do better. What we need to do today is to look ahead and put in place the measures that are needed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: My question to the members opposite is, given, geographically, where your riding is located and your potential relationship with the federal Liberal government, what steps are you taking in your caucus in order to bridge the gap with the CRTC? We saw the 15 years you could have done something. Of course, you weren't there, so it's totally understandable. Now that you're a breath of fresh air and new to the Ontario Liberal caucus, will you work with your federal counterparts to help us get more broadband connection and solve some of those CRTC issues?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We'll go to the member from Orléans.

Mr. Stephen Blais: In Orléans, in the east end of Ottawa, we're lucky to be represented by Marie-France Lalonde and Francis Drouin in the rural area. Francis has

gone to bat for his rural constituents to deliver federal monies for broadband expansion in Glengarry–Prescott–Russell, so I was very concerned to learn that a recent application to the Ford government's ICON program to expand rural broadband into the village of Carlsbad Springs, a small village of a thousand people just 20 minutes from Parliament Hill, was rejected by the government.

I would encourage the government to do more with the money it has allocated itself to invest in rural broadband, especially in our nation's capital.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member from Waterloo.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Schedule 3 of Bill 257 deals with ministerial zoning orders. I'm looking at Martin Regg Cohn's last piece on the doubling of private donations that the government is pursuing currently, at the same time as this legislation. He says, "Think of those controversial ministerial zoning orders ... that do the devil's work for developers who donate money to the party in power. Like a greenbelt up for grabs, MZO equals quid pro quo, not to mention highways to nowhere that lead to the developer's door."

What do the members say to the public at large about increasing private donations to political parties at the same time as undermining local municipalities on environmental orders?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Orléans.

Mr. Stephen Blais: As my colleague from Vanier said in debate last week, we question whether or not now is the right time to talk about political finance rules, but that's clearly the decision the government has made. We've been very clear: We don't support Highway 413. In fact, it was the Liberal government that produced the report to show how little benefit Highway 413 would provide and shelved that project.

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In my own work on city council in Ottawa, there was an opportunity for developers to re-designate prime agricultural land for housing developments—these were large contributors of mine—and I said no because that was the right thing to do and that's the thing we'll do every time.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question?

Mr. David Piccini: I caught the tail end of the member's remarks and I appreciate that. I know the member is a new member to the party, but the previous government oversaw a decade in which we found ourselves on the precipice of a pandemic with no PPE production in this province to meet our demands, no connectivity in rural Ontario that posed fundamental and structural supply issues in the ag sector in the riding I represent, systemic failures in the health care system—and we've all seen the problems there.

Why won't that member get onside and support broadband?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Ottawa–Vanier.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: There's no question that we support better Internet access. I just find it very shameful that I'm put in a position—I'm cornered—not to be able to support the bill that has those good measures. Imagine if we could gather and all agree on this measure and this bill for Ontarians. We're stuck with a schedule in there that brings such negativity that it just makes it impossible. We don't understand. If the government thinks that MZOs are so important to change, why don't they bring it at the forefront? Why not have an open discussion and a real debate about this issue so that the government can explain to the population and convince everyone that it is the right thing to do, because it's so important for economic reasons, despite the environmental impact?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for a very quick question and a very quick answer.

Ms. Doly Begum: I want to thank the members for both of their statements. My question is regarding schedule 3 of this bill. I think we all in this House want broadband for our communities across this province. Why do you think they included schedule 3 when they could have completely avoided that and had a really good bill with timelines and actually done something good for this province?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): You have 30 seconds to respond. The member from Ottawa–Vanier.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I think it's really too bad. It could have been a very good-news bill. Unfortunately, the attention maybe they were trying to avoid with sneaking that schedule in has done the total opposite, because we see what's happening in the news. I don't understand why we have to sacrifice economy over environment. Why can't we do both? Ontario is not that small that we have absolutely only the wetlands left to build on. Seriously, let's get creative and let's be realistic.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for further debate. I recognize the member for Perth–Wellington.

Interjection.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Thank you, Speaker. I want to thank my only applauder over there, too. That was great.

Speaker, I don't know whether you know this, but as many as 700,000 households and businesses in Ontario—700,000—are without access to adequate broadband speeds or have no Internet at all. From farmers unable to do their books online, to parents unable to help their kids with homework, to families unable to stream a movie to watch together, to grandparents unable to connect with their grandchildren during a pandemic, to patients unable to access vital health care services—and in the year 2021, that's unacceptable. It's fair to say that most of those people live in rural and small-town Ontario. I've been advocating for them ever since I was first elected in 2011. It mattered then and it matters even more today.

It became even more important during the pandemic. Schools were closed and remote learning was the reality. But for families without adequate Internet service, that reality could seem like a nightmare.

My constituent Trevor from the town of Minto wrote me on this matter:

“With everyone dealing with COVID, my kids have had to try to do schooling from home, while I too work from home.

“We can't all be on the Internet at the same time, in order to try and have videos download, or video calls not freeze and pause, and be unintelligible.” They can't be on the Internet all at once.

“The task of trying to keep my kids educated and get my work done has become a trying, frustrating, tear-inducing saga that we need help with!”

This family is not alone. Lack of adequate Internet makes online learning all but impossible. It's one of the reasons I wrote to the Minister of Education back in January about the need to reopen schools as soon as it could be done safely.

Chantelle, a nurse practitioner in Clifford, told me that poor Internet service makes working from home a struggle: “During COVID-19, I am working from home. A lot.

“Or at least attempting to work from home.

“We have had struggles with our rural Internet for years, however COVID-19 has amplified these struggles.

“With two young boys along with a husband also working from home ...

“We have found our Internet to be very unreliable—at best. Oftentimes it is non-existent.”

My constituent Anne wrote me regarding her Internet speed: “I wanted to let you know that I am working from home and realize how terrible my Internet speed is.

“My daughter is here from Toronto. She has to use her data.

“When are we going to get high speed?”

“I know there was a promise for rural Ontario, and we are as important as city folks.

“My neighbour about 1.4 miles away has cable and full speed and I sit here waiting and waiting.”

Well, people have waited long enough. In a survey in my recent constituency newsletter, I included a question on broadband. I asked how they would rate the quality and affordability of the Internet service in their area, and I look forward to those results.

Our government's legislation comes at a time when the need is greater than ever.

We continue to call on the federal government to step up and do their part, but we're not waiting for them to act. We've stepped up by providing funding for the Eastern Ontario Regional Network, to eliminate coverage gaps and to increase capacity, while creating up to 3,000 jobs over 10 years. We started our own province-wide broadband program, ICON, to find ways to deliver access to reliable Internet. And we've provided funding for the South-western Integrated Fibre Technology projects.

This past year, in my role as parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, I announced some important updates on SWIFT projects, including one in Perth–Wellington.

Since July 2019, SWIFT has moved swiftly on several projects in our area. This past August, the first customers to receive Internet through the project were in Wellington

county, in the little town of Ariss. Since then, many more areas have connected through the SWIFT projects. More connections are yet to come.

Last fall, we invested an additional \$680 million, to bring our total investment to a historic \$1 billion. But there's still more to do.

The Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act will help advance implementation of broadband infrastructure in Ontario. If passed, it will take immediate action to connect unserved and underserved communities to faster, more reliable Internet. People can wait no longer. This legislation lays the foundation for future growth, renewal and long-term economic recovery. It fulfills commitments made in Up to Speed: Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan. It will help Internet service providers plan for expansion projects, reduce costs and save time. And it's not a made-in-Queen's Park solution. The government consulted with municipalities and stakeholders.

Graydon Smith, president of the association of municipalities, had this to say: "The need for better rural and northern connectivity is clear. Speeding up provincially funded broadband projects will connect more people faster.

"AMO looks forward to working with the province to make real improvements that benefit people and their communities."

I want to thank the Minister of Infrastructure for her leadership on this file. I know this is nothing new for her either. She has also spoken on it for many years, under the previous—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I want to thank the member from Perth–Wellington for his beginning of his portion of this debate. Unfortunately, we have run out of time for him to conclude.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): It is now time for private members' public business.

Report continues in volume B.

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| Thompson, Hon. / L'hon. Lisa M. (PC) | Huron—Bruce | Minister of Government and Consumer Services / Ministre des Services gouvernementaux et des Services aux consommateurs |
| Tibollo, Hon. / L'hon. Michael A. (PC) | Vaughan—Woodbridge | Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions / Ministre associé délégué au dossier de la Santé mentale et de la Lutte contre les dépendances Minister Without Portfolio / Ministre sans portefeuille |
| Triantafilopoulos, Effie J. (PC) | Oakville North—Burlington / Oakville-Nord—Burlington | |
| Vanthof, John (NDP) | Timiskaming—Cochrane | Deputy Leader, Official Opposition / Chef adjoint de l'opposition officielle |
| Wai, Daisy (PC) | Richmond Hill | |

| Member and Party / Député(e) et parti | Constituency / Circonscription | Other responsibilities / Autres responsabilités |
|--|---|--|
| Walker, Hon. / L'hon. Bill (PC) | Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound | Associate Minister of Energy / Ministre associé de l'Énergie Minister Without Portfolio / Ministre sans portefeuille |
| West, Jamie (NDP) | Sudbury | |
| Wilson, Jim (IND) | Simcoe—Grey | |
| Wynne, Kathleen O. (LIB) | Don Valley West / Don Valley-Ouest | |
| Yakubski, Hon. / L'hon. John (PC) | Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke | Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry / Ministre des Richesses naturelles et des Forêts |
| Yarde, Kevin (NDP) | Brampton North / Brampton-Nord | |
| Yurek, Hon. / L'hon. Jeff (PC) | Elgin—Middlesex—London | Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks / Ministre de l'Environnement, de la Protection de la nature et des Parcs |

**STANDING AND SELECT COMMITTEES OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
COMITÉS PERMANENTS ET SPÉCIAUX DE L'ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE**

Standing Committee on Estimates / Comité permanent des budgets des dépenses

Chair / Président: Peter Tabuns
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Donna Skelly
Teresa J. Armstrong, Toby Barrett
Lorne Coe, Rudy Cuzzetto
Randy Hillier, Jane McKenna
Judith Monteith-Farrell, Michael Parsa
Randy Pettapiece, Donna Skelly
Peter Tabuns
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Thushitha Kobikrishna

**Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs /
Comité permanent des finances et des affaires économiques**

Chair / Président: Amarjot Sandhu
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Jeremy Roberts
Ian Arthur, Stan Cho
Catherine Fife, Mitzie Hunter
Logan Kanapathi, Sol Mamakwa
David Piccini, Jeremy Roberts
Amarjot Sandhu, Dave Smith
Vijay Thanigasalam
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Julia Douglas

Standing Committee on General Government / Comité permanent des affaires gouvernementales

Chair / Présidente: Goldie Ghamari
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Mike Schreiner
Jill Andrew, Robert Bailey
Guy Bourgouin, Stephen Crawford
Goldie Ghamari, Chris Glover
Mike Harris, Sheref Sabawy
Amarjot Sandhu, Mike Schreiner
Daisy Wai
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Isaiah Thorning

Standing Committee on Government Agencies / Comité permanent des organismes gouvernementaux

Chair / Président: Gilles Bisson
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Aris Babikian
Aris Babikian, Gilles Bisson
Will Bouma, Lorne Coe
Wayne Gates, Robin Martin
Norman Miller, Rick Nicholls
Billy Pang, Amanda Simard
Marit Stiles
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Julia Douglas

Standing Committee on Justice Policy / Comité permanent de la justice

Chair / Président: Daryl Kramp
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Lucille Collard
Will Bouma, Lucille Collard
Parm Gill, Daryl Kramp
Natalia Kusendova, Suze Morrison
Lindsey Park, Guratan Singh
Nina Tangri, Effie J. Triantafilopoulos
Kevin Yarde
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly / Comité permanent de l'Assemblée législative

Chair / Président: Kaleed Rasheed
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Vijay Thanigasalam
Rima Berns-McGown, Michael Coteau
Faisal Hassan, Logan Kanapathi
Michael Mantha, Jim McDonell
Christina Maria Mitas, Sam Oosterhoff
Kaleed Rasheed, Donna Skelly
Vijay Thanigasalam
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Tonia Grannum

Standing Committee on Public Accounts / Comité permanent des comptes publics

Chair / Président: Taras Natyshak
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: France Gélinas
Deepak Anand, Toby Barrett
Jessica Bell, Stephen Blais
Stephen Crawford, Rudy Cuzzetto
France Gélinas, Christine Hogarth
Daryl Kramp, Taras Natyshak
Michael Parsa
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Christopher Tyrell

Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills / Comité permanent des règlements et des projets de loi d'intérêt privé

Chair / Président: Logan Kanapathi
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: John Fraser
Will Bouma, John Fraser
Logan Kanapathi, Vincent Ke
Laura Mae Lindo, Paul Miller
Billy Pang, Jeremy Roberts
Dave Smith, Daisy Wai
Jamie West
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Isaiah Thorning

Standing Committee on Social Policy / Comité permanent de la politique sociale

Chair / Président: Deepak Anand
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Bhutila Karpoche
Deepak Anand, Aris Babikian
Jeff Burch, Amy Fee
Michael Gravelle, Joel Harden
Mike Harris, Christine Hogarth
Belinda C. Karahalios, Bhutila Karpoche
Natalia Kusendova
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Tanzima Khan

**Select Committee on Emergency Management Oversight /
Comité spécial de la surveillance de la gestion des situations d'urgence**

Chair / Président: Daryl Kramp
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Tom Rakocevic
Robert Bailey, Gilles Bisson
John Fraser, Christine Hogarth
Daryl Kramp, Robin Martin
Sam Oosterhoff, Lindsey Park
Tom Rakocevic, Sara Singh
Effie J. Triantafilopoulos
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Christopher Tyrell