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**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

G-43

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

G-43

**Standing Committee on
General Government**

Supporting Broadband
and Infrastructure Expansion
Act, 2021

1st Session
42nd Parliament

Thursday 25 March 2021

**Comité permanent des
affaires gouvernementales**

Loi de 2021 soutenant
l'expansion de l'Internet
et des infrastructures

1^{re} session
42^e législature

Jeudi 25 mars 2021

Chair: Goldie Ghamari
Clerk: Isaiah Thorning

Présidente : Goldie Ghamari
Greffier : Isaiah Thorning

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
GENERAL GOVERNMENT**

**COMITÉ PERMANENT DES
AFFAIRES GOUVERNEMENTALES**

Thursday 25 March 2021

Jeudi 25 mars 2021

The committee met at 0900 in room 151 and by video conference.

**SUPPORTING BROADBAND
AND INFRASTRUCTURE EXPANSION
ACT, 2021**

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

Consideration 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 Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Good morning, everyone. The Standing Committee on General Government will now come to order. We are here for public hearings on 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.

We have the following members in the room: MPP French and MPP Crawford. The following members are participating remotely: MPP Bailey, MPP Glover, MPP Harris, MPP Sandhu, MPP Schreiner, MPP Cuzzetto and MPP Smith. We are also joined by staff from legislative research, Hansard, and broadcast and recording.

Please speak slowly and clearly and wait until I recognize you before starting to speak. Please take a brief pause before beginning, and, as always, all comments should go through the Chair. Are there any questions before we begin?

**MINISTRY OF INFRASTRUCTURE
MINISTRY OF MUNICIPAL AFFAIRS
AND HOUSING**

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Our presenters today are the Minister of Infrastructure, the Honourable Laurie Scott, and the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Honourable Steve Clark. You will have 20 minutes to make a joint statement, followed by 40 minutes for questions and answers, divided into two rounds of

seven and a half minutes for government members, two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the official opposition members, and two rounds of five minutes for the independent member of the committee. Are there any questions?

I will now call upon the Honourable Laurie Scott, Minister of Infrastructure, and the Honourable Steve Clark, Minister of Municipal Affairs. You will have 20 minutes for your presentation. Please state your name for Hansard, and you may begin—oh, my apologies. Before you begin, another committee member has joined us. Can you please confirm your name and whether or not you are in Ontario?

Mr. John Vanthof: I take it that's me.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Yes.

Mr. John Vanthof: John Vanthof. I am in my office at Queen's Park.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you, MPP Vanthof.

All right, Ministers. Please state your names for the record, and then you may begin. You will have 20 minutes.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Laurie Scott, Minister of Infrastructure.

Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to every member of this committee for your hard work to support the people and businesses of Ontario. I'm pleased to have this opportunity to speak to all of you about Bill 257, the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, 2021.

Now more than ever, we need to build better infrastructure faster, laying the foundation for growth, renewal and long-term economic recovery from COVID-19. Our proposed legislation comes at a time when COVID-19 has underscored the importance of the digital economy and connectivity in our daily lives. It also comes at a time when an increasingly digital world threatens to leave many behind, simply because they lack access to reliable high-speed Internet.

Today, as many as 700,000 households across Ontario lack access to reliable Internet service. That's hundreds of thousands of people who are struggling to work, learn or connect with a loved one from the safety of their home during this global pandemic. Hundreds of thousands of people face even more burdens while operating and growing their businesses, or while accessing vital services like health care, simply because they lack Internet connectivity. Ontarians are falling further behind as the world

continues to shift to a digital economy. We cannot stand by as this happens.

Yesterday we released the 2021 Ontario budget, focusing on protecting people's health with a plan to defeat COVID-19 and support people and jobs. From that budget, we announced a historic investment of nearly \$4 billion over five years, so every household and business in Ontario would have the ability to access reliable high-speed broadband by the end of 2025. We are taking decisive action right now to get unserved and underserved communities connected faster, because we simply cannot wait any longer. We're doing everything within our responsibility to help achieve 100% connectivity for every household and business in every community in every region across Ontario. We're taking even greater steps than our previous commitment of nearly \$1 billion that we announced last November.

Our commitment will cement Ontario as a digital leader in this 21st-century global economy, so that no one, no matter where you live, will be disadvantaged by not having access to the same tools and resources that many of us take for granted. Our approach will use a mix of technologies and accelerated funding, and will help bring reliable broadband to Ontarians more quickly and efficiently.

We have decided that we're not going to wait any longer for the federal government to step up and fill in the gaps of proper connectivity. Ontario is stepping up, and we will continue to advocate on behalf of the people of Ontario to urge the federal government, which regulates the sector, to properly invest and to accelerate and reduce the regulatory barriers to providing access to reliable broadband.

The reality is that the transformative investment that was announced yesterday is only part of the solution. For us to truly accelerate the deployment of broadband to every community in Ontario, we need to reduce barriers to faster broadband deployment. That is what this important legislation will achieve.

The proposed act aims to reduce barriers to help ensure timely deployment of reliable high-speed broadband infrastructure in unserved and underserved areas throughout Ontario. We know that Internet and telecommunications service providers face the highest hydro utility pole attachment rates in Canada. These costs are a 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.

We also know that building broadband infrastructure in a province as large and as geographically diverse as Ontario can already be a challenge and can be costly. These additional costs only further discourage investment in deployment of broadband infrastructure into areas of need and the hardest-to-reach places. If passed, our proposed legislation would provide the ability to reduce these barriers. Our new and innovative approach would allow infrastructure to be built faster and more cost-

effectively, leading to greater opportunity, investment and job creation.

I'm sure many members of this committee have heard frustrations from their own constituents about slow, unreliable and even non-existent broadband. As someone who was born in, raised in and still lives in a rural community, I understand these frustrations all too well. I, too, suffer access and download speed issues and issues with video calls, and my experience is not unique.

We've all heard the stories, from the residents in northern Ontario near the Manitoba border who describe to us challenges trying to participate in daily video calls for work, to the small business owner just outside of Ottawa who asked when she will have the Internet speeds to sell her products online. We've heard the story of the students who had to sit on benches outside their schools in the cold winter weather just to catch a WiFi signal to download learning materials. It's personal stories like these from across the province that inspire me to think big on helping to bring reliable broadband access to every household, every business and every community in Ontario.

Thinking outside of the box has proven to make revolutionary change to the way we live here in Ontario. For example, Premier Leslie Frost—who was from a small town in my riding, in fact—also had a big, unique idea. In the mid-20th century, his government greatly expanded the province's highways with the construction of Highway 401, the Trans-Canada Highway in the province and other highways across the province. It was one of the biggest expansions of transportation networks in our country, opening up our highways and forever changing how we travel.

Today, with this proposed legislation, and together with the support of the members opposite, we have the opportunity to open up Ontario digitally. Instead of concrete and asphalt, we're helping to install fibre optic wires. Rather than 400-series highways, we're helping to construct the information superhighway that will connect every community in every corner of the province. This is a pivotal moment for our province and our economy. That's why we need to take these transformative actions through our proposed legislative changes. Our proposed approach will also continue to build on our previous commitments to improve broadband, such as through our Improving Connectivity for Ontario program.

Last year, we asked the telecommunications service providers, municipalities, Indigenous communities and non-profits to submit their innovative proposals and to lead their investment expertise and experience to improve connectivity across Ontario. Since we opened the intake for this program last July, the demand has been incredible. We have since doubled our investment in that program to \$300 million and we're currently reviewing submissions. We're invested in projects that support access for those who need it most and ensuring that Ontario has the right digital infrastructure to compete on the global stage.

0910

Speaking of investment in the right projects, I'm proud to have joined the Eastern Ontario Regional Network,

EORN, and our federal and municipal partners last week to announce another great step towards eliminating cellular dead zones in eastern Ontario. Last Friday, we joined EORN as they announced the successful contract recipient that will work on the Cell Gap Project: Rogers Communications.

Many of us have heard stories of stretches of highways where you can't get a cell signal. I experience it almost every day as I drive through my riding that cellphone calls are dropped. This is hazardous to motorists if their vehicles break down, especially in the middle of the night or in the dead of winter. Whether it's a workplace injury out in the field or a heart attack while hiking in the backwoods of your cottage, people need to be able to call for help. Many residents aren't even able to access reliable cell service from inside their own homes and businesses.

That's why Ontario invested \$71 million into this project, and with the partnership with Rogers announced by EORN last week, the dream of a better cellular signal can now become a reality. It will mean staying connected with your family, friends or clients, it will mean being able to access and transmit important data for your work on the go, and it will mean peace of mind for you and your loved ones, at home and on the road.

We're also helping to bring high-speed Internet to homes and businesses across southwestern Ontario by investing \$63 million in the Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology project, or SWIFT. For those of you who may not know SWIFT, it is a non-profit corporation initiated by the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus to address connectivity in southwestern Ontario that will support the critical expansion of broadband to underserved areas. With the help of our government's investment, SWIFT has been able to move forward with projects in several counties, connecting thousands of households and businesses. Last summer, Ontario celebrated the first customers to receive Internet through this project.

We've also invested in projects throughout northern Ontario to bring high-speed connectivity to residents and towns in First Nation communities. For example, we invested \$30 million to connect five remote Matawamember First Nation communities to fast, reliable and affordable Internet service. Last June, the Minister of Indigenous Affairs announced an investment of more than \$2.3 million in an additional seven broadband projects that will support rural and Indigenous communities in northern Ontario. And just last month, we invested almost \$11 million to bring faster and more reliable broadband to several towns and First Nation communities across northern Ontario.

These existing broadband programs and projects and others will continue under our new funding and approach. We are moving fast to find ways to extend reliable broadband to areas of need. The digital divide is a threat to regional economic growth and to the competitiveness of businesses in those regions. By bringing reliable broadband access to all Ontarians, we are ensuring that our economic engine is firing on all cylinders. This is what Ontario needs and deserves.

The fact is, this is an issue of digital inequality for the vulnerable and for the many who have unequal access to vital public services like health care, education, employment and business opportunities. Information is the new currency, and those without it will only fall further behind.

These unprecedented times have only underscored how challenging the lack of broadband access can be for many people. The COVID-19 pandemic has only magnified the impact of the urban and rural divide and is a source of economic disadvantage, particularly in our rural communities. Better broadband can help a rural business operation scale up and grow. Better broadband means increased productivity, the ability to communicate with a wider range of customers and the ability to hire more people. Better broadband means helping rural businesses succeed so they can help our province accelerate economic growth.

But we are also realistic about the challenges. We know that there are more challenges delivering broadband to rural, remote and northern communities than there are for urban locations. This gap is driven largely by low population densities, long distances between customers and tough-to-navigate terrain, such as rock and dense forest, that make construction difficult. Even large telecommunications service providers with construction divisions have limited economic incentive to expand into low-density communities. Coupled with the lengthy time and high cost for Internet service providers to deploy broadband infrastructure, we often see a patchwork of spotty coverage that leaves many communities without reliable Internet.

We know that these high-costs and regulatory burdens deter private sector investments. That's why we need to make it easier and more effective for Internet service providers to use existing infrastructure to deploy broadband. Otherwise, we risk our economy being outpaced by other jurisdictions that have the foresight to ramp up deployment of digital infrastructure. The C.D. Howe Institute released a report last month that said, "If Canada faces sluggish rollout of next-generation broadband and wireless infrastructure, consumers and businesses will lack access to the world-leading digital technologies and Canada risks stumbling in the race with other economies." That same report went on to say, "Action by governments is urgently needed ... for Canada to remain competitive."

Everyone has a vested interest to deploy broadband faster to our underserved and unserved communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has only underscored the urgency and the need to deploy broadband more quickly. Our proposed legislation will help move us towards that goal. Our goal is simple: We want everyone in Ontario to have Internet access at home and at work, and at speeds of at least 50 megabits per second download and 10 megabits per second upload, as set by the federal government's agency, the CRTC. These proposed measures will help us get to that goal. And with our historic investment in broadband that we announced yesterday within the budget, we will help all Ontarians get the chance to access broadband by the end of 2025.

We are ensuring that everyone can participate in the digital economy. We are taking bold and transformative

action now to ensure we reduce the barriers that are preventing people from connecting more quickly. I know we all understand the pressing need for connectivity in this rapidly expanding digital economy. Broadband, when properly supported and funded, can play a role in the recovery of—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Five minutes left.

Hon. Laurie Scott: I look forward to continuing the work with all of you to help build a stronger and more connected Ontario, and strongly encourage you to support this bill. This is a huge undertaking; it will take all of us to achieve it. Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you. Minister Clark, you may begin. Please state your—

Hon. Steve Clark: Thanks, Chair. Can you hear me okay?

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Yes. Please state your name for the record, and you may begin. You have approximately five minutes left.

Hon. Steve Clark: Sure. My name is Steve Clark. I'm Ontario's Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and I'm also the MPP for Leeds–Grenville–Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes. Chair, it's a pleasure to be here. I'm pleased to speak on the supporting broadband and infrastructure expansion bill, on my portion, which deals with minister's zoning orders, or MZOs. I'd like to start by clearing up some confusion that the members opposite appear to have on MZOs. Every single minister's zoning order issued on non-provincially owned land has been at the request of the municipality, full stop. Municipalities are in the driver's seat, not us. Our government doesn't consider municipalities to be donors or insiders; we consider them to be partners, which is why we work with them to accelerate local priority projects.

For example, in the Leader of the Opposition's riding, the city of Hamilton requested an MZO to speed up approvals for 15 new affordable housing units, because having good-quality, stable housing for our most vulnerable is a priority in their community. Last summer, in the former Premier of Ontario's riding, the city of Toronto requested an MZO to help expand Sunnybrook hospital to create more capacity during a once-in-a-century pandemic. And the city of Toronto's widely successful CaféTO program was done through an MZO to provide an economic boost to our restaurant sector. Chair, I'll give some other examples of projects that MZOs are helping to accelerate: 3,700 long-term-care beds, hundreds of affordable and supportive housing units, a new hospice facility, a made-in-Ontario PPE facility. These are government priorities, but they're local priorities.

These MZOs are playing a key role in the province's economic recovery. But, Chair, don't take my word for it. Take it from a recent third-party study that was conducted by Deloitte, which found that some of the projects we helped with an MZO are creating up to \$3.1 billion in Ontario's GDP, and helping to create up to 26,000 full-time jobs.

0920

And let me be clear: MZOs are not new; they've been around and have been used since 1972. The previous Liberal government used them 19 times. In addition, it was the previous Liberal government that exempted MZOs from appeals at the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal.

Chair, let me also clarify some misconceptions over the process of using of MZOs. A municipal request for an MZO simply starts the process for us, and then we have to do our due diligence. For example, we've been clear that we will not permit development in the greenbelt. That's why I've denied nine MZO requests from municipalities that would have permitted development inside the greenbelt, because we're committed to protecting the greenbelt for future generations.

Hon. Steve Clark: Earlier this year, we made good on our budget commitment to expand the greenbelt by launching a 60-day public consultation.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute left.

Hon. Steve Clark: The consultation seeks feedback on how we can protect more lands. This includes the Paris-Galt moraine, which is critical for our groundwater resources. We're also looking to expand urban river valleys into high-density urban areas like Toronto's Don River. This consultation could set the foundation for the largest expansion to the greenbelt since its inception in 2005, and I hope that members of the opposition will join us on this significant environmental protection journey.

We've also been clear that we are expanding the greenbelt and will not develop or remove any part of it, unlike the previous Liberal government, who carved up the greenbelt 17 times and actually removed 370 acres of greenbelt lands.

Our proposed changes will ensure that there are no unnecessary delays or barriers to accelerate priority projects.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you very much, Minister.

Hon. Steve Clark: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): That is all the time that we have for your presentation.

At this point, we will now turn to the official opposition for the first round of questions, for seven and a half minutes. Who would like to begin? MPP French.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you to both ministers for joining us this morning. It's always an appreciated opportunity when we can talk about underserved and unserved areas when it comes to broadband and infrastructure needs. Side note: I'm looking forward to finding out which communities have been successful in their ICON and connectivity applications, Minister, so I'll wait with bated breath, as will many of the communities.

I would like to focus in on schedule 3. While I appreciate the minister's infomercial for ministerial superpowers and minister zoning orders, I would not be interested in debating that. My questions are about the need for schedule 3. It exempts those ministerial zoning orders from the requirement to be consistent with the provincial policy statement. I would like to ask the minister, either of them, what the justification for that could be, when the

provincial policy statement, under the Planning Act, has always taken Ontario's best interests to heart. So why the need to override and overrule and do away with that?

Hon. Steve Clark: First of all, thanks, Chair, through you to the member. I want to thank her for her question. As I said earlier, the ministerial zoning order process puts municipalities in the driver's seat, not the province. Again, I want to reiterate that every single minister's zoning order that I've done on non-provincially owned land has been at the request of the municipality.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Right.

Hon. Steve Clark: Also, to answer your question, MZOs are a tool that our government uses to get critical, local projects that people rely on, located outside the greenbelt, moving faster. This is the tool that, obviously, when you're trying to create 3,700 long-term-care beds where the previous government—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay, Minister, with all due respect, I did listen attentively to what you had said. What I'm asking specifically about is that schedule 3—it's completely unrelated to broadband expansion, yet here we find ourselves with a broadband bill. This is a schedule that retroactively changes the law, changes the framework, so that the government can use, as you were saying, a tool—this is a jackhammer—to put aside the provincial policy statement. I'm wondering why that's needed when we've gotten to this point. I see your green background there, but I'm going to need more than that. Protected lands that have been protected should be protected, and this section says, "Just kidding. Never mind. It used to be protected; now it's not." Why?

Hon. Steve Clark: First of all, thanks again for the question. Broadband is critical infrastructure. MZOs are helping accelerate other critical infrastructure projects in local ridings. Again, it's done at the request of the local municipality. We are accelerating very important projects for long-term care, a made-in-Ontario PPE plant, affordable and supportive housing projects. There are so many projects that this tool is being used for, and it's not new—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: But we're not debating—

Hon. Steve Clark: This is something that has been around since the early 1970s.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Sorry; my apologies, Minister. I just wanted to remind all members not to speak over the presenters when they're speaking. I would just maybe—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Chair, with all due respect, I hear you, but the question that I've asked twice, about the use of schedule 3, has not been answered.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): So perhaps we should let the minister answer the question.

Hon. Steve Clark: Again, Chair, thank you so much.

Our proposed changes will facilitate and provide certainty for these projects. But let's not forget that we write the provincial policy statement. We consult widely through our municipal partners on the PPS, but there are opportunities for governments to use this tool to work as our partners. And again, I want to remind the member, municipalities are our partners. We work collaboratively

with them when we create the provincial policy statement. We work collaboratively when we review policy statements like the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe. We consult with them when we're reviewing policies on the greenbelt. Municipalities are a key partner for our government moving forward and presently.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you. The Association of Municipalities of Ontario: I know the minister is well acquainted; I don't have to tell him anything about AMO. But even AMO had wondered about the change over the provincial policy statement. I don't have their words in front of me, but it's on record that they feel that the protections of the provincial policy statement have served Ontario well.

I would ask the Minister of Infrastructure, who lives in a beautiful part of the world, as many of us do, but with blue-green algae challenges—I'm sure she knows well the challenges with nutrient pollution, blue-green algae and the need for wetlands. When we've lost about 75% of our wetlands, I wonder, can the minister tell me if that's not enough, too much or just the right amount of wetlands that we've lost, and how she feels about schedule 3 that would allow the government to run roughshod over protected areas in the future?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you very much for the interesting question. As Minister Clark, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, has said, no MZO is done without the local council approving the developments. In this case, many times, broadband developments, long-term care, affordable housing—Minister Clark has mentioned these accordingly.

I work very closely with all of my local councils. I work very closely with all of my environmental groups, with my conservation authorities, in very thoughtful discussions of what's important for our communities.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute left.

Hon. Laurie Scott: As was said, none of the MZOs—the ministerial zoning orders—are done without a local council resolution asking the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you very much.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: This section, schedule 3, is not about the wonders of MZOs; it's about the ability to retroactively go back and say that protected areas no longer need to be deemed protected. The eloquent Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry said that if we didn't like it, we could just pretend it wasn't there. Does this minister also wish it wasn't there so we could indeed talk about broadband?

0930

Hon. Laurie Scott: You know—

Hon. Steve Clark: Well, I believe—

Hon. Laurie Scott: Yes, go ahead.

Hon. Steve Clark: Listen, I believe that, from someone who represents a rural riding—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): That's all the time. My apologies, Minister. That's all the time we have for

this round, but perhaps you could continue answering that question in the next round.

We'll now turn to the independent Green Party member for five minutes of questioning. MPP Schreiner.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I want to say a big thanks to both ministers for joining us at committee today. I know you have busy schedules. This is an important conversation.

I'm hoping to ask some questions about broadband, but that may have to wait until the second round. I'm going to focus my questions on schedule 3 at the moment.

I certainly won't dispute the minister's contention that there are times when it is appropriate to use a ministerial zoning order. On that, I have no dispute with the government.

Even when a municipality requests an MZO, and even if it might be for a beneficial project, it seems to me that it's questionable why we would need an MZO that violates the provincial policy statement. As the minister said, the provincial policy statement has been developed in collaboration with our municipal partners. It provides some significant protections—in particular, I'm thinking of wetlands. We've lost 75% of our wetlands. We know how essential they are to cleaning drinking water and protecting us from flooding. So it seems to me that at the very least, an MZO, even for a beneficial project, should be in compliance with the provincial policy statement. I don't understand why we would overturn that collaborative process we've developed with municipalities in developing the PPS.

Hon. Steve Clark: Chair, through you to the honourable member: I want to thank him for his question.

I want to go back to something I said in my deputation. The motion from the council just starts the process. We have to do our due diligence, as a ministry, regarding the request. As you know, I've been clear that we will not allow development in the greenbelt. In fact, after I've received motions from councils, I've written nine responses back indicating that we wouldn't entertain MZOs because they were within the greenbelt. Just because there's a motion by a council—that only starts the due diligence process. We want to make sure that councils look at priority projects that make sense in their communities. Again, just because there's a motion—there needs to be a lot of work at the back end, in terms of due diligence by the ministry.

One thing that maybe we haven't done a good enough job on is making sure that people know we have said no to nine requests to develop in the greenbelt. We're going to make sure that those communities understand why we said no. Again, it's part of the consultation process with local municipalities.

I've always said that municipalities are in the driver's seat, and we want to make sure that we do the due diligence.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Thank you for the response, Minister. I appreciate it. And I certainly appreciate the fact that you've said no to requests in the greenbelt. I think that's an important statement.

I also think it's vitally important that we protect wetlands. That's exactly why they're protected in the provincial policy statement, whether those wetlands are in the greenbelt or not. We've lost 75% of them in southern Ontario. They're so vital to saving us money from the damages caused by flooding.

I have a question about the due diligence that was done specifically related to the MZO request from Pickering—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute left.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: —to develop on the Duffins Creek wetland, which, as you know, now has been revoked at the request of the city of Pickering. It seems to me that that's what's motivating schedule 3. So I'm curious about this due diligence process, given what has happened, specifically, in Pickering related to the lower Duffins Creek wetland.

Hon. Steve Clark: That's a very good question. You are right: This process, that particular MZO, was done not just at the request of the city of Pickering, but it also had a resolution of support from the region of Durham. You are correct. I've received the council resolution from the city of Pickering giving me clear direction on how to handle it. Under section 47 of the Planning Act, I will be working on an advertisement following that council's direction. That will come in the very near future.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you very much. This concludes this round of questioning.

We'll now turn to the government for the first round of their questions, beginning with MPP Crawford. You have seven and a half minutes. You may begin.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Thank you to both ministers for presenting today. I think this legislation is sorely needed throughout the province, and we've seen, with the pandemic, the critical role that broadband will play.

My question is to Minister Scott. It focuses on broadband with respect to broadband being a federally regulated sector, with the CRTC being the agency that is responsible for the delivery of reliable telecommunications throughout Ontario and the rest of the country. My question is, why are we taking these steps to introduce this legislation now, and what will be the impact on businesses and families throughout Ontario?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you very much, MPP Crawford, for the question. I don't think anybody on this virtual session we're having today would disagree that connecting 100% of the people in the province of Ontario to broadband and high-speed Internet is essential. You're correct: The CRTC is a federal regulator of TV, Internet, broadband etc. We are doing what we can provincially with this piece of legislation, as well as the dollars that we put forward. But when we said we need to build it quickly—it's important. It needs to be done. We consulted, of course. We've been talking constantly about broadband. We said, "What barriers are out there?"

The three main barriers that we heard and that are addressed in this bill are the costs and delays by Internet service providers to attach to hydro poles or utility poles, helping get the timeline down for access to municipal rights-of-way and, of course, the right for hydro pole

attachments and other costs. So we built this legislation that is going to decrease the cost to industry to build the much-needed broadband that I speak so often about, and that will improve access to reliable broadband for all Ontarians.

The federal government—because this is federally regulated, as you said, through the CRTC. We have spoken, and I have communicated, as recently as yesterday after the announcement of the budget, with the federal ministers responsible to say, “We are doing what we can as the province of Ontario to decrease barriers so that our Internet service providers can build as quickly as possible. This is an immediate need in the province of Ontario. Now we would love you, the federal government, to come on board.”

We’ve all seen the Quebec announcement earlier this week, where the federal government went to the province of Quebec, who face similar challenges. We have, of course, the largest number of households that are unserved in our province. But to say, “How can you join us and build broadband and high-speed connectivity as fast as possible to those probably over-7,000 households, about 1.4 billion people?” So we come to the table—of course, I always ask for more dollars. The more money that we have from the federal government, the faster we can build, but we’re not waiting on them. There is \$4 billion on the table from this province to build out as quickly as possible so that all the people in the province of Ontario, and as I said, I live and breathe this every day in unserved communities—they need that connection. It is federally regulated. The CRTC has a role to play; the federal government has a role to play. We all have a role to play in connecting the people of Ontario, making it a level playing field.

This is a time in the province of Ontario that, when I reflected back to Leslie Frost—I’m a little biased because, of course, Premier Leslie Frost came from my riding. What he did—I know MPP Bailey is smiling; he’s a great historian. How that changed people’s lives and how that opened up the province of Ontario—we have such resourceful people in the province. I’ve quoted many economic studies that show how it makes such a difference in people’s lives and to businesses that they can now connect, join the global world, join our new online platforms in many local ways, also. But this is a watershed moment in the province of Ontario, that we can work with, hopefully, the federal government as they come more to the table to get those people connected and change their lives.

0940

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thanks, Chair. My question is for Minister Clark. There has been a fair bit of conversation already from the opposition members about MZOs. I’m not sure if they truly understand what they’re used for or what they can be used for, but there has been some talk about an MZO that was issued for the municipality of Pickering and some of the things that were going to go on there with that.

Pickering has come back now because that distribution centre has decided not to relocate to Pickering. They’ve come back and they’ve said that they don’t want the MZO anymore. How does that process work, and what would your ministry do in that case?

Hon. Steve Clark: Thanks, MPP Smith, for that question. It is a great question, very topical. Our government has been very clear that when it comes to MZOs on non-provincial land, municipalities are in the driver’s seat. Just to take you back, the MZO was requested by the city of Pickering. It was supported by the region of Durham. On March 12, I wrote to Mayor Ryan from Pickering, asking if they would like to amend the MZO that they requested because of the proponent.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute left.

Hon. Steve Clark: Earlier this week, Pickering council met. They gave me very clear direction. I’ll be following up on that direction. As I said to MPP Schreiner, we’ll be moving, under section 47(9) of the act, to post the amendment to the MZO, as requested by the city of Pickering. After the comment period, it will be done. We’ll take those comments into consideration and move forward based on the direction of Pickering council.

That, again, just proves that municipalities are in the driver’s seat. They’ve given me clear direction on what they want now, and we’re going to follow their direction.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you very much for that.

How much time is left, Chair?

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Eight seconds.

Mr. Dave Smith: I’ll defer that eight seconds to the next round, then.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you. We’ll now turn to the official opposition. Who would like to begin? MPP French.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you. I appreciate having another kick at the can here about schedule 3. My concerns are about the potential bad planning that this enables, putting people, property and the environment at risk if we have the ability to run roughshod over what used to be protected areas—excuse me, still deemed protected, but that no longer matters, as per schedule 3.

My question, I guess, is about how the ministers will respond to the concerns from the agricultural communities, the environmental folks, community members and neighbours who want to ensure that protections are in place, that not only their wetlands but their green spaces will indeed be protected—because a schedule like this says that they don’t have to be, under certain circumstances. So my question is about that.

Further to that, schedule 3, if it’s removed from the bill—would there be any restrictions on broadband expansion if schedule 3 didn’t exist? Does it affect broadband in any way?

Hon. Steve Clark: I can talk about my section of the bill, the infrastructure piece. Again, when a ministerial zoning order is requested by a local community, it’s basically to facilitate a priority project. So again, we require a council resolution. We would do our due diligence. The legislation specifically indicates that my

section of the bill does not take place in the greenbelt. The greenbelt is a protected area, as part of schedule 3.

Again, the local municipality is in the driver's seat. We value our municipal partners. We don't classify them, as some members of the opposition categorize, as donors or insiders. Municipalities are partners, so we want to make sure that we do our due diligence once they pick a priority project, no matter what it is. I don't dictate to municipalities what priority project they're asking for an MZO for; that rests with their decision.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I'm wondering, though—when the minister talks about due diligence—in the case of Duffins Creek, why the provincial government didn't consult with Williams Treaties First Nations. That's my understanding.

Further to this, can you describe any situation where you would want to ignore the provincial policy statement?

I wonder if the government really does understand how outraged the community in that neck of the woods, around Duffins Creek, has been. I remember when the PC members used to rage against the backroom deals with the Liberals—so turnabout is fair play, I guess.

Hon. Steve Clark: Again, I want to go back to the fact that that particular MZO was not only requested by resolution by the city of Pickering; it was also supported by the region of Durham.

Our municipal partners, I know, value the relationship with Indigenous partners. This change in schedule 3 does not affect the crown's duty to consult. We welcome all input from Indigenous communities on the proposed changes to the Planning Act within schedule 3.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I'm going to pass my time to MPP Glover. I know he has a quick question.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Glover, you have just over two minutes.

Mr. Chris Glover: My question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

In December 2020, the government passed Bill 229, which stripped the conservation authorities of their power to protect wetlands. At the time, former Toronto mayor and former Conservative MP David Crombie and six other members of the Greenbelt Council resigned in protest. David Crombie said that this bill “will cut the heart out of watershed planning, which is vital to environmental planning in the province of Ontario.”

Just a few days ago—maybe it was last week—there was a release about the provincial policy statement, saying that there was a moderate to high risk that the MZO issued for Duffins Creek could be found to have contravened the provincial policy statement and that the province faces the risk of further legal challenges.

Bill 257 now changes the law retroactively—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute left.

Mr. Chris Glover: —in what seems to be an act to try to make the MZO on Duffins Creek legal under the PPS.

Why is the government taking such extreme measures, including changes in clauses retroactively, in order to pave over wetlands?

Hon. Steve Clark: Thanks again for the question.

On your first statement, about Mr. Crombie: Obviously, I value Mr. Crombie and the other members of the Greenbelt Council, who decided to do other things. I wish them well. They provided the government with very valuable comments.

I've been very clear, both with the past and present members of the Greenbelt Council, that we're not going to allow development in the greenbelt.

In our last budget, we committed to a consultation which will grow the size and quality of the greenbelt for future generations, and I invite all the MPPs to participate in our consultation.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): We'll now turn to the independent Green Party member for questioning. MPP Schreiner, you may begin.

0950

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I'd like to just continue my conversation with Minister Clark. The province clearly has a responsibility to protect its citizens from things like flooding, and I appreciate that the minister has exercised that responsibility in saying no to MZOs that would affect the greenbelt, but we obviously know there are provincial protections in the PPS that go beyond the greenbelt, specifically related to wetlands, where developments not only would affect the municipality making a request, but adjacent municipalities. In the case of Duffins Creek, there's a significant flood risk for residents of Ajax, for example. That's why we have a PPS.

And so it seems to me that the whole Pickering-Ajax-Durham region and Duffins Creek example is exactly why schedule 3 is so problematic. It appears to me that there was a breakdown in the due-diligence process in this particular case, and possibly in the case in Stratford.

And so, I guess, to the minister: Would it make sense to just say, “Hey, let's remove schedule 3 from this bill”? It doesn't prevent us from issuing MZOs in cases where MZOs would be appropriate, but it does maintain the province's responsibility to protect its citizens, regardless of which municipality they live in and which municipality that development may take place in.

Hon. Steve Clark: As I've said over and over, I think our approach, where municipalities are in the driver's seat, not the province and not the minister, is the preferred approach.

To use Stratford as an example: That council asked me three times for an MZO, and because of their public process, they made a decision as a council to ask for me to revoke that MZO. Again, because the process starts with a council resolution, obviously when the council does change direction, we want to be responsive as a government, so we've indicated to them that we will be posting the revocation for public comment.

Again, I've said this to many other stakeholders out there: We need to ensure that our local municipalities—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute left.

Hon. Steve Clark: —continue to consult with local stakeholders prior to asking the minister for an MZO. If they are in the driver's seat, I think part of the planning process involves consultation, and I really do believe that

municipalities need to make sure that, while I'll do my due diligence, once the resolution takes place, they need to do their due diligence as well as a council moving forward.

I think that the Stratford case is an example of where someone repeatedly asked for an MZO, and then here we are a number of months later with a different outcome. We're going to continue to talk to municipalities and AMO about how we can make that process better, but I think schedule 3 is vitally needed for projects across this province, and I'm committed to ensuring that municipalities remain in the driver's seat.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: With all due respect, Minister—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you very much. Sorry, that's all the time we have for this round.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Thank you, Chair, and thanks to both ministers. I appreciate your time.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): We'll now turn to the government for a final round of questions. MPP Harris, you may begin.

Mr. Mike Harris: Ministers, it's good to see you, even though virtually, this morning. I know that we've had a lot of occasions to get down here to Waterloo region and see the good things that are going on.

I want to bring the conversation back to broadband a little bit more specifically, and to Minister Scott. One of the biggest questions that we have into our office right now is, in fact, talking about rural broadband, and also broadband in some of the areas that are a little bit closer to the cities here in Waterloo region. We're blessed with Waterloo, the city of Kitchener and also the city of Cambridge, and our four rural townships that do sort of an upside-down horseshoe, for those who aren't familiar with the area as much as maybe some others at our committee meeting here today.

But one of the things that the opposition has talked about quite a bit over the last little while—and I'm surprised, to be honest, that MPP Vanthof hasn't brought it up here today, because I've heard him stand up in the House quite a few times and go on about it—is why the word “rural” isn't necessarily reflected in this bill. It's my understanding—and, Minister, I think you can probably clear this up a little bit for us—that this isn't just about rural Ontario. I've got areas in my riding that are right on the border of the city that don't have reliable access to broadband Internet, and even cell service. You can drive literally two minutes out of the city and, all of a sudden, there's no cell signal. So I was hoping maybe you could expand a little bit on why it doesn't specify the word “rural” in this bill and what the plan is to be able to roll this out to all of Ontario, not just rural Ontario.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you very much for the great question, and your geography lesson for your riding and the horseshoe that surrounds the urban areas. You're absolutely right: It is unserved and underserved, and that is rural areas and remote areas in the north, but it's also just outside of major urban settings, and people are somewhat shocked. They're like, “I can see the city lights, but I can't connect. I can see the tower and I can't

connect.” I know that there have been many petitions and letters from the opposition about those very same stories.

That is why this is an ambitious and historic plan to build connectivity to 100% of Ontarians by 2025, and \$4 billion on the table, because we've heard the stories. Just like you had said, just like members of the opposition have said and written to me: How can this be, in the 21st century, that we're not connected? The Premier, all of the caucus that are here today and cabinet know how big an issue that is for our ridings. Northern Ontario has its own stories, absolutely, and a few more challenges, but we have a very strong commitment to connect people. That is why we're here today.

This legislation, when we've been speaking with not only people in communities—and Minister Clark has done a great job at the AMO tables. That's our number one ask: How do we connect? How do we grow our businesses? How can we engage our people who don't have it? How do we get the farmers who not only run businesses, but need Internet and GPS to plant their crops? It's absolutely massive. So when we said, “What are the barriers?”—these were the barriers that were brought forward.

And this is done in a very co-operative way with the Internet service providers, with the municipalities, with the federal government, who I'm trying to bring more to the table—consulting with them. Doing that precision mapping, which we have; collecting that data to say why does the Internet stop two miles from the city, two miles from—where the farmer doesn't get it, but yet it's just two miles up the road. How does he not get it? That's the challenge that we have in connecting people, no matter where they live.

I know there are going to be more details, and I'll be saying it in a few more weeks, but we basically said, “How do we bring down the barriers, how do we reduce the cost to industry to build, and how do we service everyone in the province of Ontario?” I do not want to leave anyone behind.

Northern Ontario has got some challenges, but it's got some exciting opportunities, and I just can't explain enough the privilege I have had to take this file on for the government, for the Premier and for all the people. There are close to 1.4 million people who don't have service today. This is a watershed moment. I will not say my Leslie Frost quote again, but just like communities from your riding, like you've said, Mike, this is a game-changer for those who don't get any service.

I always lay out the challenge to members who do get service. Turn it off for a day and see how your life is. Because that's the motivation that I have every day, to connect those people and fill that out.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute left.

Mr. Mike Harris: Thank you. That's it for me, Chair.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Cuzzetto, you have 50 seconds.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: My question will be for Minister Clark. I noticed that the members opposite are against MZOs, and I want to thank you for using an MZO in Mississauga–Lakeshore to build 640 long-term-care beds,

with the first hospice in Mississauga–Lakeshore. Can you elaborate on other MZOs that have been used throughout the province of Ontario?

Hon. Steve Clark: Yes, great question, MPP Cuzzetto. I'm glad to do the MZO in your riding for that fantastic project.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Twenty seconds.

Hon. Steve Clark: I talked about two that we did in the former Premier's riding, Sunnybrook; the Leader of the Opposition's riding, affordable housing; MPP Stiles, we did a modular housing development; MPP Begum, we did a modular housing development; and MPP Morrison, we proposed affordable housing units there. So there are a

number of local priorities in opposition ridings that MZOs are providing for affordable housing—and other great programs like the CaféTO program. There are a lot of good things happening.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you very much. This concludes our round of questions, and this also concludes our time with the ministers. Thank you so much for your presentations today. You are now released from the committee.

To committee members: This concludes our business for today. The committee is now adjourned until 9 a.m. on Friday, March 26, 2021. Be safe and well, everyone.

The committee adjourned at 1000.

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