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**Standing Committee on
Estimates**

Ministry of Infrastructure

Ministry of Agriculture,
Food and Rural Affairs

1st Session
42nd Parliament

Wednesday 9 June 2021

**Comité permanent des
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère de l'Infrastructure

Ministère de l'Agriculture,
de l'Alimentation
et des Affaires rurales

1^{re} session
42^e législature

Mercredi 9 juin 2021

Chair: Peter Tabuns
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Président : Peter Tabuns
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ESTIMATESCOMITÉ PERMANENT DES
BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Wednesday 9 June 2021

Mercredi 9 juin 2021

The committee met at 0914 in room 151 and by video conference.

MINISTRY OF INFRASTRUCTURE

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Good morning, everyone. We're going to resume consideration of vote 4001 of the estimates of the Ministry of Infrastructure. There's now a total of four hours and 50 minutes remaining for the review of these estimates.

When the committee adjourned on June 8, the government had eight minutes and 23 seconds remaining. I will turn it over to the government. Who will be taking the floor, asking questions for the government this morning? MPP Cuzzetto, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Thank you, Minister, for all the work you're doing in infrastructure, and especially in my riding of Mississauga–Lakeshore, with the BRT, the hospital and the long-term care.

I want to touch on the long-term care here today. Recently, the city of Mississauga has been chosen for an accelerated build of a pilot program for our long-term-care development. Could you elaborate on this long-term-care development here in Mississauga–Lakeshore?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you very much for the question, and I'll say thanks for the compliments too. We're working very hard to build infrastructure that's very much needed by the province.

We had a great deal of neglect for the 15 years before. You are very much correct in that the long-term care—the Accelerated Build Pilot Program, actually, to deliver long-term care sooner than the traditional method. Trillium Health Partners have been indeed a key part of that. It will bring new long-term-care beds to Mississauga, hopefully by late summer 2022 or early 2023.

Of course, I don't need to speak about the pandemic and the effects that it has had. We all know the tremendous effect that it had. It came suddenly; we had to respond suddenly. I'd like to thank Infrastructure Ontario for taking the initiative to help figure out, to help plan how to build long-term-care beds as quickly as possible.

The hospital there—we took advantage of the hospital-owned land and the rapid procurement and modular construction, which is very innovative thinking that highlights our commitment to getting things done quickly.

I can turn it over, maybe, to Michael Lindsay for more details of how the process went for the long-term care and

the rapid builds. So I'm giving him a little heads-up. Hopefully he got in. I guess I should verify that he was actually able to get in.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: I'm here, Minister. Good morning.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Oh, there you are. Okay. So it's a great development. I'll let Michael tell you about the number of beds there, because there are actually two sites. I can talk health care a lot, so I will stop and let Michael Lindsay, the CEO—well, you're going to introduce yourself—of Infrastructure Ontario give you some more details.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Good morning, committee members. I hope you are well. This is Michael Lindsay, president and CEO of Infrastructure Ontario. I am in Toronto today.

Minister, yes, the program associated with rapid build actually sees four long-term-care homes being built across three hospital sites. Two homes are being built at the Trillium Health Partners' Speakman Drive site in Mississauga; one home is being built at Humber River Hospital's Finch campus in Toronto; and one home is being built at Lakeridge Health's Ajax Pickering Hospital site. Collectively, this is a total of 1,272 new long-term-care spaces.

Each of the homes, for interest, will be six storeys. The ground floor of each building includes common spaces and amenities, such as a beauty salon, a barber shop, a place of worship and administrative offices, required by the residents of the facility. Each of the remaining five floors will include up to 64 beds in private and semi-private bedrooms, lounge areas for residents to interact with other residents, terrace spaces overlooking landscaping and gardens and, importantly, space for therapeutic programs. That is another facet and element of this particular program: Working with our hospital partners, we've indeed brought services into these buildings that typically would have been sought elsewhere, around behavioural units and dialysis units, all of which are subsumed within the home.

I think I will also just mention that the homes' design is informed by the Ministry of Long-Term Care's current home design standard. These are the best practices that align with hospitals' clinical care approaches and incorporate lessons learned from COVID-19. To just give you an illustrative set of some of the infection prevention and control measures that we have incorporated with the

Ministries of Health and Long-Term Care, there are enhancements to the HVAC systems, including capabilities for 100% fresh air supply. There will be air conditioning throughout these facilities. As I mentioned, there are moderately sized rooms, with private bedrooms and washrooms or private bedrooms with a semi-private washroom as part of the design. There are larger dining rooms to allow for physical distancing, and there are extra storage areas for cleaning equipment and supplies.

We ultimately procured and are trying to construct these facilities as rapidly as possible. This was a competitive process. As the minister said, it involved some innovation on our part. Briefly, I'll just say that the program was—when we first put out our request for qualifications, it was open to anybody who wished to apply. People could meet an objective standard that we set with the Ministry of Long-Term Care with respect to capabilities to build long-term-care facilities and to deliver through a variety of rapid construction models. That prequalified a set of parties that were on a list. That then allowed us to have a competitive competition for the contracts to actually build these four sites across the three hospital properties.

0920

Construction is visible, and I would invite members of the committee to wander by any of these sites. Day over day, they change. As the minister correctly said, we are using modular construction approaches here, slightly different variations on that theme. For instance, at Trillium Health Partners, it's genuine volumetric modular; i.e., the rooms are assembled off-site and are brought on site and slotted into place next to one another.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

At our Lakeridge Health site, it's more of a pre-fabricated modular approach, where there's quite a bit of construction off-site on prefab materials that are then assembled at the site. It's very much a program that we're proud to be a part of. I thank you, Minister, for the opportunity to comment.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you very much, Mr. Lindsay. It's a great initiative, and I know that, MPP Cuzzetto, you've been a champion for infrastructure in general in your constituency and in your riding.

This is very unique, and as Michael said, it was incredible to hear of the different modular forms, that type of action that we need to take. But at the end of the day, we were short, when we came into government, over 30,000—I think 35,000—long-term-care beds. The wait-list in many areas is two to three years. We were taking action. I know the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Long-Term Care had plans to increase the number of homes, very aggressive planning that we've set for 30,000 new beds over 10 years. The Premier wanted to take action. The rapid builds were definitely not something that we were looking at. The pandemic came, and you can see that we were able to shift quite quickly and get the building done far ahead of the normal build process that we have in the province of Ontario. It's always great to bring in new

innovation. Infrastructure Ontario certainly partnered and came up to the table with the respective ministries, and at the end of the day, it's about caring for people in this new world that we live in, with COVID-19.

Michael Lindsay mentioned the science that we've taken from the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Long-Term Care in the types of rooms, the ventilation, the air supply that we need to look at going forward for any builds going forward with these new designs. I just want to thank everybody involved for making this happen. I know that the Trillium Health Partners—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say that you're out of time.

With that, we go to the official opposition. MPP French, the floor is yours.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Good morning, folks. Before we begin, Mr. Lindsay, I'm dying to see what this sign that's behind your head—is it “My Day Crashes Fast”? I can't tell what it says.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: “My Dad is Crazy Fast.” My eight-year-old made this sign when I ran around the bay.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you. I didn't know if it was that your day goes crazy fast or your day crashes fast. I just had to know.

All right. I'll rein it back in. By no means, folks at the ministry, is that an indication of how this will go. I've got some focused questions for us today and a fair bit of homework for you and a few requests. I am going to just finish up with some of the broadband conversation from yesterday, and I'm going to piggyback on what my colleague MPP West had started with, talking about the north.

Something stuck with me yesterday about the discussion around money and that it hasn't been spent. I had a clear understanding—I know the deputy minister outlined some of the challenges and barriers that, as he put it, may conspire to affect outcomes and timelines. But I wanted to talk more about the barriers and challenges, but specifically, are there specific reasons that we haven't seen the spending up north? Reading into what was said yesterday, are there municipalities up north that are inadvertently creating slowdowns? As I understood yesterday, if it's their procurement process or whatnot, that was one of the things that could slow it down. Are there northern communities that are kind of creating slowdowns? And then, further to that, I would love to know, of the communities in northern Ontario that previously have not had broadband, which of those northern communities will have broadband this year? Do we have a list of those that have good news coming?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thanks very much for the question, and of course it's a topic I love talking about. Yesterday, I'm not sure what the impression was, but I work a lot with northern Ontario municipalities and the Federation of Northern Ontario Municipalities—so NOMA, FONOM—I speak frequently with the mayors. We are all very much on the same page of how we get broadband. They're very excited. I think I read some quotes yesterday from them. I just don't have them handy today.

The north is obviously a challenge: geography; we've gone through the challenge of sparser populations, spread out; the infrastructure that's there; the challenges of the construction season. I have spoken to them, as I've said, many times. The nearly \$4 billion that we've put on the table is to help address the capital expansion. Just by the very nature of the factors I've said, that is the challenge of the north. So there's a co-operation, absolutely, with them. And what I did say yesterday was that those smaller municipalities—which will probably be predominantly in the north, again, but there are certainly some in southern Ontario—just don't have the bandwidth, the size of staff to help, if there's any extra assistance needed for Internet service providers, per se, to access municipal rights of way.

Basically, what we're saying with our Building Broadband Faster Act is that we will assist them in a one-type window that Infrastructure Ontario is going to be part of, in which, if there are problems, let us help you. If it's a small municipality that needs assistance to work with a utility company, to work through some type of regulations or some type of municipal blockages, I'll say—I can't name anything specific. But we will actually assist them to overcome those obstacles so that they can get whatever type of infrastructure accessed quicker: if it's hydro poles, if it's a utility pole, if it's something with planning or mapping. So, no—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: So there's not some municipality that's getting in its own way accidentally that's left to flounder? Because I just wasn't sure—and that's not what was said yesterday. I'm not meaning to misrepresent that, but it was sort of the discussion around the recipients' ability to procure and whatnot. And I thought: Are we putting this back on municipalities as being the holdup? I wanted to be clear on that, because obviously—

Hon. Laurie Scott: Not at all, not by any means. In the ICON Program, for example, the municipalities were involved. I mentioned EORN and SWIFT several times yesterday. They have established groups, as municipalities, to help assist in this build. We realize that that's not occurring up north. As I've said, I've talked to FONOM and NOMA several times. They're very happy to hear that we're going to assist them. So we're building, but we're relieving the municipalities of some of the pressure they feel in getting their constituents, who are our constituents, connected to the Internet.

I can list some projects, absolutely—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Yes—in the next year, that previously haven't had it but that are going to be getting it. Do you have a definite list, or is it all kind of hopeful? Are we—

Hon. Laurie Scott: No, it's announced. The money flows. I think the deputy said yesterday that we don't control necessarily all the contracts of the ISPs with municipalities. So I don't know if I can give you too much specific.

I can say that last January, for example, we invested \$10.9 million for faster broadband to several towns and First Nations communities across the north. They were:

Chisholm, Marathon, Terrace Bay, rural Thunder Bay, Oliver Paipoonge—I'll get that right today. There's a 22-kilometre fibre backbone that brings high-speed broadband to Treaty 3 territory in northwest Ontario. There's an upgrade to the speed and capacity of the K-Net network owned by Keewaytinook Okimakanak—I know I didn't get that right, but roughly—which serves more than 80 First Nation communities while supporting future upgrades. And there are investments under Up to Speed, so that's going to bring broadband to more than 7,000 households and businesses across our—I don't know if the deputy has, I don't know if we actually have—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Well—

Hon. Laurie Scott: —schedule to share with you today, but really—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Minister, thank you for that list, but is that already previously announced? Is that—

Hon. Laurie Scott: In January this year.

0930

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I appreciate that. I can find that myself.

Hon. Laurie Scott: It might have been last year, actually.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I was just wondering if there were any other northern communities that haven't had it that are going to get it this year. I'd be glad to have that list but not to take the time of the committee to hear it. I'd be glad to have that list if it hasn't been announced yet. I'll take it today.

Hon. Laurie Scott: As I said, a lot of it is multi-ministry, too, and I mentioned a lot yesterday. There are lists available publicly that the announcements have gone forward, but the commitment is still nearly \$4 billion and everyone connected by 2025 across the province. And in the north, the satellite is now an option.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I'm going to take some of what you said there and carry on because yesterday and today you've highlighted that there are some projects happening with First Nations and Indigenous communities. A lot of us have been having meetings with OPSBA and they had raised northern concerns and talked about the potential of having a pilot, for example, in Indigenous communities that don't have access to Internet. There are lots of different folks interested in ensuring that communities that don't have will have.

I have a question about whether there is a commitment to bring broadband to Indigenous communities, specifically which ones, and when they will be started or completed. We heard yesterday—and I will admit that I don't know whether it's Matawa or Mat-awah. Yesterday I heard Mat-awah.

Hon. Laurie Scott: It's Matawa.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay, thank you. Can the minister provide the committee with a list of the First Nation communities or Indigenous communities that will have broadband and a schedule of when they can expect it—just sort of a brief update on that?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Absolutely. When I say “everyone in Ontario,” I mean everyone in Ontario. I know, in

Matawa, it's almost a year and a half ago for those connections. Again, the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund helped with that.

We also have CENGN, which did some announcements for northern Ontario. That's a partnership, and I think it was \$63.3 million over five years. That works with the Ontario Centres for Innovation. The rural and northern Ontario residential broadband program stream supports projects with high-speed Internet to the unserved areas across the province. Again, by nature, there are some up north.

I will reiterate that there are more announcements that are coming in the next few weeks. June is going to be a very big month for broadband announcements, so there will be clearer pictures of specific projects that are more to come. We can give you a list.

I don't know if the deputy wants to jump in here, but there are many northern communities and many First Nations, and we are working with Minister Rickford, of course, with the First Nations communities. I mentioned yesterday—because that is a great example—Pikangikum, up north of Kenora, that worked with Starlink.

There's the test pilot, but we know that Starlink—that low-Earth-orbit satellite—can connect to these communities. And when I say 2025, that is big speed. That is a very short time to deliver, but because of the technologies, because of the mapping, because of the co-operation and the work of the team at IO and the Ministry of Infrastructure and the federal government to narrow down—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Did she freeze or did I?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Did I freeze?

Failure of sound system.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Jennifer, I think you froze.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): She's very frozen.

Hon. Laurie Scott: I think she's back.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Oh, was that me freezing?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Yes.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I just thought you were all holding still.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): No, we were going to call you Elsa if it had gone on longer.

Hon. Laurie Scott: I don't know, Deputy, if you want to jump in. Do you want the deputy to jump in, MPP French?

Ms. Jennifer K. French: No. If there's something to share with the committee that's a list or whatnot, that's fine, but I'm looking at my list of questions to get through.

Hon. Laurie Scott: We have so much time; what are you talking about?

Ms. Jennifer K. French: No, we don't. I know what I have coming.

Interjections.

Hon. Laurie Scott: That is true.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: So does IO probably. I've got some Bondfield on my list and I'm not going to dawdle on the way there. But I thank you, Minister, for the answer.

There are a lot of projects across the province and there are a number of concerns with them. Infrastructure construction is a complicated thing. This is not about

broadband projects generally, but can this ministry please provide the committee with a list of all Infrastructure Ontario P3 projects that are subject to a dispute process or a court proceeding? And, if applicable, I'd love to know the damages or remedies sought by or from or received by or from the government or one of its agencies. Obviously, there's a lot of attention paid to where our tax dollars go and the projects that are happening.

In addition, can I ask that there be described how the dispute or court proceeding affected or may affect the delivery of the project, including its timing or scope, and what financial or other risks the public faces? There's a fair bit there, but—

Hon. Laurie Scott: I'll just pass this over to Michael Lindsay, the CEO of IO, to answer those questions. Michael, if you wouldn't mind, please.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Apologies; I had a stutter on my signal there for a minute, Minister. MPP French, are we going to Bondfield? Did I understand you correctly? You're looking—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: No, not quite yet. I'm just saying that I've got a whole day planned, but what I'd like right now is, if there's a list of all Infrastructure Ontario P3 projects that are subject to a dispute process or a court proceeding, I'm interested in how those proceedings may have affected timing or scope or if there are any other risks that the public is facing as a result and, if applicable, damages or remedies sought by or from or received by or from the government or one of its agencies. Broadly—

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you, MPP French. Apologies for making you repeat yourself. I apologize.

I think a couple of thematic comments, if you'll permit me first, before I get into the specifics: It's worth noting that in all contract forms and contract models as you do construction, disputes are a part of the business. It happens to every contracting authority, every jurisdiction and every private sector entity that tries to construct something.

I think that the P3 model that we use has several advantages for taxpayers and for the citizens of Ontario just in its construct, one of which is that it actually gives us the ability as the contracting authority to deal with those disputes post-substantial completion of our projects. One of the things that could seriously impair delivery performance in connection to these projects is having to entertain every single dispute before substantial completion in a way that would ultimately divide the attention both of constructor and contracting authority when it comes to trying to make progress at the same time as you pursue disputes. I think that is an inherent benefit of the P3 model.

I think it is obviously fair to say that there are disputes on our projects right now. Some of them, obviously, are confidential. Some of them are before the court, and we couldn't possibly comment on them. But to give you just a sense of some of the themes of the disputes that exist between us and our counterparties at the moment, I would categorize them in the following way: First, our model at its heart is about risk transfer. One of the inherent benefits is that risk in our contract structure is passed to the party

that's best positioned to manage it. And, especially on large and complex projects, especially linear projects like transit projects, it's fair to say that our market, not just in Ontario but indeed across Canada, was quite bullish in respect to their ability to accept the risks that have been transferred to them for, in particular, third-party permits, licences and approvals, effectively getting the sign-off of relevant authorities for the design that they're ultimately responsible for, based on the output specifications that we give them.

Many of the disputes that we have on the go right now in connection to our projects are about our counterparties living with the realization of those risks for which they are contractually responsible and trying to find legal ways to ultimately make that our liability as much as theirs. One big bucket of disputes, I would say, falls into that category—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I appreciate the time that you're taking to break the themes down for me, but I'm looking for specifics, because I am well aware of our ideological divide here in terms of P3s. So, with all due respect, I'm looking for specific answers, not the overview of P3s and the value. I know that this will come up, and that's fine. But right now, can the committee have a list of all of the IO P3 projects that are subject to a dispute process or court proceeding right now? I recognize that before the courts, you can't break it down for me, but can we still have a list of what is entangled, so to speak?

0940

Mr. Michael Lindsay: MPP French, I get the ask. If you'll permit me, I will take that away and just work with legal at the Ministry of Infrastructure to confirm on what basis we could provide you with such a list.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you. I think that I'm not going to—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have about two minutes left.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you. I may not get the answer that I'm looking for here, but I'm wondering—I'd like a description, if possible, and that may not come from legal after you discuss it with them, of how these dispute or court processes are actually affecting the delivery and the timing and scope or other financial risks. Is there a possibility that you can also ask them, as they're providing that information, if I can have that aspect as much as possible?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Yes, I will take that away, MPP French, absolutely.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay. I realize I have less than two minutes. I don't care; we'll make it count.

Moving on, Highway 427 and the extension—and after the break, we can come back to this too. The \$616-million Highway 427 extension currently is sitting empty, as IO and the P3 contractor, Link427, are fighting in court about whether the highway is built safely or not. We've all read it in the paper and whatnot. The highway was supposed to open last September; now it's not clear if it will open this year. The dispute seems to centre around the drainage or the cross fall or what have you, or the 2% slope, all of that.

I certainly wouldn't comment on what is or isn't appropriate, but we always want to ensure that our public infrastructure is safe. But I want to know: Is the public at risk of being forced to pay more for Highway 427? Could we get stuck with a substandard highway, where water might pool dangerously? What are we on the hook for with this P3, potentially?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: To begin my answer to your question in the time that remains, MPP French, first, I just want to say that Infrastructure Ontario and the Ministry of Transportation are committed to opening the 427 extension as soon as it's safe to do so, and are committed to resolving any dispute that's between us fairly and expeditiously. We continue to target an opening in 2021.

The parties were in court on May 17, 2021. It's worth noting that Link427 has withdrawn its claim in court against IO and MTO and against—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say that you're out of time for this round.

Before we turn back to the government, I understand that MPP Crawford has joined us. MPP Crawford? Excellent. Will you confirm your identity and your location in Ontario, please?

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Hi. It's MPP Crawford. I'm here in Oakville, Ontario. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thanks so much.

We now go to 20 minutes for the government. Who will be—MPP Cuzzetto, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Minister, I know in the 2021 budget, we committed \$30.2 billion over the next 10 years to build hospital infrastructure and are already seeing hospitals being built. The Groves Memorial Community Hospital has been built using a P3, and I know that the NDP government in British Columbia has been using P3s for most of their projects and it has been very successful in British Columbia, so I commend our government for using P3s as well.

As well as the new build in Mississauga–Lakeshore of our new Trillium Health Partners at the corner of Queensway and Hurontario, which will be coming soon to my riding as well, could you please elaborate on these projects, Minister?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Well, absolutely, and as has been discussed many times today about the P3 model and the successful progress that the P3s have brought to the province of Ontario—Michael Lindsay, the CEO of Infrastructure Ontario, has mentioned some of those projects. But I want to say again that IO's record on delivering P3s is very good. Substantial completion of IO's P3 programming—they're 95% completed on budget and nearly 70% on time.

When we're speaking about protecting the taxpayers' dollars, making sure that those builds with investment from the private sector are done on time, on budget, and in this case with hospitals, they certainly get the care that they deserve quickly, I always say, "What part of health care or transit or the justice system don't you want built?" Because this is actually a globally recognized P3 model infrastructure.

Before COVID came, I had the opportunity to share with some other countries our model and how effective it has been and its great reputation.

Definitely, the \$30.2 billion over the next 10 years has included an additional \$3 billion since the 2020 budget in hospital infrastructure.

What we saw, coming into government after 15 years of the previous government, was that our hospital infrastructure was indeed not in a good state of repair, that we needed to make significant new investments in major hospital projects.

Some projects under construction at various stages of planning are the new in-patient care tower in Etobicoke and a complete rebuild of the Mississauga Hospital, in partnership with the Trillium Health Partners. It's been a very busy build down there. I know, MPP Cuzzetto, that you speak, and the Mississauga MPPs speak, often of the crunch of the high population and the need in the Mississauga area as we see so many more people living there. There's new construction at the Peel Memorial Hospital in partnership with the William Osler Health System in Brampton to meet their increasing demands, as we see that in the region of Peel. We had expansion of in-patient and ambulatory care at London Health Sciences Centre, to expand the stem cell transplant unit to double its current capacity. We've got planning for the new regional hospital in Windsor-Essex. And just to make sure that the north is always included in what we look at, there's a new hospital and lodge in Moosonee as well as a new ambulatory care centre on Moose Factory Island.

These are just some of the projects that I'm highlighting. We see this reflected in our April 2021 market update, which lists a total of 41 P3 projects valued at \$60 billion. It's a huge investment. The Prince Edward County Memorial Hospital redevelopment is also in process and it's very big news for that community as well as other communities. So it is really an historic investment in infrastructure across the province on many different levels.

We do talk transit and highways, and definitely hospital and health care infrastructure. When we used the example before about the rapid builds—innovation, changing design, how we build, how we can build quicker—we talk about that. It's ever evolving with Infrastructure Ontario and the team they have there. You see the competition of people who want to come and build, whether it's from other countries, whether it's from within, or the financial close that's just been announced the last two weeks on the tunnelling for the new transit in the city of Toronto. There are many, many examples.

Health care is—as many of you know, I was a nurse before, so I can talk health care a lot, but it's an exciting time to change delivery and do innovation of health care so that we can get procedures and deliver health care maybe in a different, more streamlined and faster approach for the people who need that health care. As we know, there's an aging demographic in the province of Ontario and it has been coming for a while.

So thank you very much for your question in highlighting the investments that we can make in health care.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Thank you, Minister. I really appreciate all the investments that you are doing through the province of Ontario, especially in my riding of Mississauga–Lakeshore.

I'm going to pass this on now to Jane McKenna to ask a question.

Ms. Jane McKenna: Thank you so much. I appreciate having the opportunity.

First of all, I just want to say, Minister, it was a pleasure when I was the PA to you, and it's always a pleasure sitting and chatting with you and learning so much from you as well.

A couple of things: Obviously, the announcement this morning—I'm thrilled with what was brought forward for Halton. As you know, we've got a few of us here as MPPs. So I see the downtown promenade; the city hall customer service counter renovation; roads, parks and forestry centre renovation; and the design and construction of former multi-use trails.

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The reason I bring all those up is, I can tell you this: With the pandemic and the uncertain times that we've had, it's been refreshing and a breath of fresh air to see a few things happen. We all work together because our job as MPPs is obviously to make sure we give our constituents the tools to succeed, and we've done a phenomenal job with having certainty with infrastructure with you at the helm there to make sure that investments are done. I know our mayor, Marianne Meed Ward, was thrilled with other investments we've done here, obviously to replace and build and fix some of the infrastructure that's here and also with transit as well and replacing things. So thank you very, very much for investing, I know in a lot of places in Ontario, but also here in Burlington and Halton, because we only succeed as well as everybody investing in our community. So thank you very much for that.

I would be remiss not to say that my son has a company up north. I was telling him I was on committee for today and that you were on here, and he said, "Thank you very much," because he works on the water a huge percentage of the time and, of course, with all that you've brought forward with broadband, he's quite thrilled with how he's not dropping calls and his clients are thinking he's hanging up on them.

Anyway, I just thought maybe you could elaborate a bit on what action you've done to address the challenges. Can you just tell us a bit more about that up north in particular, because they've had unique challenges with broadband?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you very much for that myriad of questions, which are fabulous, because there's so much to speak about in infrastructure. Certainly, I've appreciated and liked working with MPP McKenna over the many years in opposition and now in government, so thank you very much. You're always a strong advocate for your community.

This morning, I do know MPP Crawford was there on our behalf, announcing with the federal government the COVID-19 resilience stream, which you've highlighted that Mayor Meed Ward was very happy for the investments and the dollars. That was the COVID stream, which

has combined almost \$1 billion from the province and the feds and no municipal money—so they were much happier, too, for their portion—so that we can deliver projects that the municipalities asked for. So they put the applications in among that structure.

The COVID-19 resilience stream was formed last year and during the COVID time. Unfortunately, there was no extra federal money, I will say. We had to move money from the green stream into the COVID stream, just in order to send some dollars quickly to the municipalities for the projects that fit within those parameters. You mentioned quite a few that hit your municipality. We're happy that that's out the door and that those municipalities can build and hopefully get a lot of that work done by the end of this year, because it's good job creation also.

But in the stream itself, it has certainly helped with—it could have been trails, and the projects that you mentioned—just something connected to COVID-19 that would allow people maybe to move around or certain upgrades to municipal buildings that make it safer during COVID-19.

We are very happy to work with the federal government in this form and, of course, I never pass up the opportunity to ask the federal government for more infrastructure money. I think Premier Ford as well as the other Premiers have a united ask for the federal government to contribute \$10 billion each year over the next 10 years for more infrastructure dollars—and the good news that keeps coming to municipalities that we can help deliver with that.

I know that you mentioned broadband. I'm trying to remember all of the streams, but I will say just overall on the COVID-19, I will reiterate to say that when the municipal one was mentioned today, announced by parliamentary assistant Crawford, that also in that COVID stream, there's \$700 million for education-related projects through the Ministry of Education, and we made that announcement—I think it's a couple of months ago; time goes—with the Minister of Education, Minister Lecce, and the federal government to continue to assist. I know that our Minister of Education has given billions of dollars to the education system for enhancements, whether it be PPE or whether it be help for online learning, but also assistance for changing the air ventilation, and that's what this \$700 million from the COVID stream was primarily for—and then the \$100 million that went to the long-term-care projects through the Ministry of Long-Term Care were also in that COVID-19 stream; and then, of course, the \$250 million, part of which was announced today. There are more regional announcements coming so that we can let our municipal leaders—who are very happy to have that money and get those projects under way.

On the broadband—thank you very much for the question. I've loved hearing stories about your son throughout the years, his evolution of going from a student into the workforce into the skilled trades. I love hearing when you speak about your son.

No question, broadband in unserved and underserved areas—those are closer than you think, because your son would be maybe an hour, an hour and a half from the city

of Toronto boundaries, right? I know that MPP West yesterday was mentioning dropping calls outside of Innisfil, and I will not tell any more stories about my riding, because, as I said, I can write the book about dropped calls and Internet service there. But that was a major investment of nearly \$4 billion on the table, and realizing that we needed to build, make those connections, get everybody in Ontario in to the 21st century so they can do more business, they can learn, access health services, justice services, everything they can from home—learning from home for the moment still, but as I said, I certainly have lots of great stories from young people in my riding, how they loved virtual learning before the pandemic hit. It just gave them that flexibility to complete courses even during the summer. Those demands are here, and they're going to stay here as we move into the 21st century.

And there's a competitiveness angle. You mentioned your son in business. It's an economic tool to have infrastructure and broadband. I often say, in my riding, it has been the number one ask for almost 20 years for economic development: access to broadband. You're seeing projects and connections happening right now. You're going to see more of them happening. I keep on alluding to the fact that in June, there's going to be more announcements, and we're just going to continue to make them.

We realize that we can work with the federal government. Unfortunately, their broadband—it was only \$2.75 billion that we got them to, for the whole country. Our commitment is nearly \$4 billion for the province of Ontario. Even though telecommunications is a federally regulated industry, the Premier, the government, all of my fellow government caucus members realize how important it is, and we've stepped up to the plate and put in that money. We know that we needed to put the money there so we can connect everyone in Ontario by 2025. I won't leave anyone behind. That is one of the marquee parts of our government.

As part of infrastructure—broadband is part of that, and that is new. I know MPP Crawford yesterday said that now we're talking about broadband as part of infrastructure. That conversation didn't really exist a few years ago, so that's exciting.

I know that you might have more questions, so I can be quiet. I don't know if you want to nod.

Ms. Jane McKenna: I've enjoyed listening to all of it. I do appreciate—and I say this time and time again, because it has been many, many years, and yes, MPP Crawford did say that yesterday, that broadband is part of it now, but it's long overdue that it is part of it. But I do appreciate the fact that, as awful as this pandemic has been—and rightly so; it has been—there have been some wonderful things that have come out of it, because we're extending hands, getting people back to jobs, getting the communities going again. I can just say, speaking with our mayor and MP Gould, it's all working together, sharing a hand.

You've done a phenomenal job, as this government, in getting out of your silos and all working together hand in hand. You just spoke about Minister Lecce doing an

announcement. I know what you do with our ministry as well, and I just think it's a breath of fresh air when everybody is working together, because as we know, ministries for many, many years were all stuck in their silos and obviously not working hand in hand. Of course, it wasn't beneficial for the good people of Ontario to not have what government should have been doing, which we have been doing for the last three years.

But I just want to go on a bit more, because I know you made a significant announcement to support broadband projects not only in northern Ontario communities but First Nations as well. Could you tell us a bit about how the investment will help connect more homes and businesses in northern Ontario?

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Hon. Laurie Scott: No question. That's why we're here. As I said, by the nature of geography etc., and the challenge of the north in populations being a little sparser and spread out, there is a challenge. The enthusiasm that you see from northern Ontario municipalities and First Nations on how this can be life-changing: I used the story of Pikangikum and the satellite that they have worked out with Starlink to receive Internet. You're going to see some more announcements coming soon. I've listed many that have occurred in northern Ontario already. I don't know if you were on yesterday when I made those calls to definitely hear the relief and the gratitude from the mayors that their community is going to be hooked up and in process with different ISP providers across the province. But I think, in the First Nations especially, the ability for education to be delivered, for health care—I've heard many stories over the years about accessing health care, about access to specialists, and of course, access to mental health service providers. What a difference that could make if you can receive those services through the broadband, the high-speed Internet, the satellite—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Okay. Can I just talk it out, then?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): It's your time.

Hon. Laurie Scott: I appreciate the warning.

The difference that can make in their lives and connecting them to the outside world, because we all—I know; I've listened to many stories, and Minister Rickford is always wonderful at telling the stories, because it's mainly his portfolio. He has worked as a nurse and a lawyer with his communities up in northwestern Ontario—the absolute change that can make in their lives. He understands their needs. It's wonderful that he has the First Nations portfolio and can relate and share those stories and work with, as you said, the multi-ministries, whether it's the Solicitor General, whether it's justice, whether it's health, whether it's ourselves as infrastructure, to figure out how we can take a united path to try to assist those First Nations.

In January of this year, we announced \$10.9 million to bring faster broadband to several northern towns and First Nations. We're investing in projects right through the north. In 2019, we invested the \$30 million, as you heard,

in Matawa, that would benefit 670 homes and institutions in northern Ontario. I had the privilege to be in Thunder Bay with the Premier and Minister Rickford and the First Nation leaders, and I am telling you, it's touching. They have asked for this for many, many years, and that was working with the Minister of Indigenous Affairs, with NOHFC money, with Ministry of Infrastructure dollars.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you.

Hon. Laurie Scott: More to come. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Okay. That's it for that 20-minute round.

We now go to the opposition. MPP French, the floor is yours.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you very much, Chair. Actually, I'm going to hand the floor back over to Mr. Lindsay just to finish his explanation. We were talking about—he said that Link427 has withdrawn its claim, but if he could just finish that thought. Thank you.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Gladly, MPP French. As I was saying, the parties were in court on May 17 of this year. Link427 has withdrawn its claim in court against IO and the Ministry of Transportation and against the joint and retained independent certifier. Instead, Link427 and IO/MTO have agreed to address our disputes about substantial completion and the necessity for Link427 to complete urgent repair work to arbitration, to solve that through arbitration rather than in court. It remains IO/MTO's position that the road was not built to specifications in the contract and that safety-related concerns preclude opening of the road until repairs have been made.

Again, I would just link this to one of the benefits within the P3 model as we see it, which is, through our model, the substantial completion payment is not made by the province of Ontario until such time as works are ultimately complete.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you. I appreciate that. I'm going to launch from there. The Highway 427 dispute—and I'm glad to hear that it's moving to arbitration, because we've seen lots of things that get stuck or grow in complexity in terms of the problem. Though, the Highway 427 dispute reminds me of how Crosslinx, the P3 consortium building the Eglinton Crosstown LRT, whose partner members include ACS, which is also one of the Link427 partners, sued Metrolinx after the contractors said standard designs were rejected by Metrolinx, resulting in delays.

And according to—and we are all aware—the Ontario Auditor General's 2018 report, it said, "Missing details and deficiencies in the designs include system elements, such as signalling and fire detection equipment in the tunnels." These sound pretty important.

Even though there were basic safety features that the P3 contractor should have understood to be within the scope of the contract, Metrolinx caved in and paid Crosslinx an extra \$237 million to settle that lawsuit. That was supposed to get the project back on schedule, then the project was delayed yet again, and now, Crosslinx has launched yet another lawsuit, this time blaming the pandemic for delays.

But according to the AG's follow-up report from last December, this project was repeatedly running into trouble well before the pandemic and well after the \$237-million settlement that was supposed to put everything back on track. The AG reported that Crosslinx was continuing to submit deficient designs for the Eglinton Crosstown and threatened lawsuits when these designs were rejected.

As the AG's follow-up report said, "From March to December 2019, Metrolinx staff 'rejected' all monthly submissions on the basis that there were substantial deficiencies present. Metrolinx sent numerous letters to the consortium throughout 2019 indicating that performance was deteriorating."

The AG said Crosslinx was still filing claims against Metrolinx, and Metrolinx was still caving in. The quote is, "Since our audit, Metrolinx has received 132 new claims from the consortium, and all were unresolved.... We discovered that Metrolinx was again engaged directly in negotiating a settlement agreement, with no substantial changes in its process to document the validity of allegations and evidence to demonstrate the credibility and the value of the claims made by the consortium and to inform Metrolinx in its negotiations. Although the settlement was not finalized, this situation was not disclosed to us by Metrolinx as of September 2020. We obtained information that this was occurring through our own means."

All that to say, I would like if you could please provide this committee with details of any settlement, financial and non-financial, with respect to the matters referred to in the AG's follow-up report. Minister, is that something that I can have? Is that something that the committee can have?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Well, I would say that MTO is probably the ministry that could give you the most information, but I'll ask Michael and see if he would like to add anything to the conversation.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you very much, MPP French. I would note that you've made a very specific request again, so I won't bother to hang a lot of context on the answer to the question, although I'm happy to address some of the specific points there and what they do and do not evidence about how we manage projects or substantiate claims that are ultimately coming in.

I would need to take this away. Again, agreements made in respect of the settlement, especially in circumstances where there is a continuing litigation and dispute, as there is in this particular case, are something that I know that you'll understand we have to be very careful in respect of, but I'm happy to take that away.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I appreciate that, and I sort of understand what you're saying, but I want to be clear. What does "take that away" mean in terms of the outcome? I recognize what you have said about needing to connect with legal folks and what have you, but is that something that by this afternoon the legal folks and what have you could say, "Yes, you can have that," or "No, you may not"? Because I would like to know what the committee can or can't expect. I recognize that there are pieces here that are missing, but beyond that—

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Understood. If I understand the request, specifically, you are looking for details related to

any settlements already made with Crosslinx in connection to the Eglinton Crosstown project. Do I understand you correctly?

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Ms. Jennifer K. French: Yes, those matters referred to in the AG's follow-up report and settlements, financial and non-financial.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Okay. Metrolinx, unfortunately, is the source of information in respect of this. The settlement in question was about resolving outstanding disputes from both sides related to the Crosstown LRT, as is typical in many contracts in many construction projects—again, not just ours, but across industry and across the country. Details of those settlements have legal implications associated with them, as I say, particularly when there's a continuing dispute. What I can undertake to do is, by this afternoon, to try to close the loop with folks at Metrolinx to confirm what can and cannot be said.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you. I appreciate that. I'm going to continue in this vein. I recognize that were Metrolinx sitting here, we could maybe have more of the conversation, but they're not, so you guys are stuck with me.

Back to that AG's follow-up report: It revealed quite astonishingly that Crosslinx is building "at risk," meaning that it is proceeding with construction even though the designs have not been approved and may be found to be deficient. As they said in their follow-up report, "Since our audit, Metrolinx technical advisers noted that the consortium was continuing to experience design issues.... At the time of our follow-up, there were 380 rejected design submissions, with the consortium continuing construction at risk of non-conformance. Although Metrolinx can also issue a non-conformance report and insist that the matter at fault be rectified, we noted that Metrolinx has not acted on this and has only issued one design-related non-conformance notice since the time of our last audit."

The AG follow-up report describes a transit line that could have major technical problems, and that makes me think of all the problems that have plagued the Ottawa LRT, which is another transit project that was procured by P3. In fact, many of the same companies behind the Ottawa LRT, like SNC-Lavalin, are also behind the Eglinton Crosstown. So given all of the lingering design and safety issues identified by the AG, and the inability of the government to enforce the terms of the P3 contract, should the public fear that history will repeat itself? Are we going to see Ottawa LRT-style problems when the Eglinton Crosstown opens? And while we're here, when exactly will the Crosstown open, anyway? Those are my questions.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: With apologies, MPP French, I cannot speak to the design review process of Metrolinx. Those answers must come from them.

I will say that the team is working right now with our counterparty to endeavour to deliver the project as soon as we can for the people of the province of Ontario, and again, consistent with our model, doing so in a way that ensures that these kinds of disputes do not unduly compromise progress on the project. Indeed, people will

have seen, I'm sure, the testing of vehicles which is now occurring on the Eglinton Crosstown. And the commissioning process that is a subsumed, embedded part of our project agreement with the counterparty is but one of the mitigations to some of the issues that have been observed on other projects.

That isn't to predict that there won't be any such issues, but ultimately, at the end of the day, we're doing everything we can to deliver the project as quickly as we possibly can. I simply cannot speak, unfortunately, to anything that the AG is raising about internal processes of design related to Metrolinx.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you for that, and I recognize that there are, I'll say, jurisdictional divides there, but as an outsider—and I don't mean me as an MPP with the opportunity to sit across from folks like yourself and ask questions, but for the outside person who sees stupid amounts of money that we're having to throw at something beyond what was the original agreement, so to speak, or the average folks who are hearing things like that the people we trust to build or that the government in all its wisdom has chosen or allowed are connected to other projects like Ottawa—which is not a good-news story and hasn't been.

The people in Ottawa watched that unfold and there was very little we could do because as soon as you've got that P3—I mean, you guys can sell it and celebrate it, but it is behind closed doors until it gets handed back, for the most part, right? You can't just put construction inspectors on site, because it's like, "No, no. The contract says you can come on once we hand it back to you." On the face, when the minister is talking about 95% on budget or 70% on time or whatnot, when things go sideways, they seem to really go sideways.

We're not going to agree. I'm a New Democrat. Minister, you're a Conservative, and we feel very differently about P3s and what we consider risk.

But back to this, with those lingering design and safety issues—fine, it might be Metrolinx and not IO, or not the ministry exactly. The government can't enforce the terms of that P3 contract. How do you tell the public, "It's okay; don't imagine it's going to go badly like Ottawa," should the public actually fear that history may repeat itself? Minister, how do I reassure folks? How do you?

Hon. Laurie Scott: The whole nature of the P3s, and Michael Lindsay can talk more specifically, is to protect the taxpayers' dollar. So if there are not commitments met by the consortiums that are to build that is in IO, in their P3 model—and, Metrolinx, of course, can speak to the Metrolinx projects that are in question now—monies do not get released. This is why taxpayers' monies are protected. There are agreements, as Michael Lindsay has spoken to, that are written in before. Payments are not advanced until completion targets are met.

The Ottawa LRT was procured by the city of Ottawa. IO maybe had an advisory capacity, but the municipality did that procurement, so they can account for that.

I don't know if Michael Lindsay would like to expand further, but your interpretation of taxpayer money mis-spent because of projects that weren't completed on

time—that is the very essence of P3s and why there is protection for the government's money, which is essentially the taxpayers' money. That's why the P3s offer that risk surety, with the transfer of risk going to the proponents that have made the bids. I don't know if Michael Lindsay would like to add more to that, but, in a general comment, that is what exists with the P3 model and why it is a protection layer for the government and the people of Ontario by extension.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: That's always been the argument, right? That's always how—

Hon. Laurie Scott: But it is actually backed up by third parties. When we say the 95% completions on budget, those are backed up by third-party people.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: In 2014, the Auditor General said Ontario's taxpayers paid an extra \$8 billion to private financiers on top of base costs, and that was to procure 74 infrastructure projects as a P3. That is the equivalent of a 30% cost overrun on every single project. That's the average. I recognize that many of the projects were—some projects are fine, but those are significant dollars; \$8 billion above and beyond the base cost is not protecting taxpayers' dollars.

Minister, you're insisting that these extra costs are worth it, or have been historically—that's my understanding—because P3 procurement, as you say, shifts risk from the public to the private sector.

We keep hearing the term "innovation," that it encourages innovation and design. That's quite a premium, right? That's a lot of extra money. These examples, though, show that when a P3 contractor "innovates," it seems to mean that it's actually a fancy word for cutting corners. Whenever the P3 contractor doesn't like the risk that they've been paid millions and billions of dollars extra to accept, they can simply sue the government and push those risks right back onto the public, meaning more costs, delays and deficiencies for the public. That's what I was saying earlier: When it doesn't go well, it doesn't go well, and it's a really expensive "doesn't go well."

How many lawsuits or how many safety issues, how many delays, how many wasted millions and billions is it going to take for this ministry or for this government to maybe rethink its interest or focus on private financing and P3s? I guess, again, there's ideology here, but I see the government doggedly clinging to P3s when we can point to—\$8 billion extra, on top of base costs, is not something to just sort of pretend didn't happen, not to say that you are. But how would you respond to that?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Well, I'll let Michael Lindsay do some more specifics, but as I will reiterate, monies are held back until certain milestones are met in completion of projects, and that's how we protect the taxpayer's money. That's how we make sure buildings are completed to the specific codes—buildings, highways etc. So we're actually holding back money until the completion targets are met on these projects. It's a risk transfer that has gone from the province to the proponent.

I will let Michael Lindsay maybe finish up some of those comments, if you would, please, sir.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, MPP French. Just first, on the AG's report: The \$8-billion figure, I would suggest, is half of the equation. The AG reported in 2014—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Just to let you know, you have about two minutes left.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you—that IO, through P3 contracts, transferred \$14-billion worth of risk to our private sector partners, and we did that at a cost of \$8 billion. That leaves Ontario taxpayers \$6 billion better off as a result of the P3 model. Using a direct delivery model, the province and taxpayers would have been responsible for any of the additional costs that had arisen through those projects—so just on the AG report specifically.

More broadly on enforcing the terms of our contracts—linking this back, MPP French, to your commentary about disputes and how prolific they may or may not be across our projects—I think that this is indeed evidence of us enforcing the contract. It represents us passing risks to private sector partners, who are trying to use legal mechanisms to ultimately get the province to accept liability and associated costs for the problems that they are experiencing with the risks that we have successfully transferred to them.

So it's not only the protection, as the minister rightfully points at, around substantial completion payment and withholding that until the moment that we are satisfied that a system is of technical quality, of the right level of safety, but other mechanisms inherent in the P3 approach that also protect taxpayers.

I'll just point out one more, and that is the integration of scope for design, construction and, often, maintenance of these projects. That implies that we are incentivizing counterparties to ultimately solve for the interactive effect between those three things, to reduce the total cost of an asset over its life and to make sure that if we run into problems during the operations-and-maintenance phase, whether it's on a transit project or a hospital, it remains the responsibility of the project co and that their availability payments that we make to them are at risk for the life of the concession, ultimately, that they have signed up contractually with us for.

I understand and appreciate the point that you make about an ideological difference on this, but I do think that it is true to say that the construct of the P3 model provides significant protections for the taxpayer and does pass risk successfully to parties who not only are better positioned to manage it, but then bear the implications associated with not managing it well.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): And I'm sorry to say, with that, your 20 minutes are up.

I will be declaring a 10-minute recess. Be back with you in 10 minutes.

The committee recessed from 1023 to 1033.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): The committee is now back in session. The floor goes to the government side.

Minister, good to see you. Who will be carrying this matter? MPP Parsa, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Good morning—yes, it is still morning. Good morning, Chair. Thanks very much. Great

job, as always. As my colleague said, these are long days, but it's very effective work, important work. To be honest, I really enjoy these meetings. I'm learning a lot about some of the issues and matters across the province, with my colleagues from all sides bringing up issues. It's really important work, so thanks very much.

I want to thank the minister. Minister, thank you very much for being here, you and your team. Certainly, Michael Lindsay, I know you guys haven't stopped even during COVID. You were busy. I saw Michael Lindsay in multiple places, in particular, at the hospital that opened up in our region, the first hospital in 30 years, a very important one in a growing area like York region, Minister. So thank you all for being here.

Minister, before I start, I also want to thank you for making broadband a key priority. Quite frankly, that's just because the previous government neglected it. It was really the right thing to do for everyone, for all Ontarians. You and I both know reliable access to Internet is no longer a luxury; it's a necessity. When it comes to individuals, families, that are affected as a result of a lack of stable and reliable service, you've stepped up. It's been a key priority for you and the government. I really appreciate it.

If you think back, in the last few months or year or so, to the impact that a lack of service has had for Ontarians who have had to rely on Internet by staying at home—not just Internet, but cell service as well—having to work from home, running their businesses from home.

In my riding, Minister, I'm in Aurora–Oak Ridges–Richmond Hill, so it's just north of Toronto. It's not a rural riding, but I'm really happy and I'm thankful that you always talk about the fact that it isn't just the unserved areas, but the underserved areas as well, because that refers to ridings like mine. I have pockets in my riding where we don't have access to the Internet. Very few people will believe it in a riding just north of Toronto, but we don't.

I remember getting a call from Marianne when you started talking about investments that you were going to be making and how you were going to prioritize it. She was incredibly happy and thankful. Marianne called me and she compared what she said—for years, she's been contacting officials at all levels and asking for something to be done: "At least let's get the ball rolling. Let's understand the priority and the importance of reliable and stable service." No one was listening to her. I just wanted to convey her thanks to you because she sent me a thank-you note. I want you to know how important it is to families like Marianne's. She said to me she was paying \$170 for 150 gigabytes of Internet, in comparison to her neighbours across the street who were getting \$60 unlimited. So her family had no access to any of the entertainment because they just simply couldn't pay the cost of it. Again, I just wanted to give you some context as to what that means to local communities like mine, for example.

In areas, again in my riding, Minister, there are businesses that rely on reliable service. These are small farms and small businesses, and they don't have it right now. One of them said, "I'm always behind the eight ball when

it comes to competing with other areas only because I don't have the reliable service I need. I have to do a lot of things manually. It takes a lot of time. My staff have been with me for a long time. We want to grow. We want to scale up, but unfortunately the one thing that's hurting us is this."

Again, just wanted to say thank you very much for this because it really, really makes a huge difference in communities.

I apologize. I'm going to let you answer that, but I'm just going to get to one of my questions because it ties into why I opened up with those remarks. Right when I was first elected, I attended conferences like AMO and ROMA and the municipalities have told us at these conferences that they need more stable and predictable annual funding when it comes to supporting infrastructure: the maintenance and the upgrades. You and your ministry have been providing this through the community infrastructure fund. I'm honoured to represent the town of Aurora and the city of Richmond Hill—parts of both—and the town of Aurora qualified for it. So we received funding in 2019, 2020 and 2021. I want to thank you for that.

I'm wondering if you can just elaborate a little bit and tell us a little bit more about the supports that are being provided to municipalities across the province. That's my first question. Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you so much, MPP Parsa. You're always such a pleasure to speak with to listen to the concerns of your constituents. They have a champion with you, for sure.

You're right. I'll just touch lightly on broadband. There is no question—I mean, 1.4 million people can't access broadband adequately, if they have anything at all. It is right across the province. So your stories ring true in your riding. Yes, we are taking action and stepping up to the plate with almost \$4 billion to connect everyone by 2025. Stay connected, stay tuned, more is coming for announcements. But it is time, and we are going to deliver on that. I'm happy to be in the portfolio as Minister of Infrastructure responsible for that since, as I keep saying, I have many stories that I hear and that I live all the time, so it is great.

You can tell Marianne "double positives" and that the minister has said, "We will get connected." I thank you for that, and for the comment about the new hospital opening and serving more residents. It's the first time a new hospital has opened in a long time. We were happy the Ministry of Health, the Premier and yourself were all part of that, as well as us over here at the Ministry of Infrastructure—no question.

1040

Diving into municipalities, I think that connectivity was the number one issue out of AMO and definitely out of ROMA—the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and the Rural Ontario Municipal Association. It has been a topic for a long time, definitely the top ask in the last session. For sure, municipalities are working together, but I think that the relief that they're hearing from our government, with such a large spend, is that they can be

assured we're going to take the burden off them of how they get their constituents connected. We're giving certainly a lot more of a helping hand and, as I said, more will be unveiled. Houses are being hooked up as we speak, but more details will be unveiled, coming soon.

The Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund is the question, I think, that you asked at the end. That certainly provides eligible municipalities with the stable and predictable funding that you mentioned, and they can address critical infrastructure needs within their municipality: roads, bridges, water, waste water projects. We certainly understand since the global pandemic that municipalities need to have access to the stable funding to address those local critical infrastructure needs. That's why we provided those same supports to our municipal partners that we had allocated the previous year.

I know that on January 25, I announced the \$200-million investment in municipalities through that OCIF fund to help 424 municipalities, which is huge, and they're the small, rural and northern communities that need that extra money. They just don't have the tax base. They have more challenges. Those are very well received, especially when I say "stable," "predictable." Those are exactly the words that they do use, and that is what describes the OCIF money.

I know that it helps them with their asset management planning to address their priority needs, and it was discussed, I think, yesterday a little bit. I touched on the asset management and how we're working with municipalities to make sure that they are able to take stock of all their infrastructure, the age they're at and have that predictable, forward look of what needs to be replaced and the priorities that they can place on that infrastructure, whether they be roads, bridges or water and waste water facilities, and what their end-of-life may be, coming up.

The good part of the OCIF is what we hear from municipalities, because nobody likes paperwork. Administration is time-consuming, and staff time is money time, too, right? This is a formula-based fund. It's based on many factors, but basically, the municipality doesn't have to fill out tons and tons of paperwork. Those eligible municipalities, when we've said, "We're going to give you the same money as last year," the \$200 million based on this formula, they can feel assured that they have those funds coming and that they can follow through on their prediction of what they would like to spend those monies on.

We remain committed to that interaction with municipalities. I know the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing has his monthly AMO table. I appeared, I think, last week and talked about broadband updates and working together on the regulations for the Building Broadband Faster Act. That's going to help them for the progress that we're going to make.

We have said that we would look at OCIF also for a redesign and what we can do better in the OCIF program itself. We have hired a consultant to work with AMO to see what changes they would like in the formula so that they can bring, maybe, up-to-date needs forward, some changes they would like to see so that the smaller, rural

municipalities' needs—those under 100,000—can be even more fine-tuned and met through our OCIF funding. That report is going to come within this year so we can make those changes. As I said, we're working with them to collaboratively make the changes that they would like to see in that formula.

Thank you very much for the questions. I appreciate it.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Well, thank you very much, Minister. I really appreciate the answer. One of the things, I guess—and I've heard you say this multiple times—is that we're going to get through this. We're going to get past this. We can't stop. We need to make sure that all the work that we're doing now, once we have put COVID in the rear-view mirror and it's behind us—we can't get up and start working then. We need to continue to make sure that our communities receive the support that they need. And that was really important, and it was evident in your work and your ministry's work and Infrastructure Ontario, certainly throughout the pandemic. The projects continued, the work continued across the province because these are services that everybody relies on, in particular our communities, Minister. You talked about the commitment to bringing infrastructure, the investments, to communities all across the province.

In particular, my question is about recreational infrastructure. These facilities help local communities everywhere, and once we get past this pandemic, we're going to get back to life, normal life, and families and communities are going to be utilizing these facilities. They're going to need them. I think it was just a few weeks ago, if I'm not mistaken, that you announced the approval of a new skating trail very near to my riding, in Whitchurch-Stouffville. I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit about this announcement and the importance of investing in these recreational projects and facilities across the province.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you very much, and absolutely. The investment in Whitchurch-Stouffville of more than \$1.8 million from the province of Ontario is for a multi-season trail that can be used for skating during the winter season. I've seen more and more of that happening in the province, making trails into skating trails in the wintertime. I've actually done that in one of my parks in my riding a couple of years ago. It was a night skate, and it was fabulous. But this type of skating trail is going to be very popular in your town, and the primary community park that situates the trail. It will include the construction of accessible washrooms and change rooms, becoming a great new place for residents to enjoy the outdoors barrier-free.

These investments, like the CCR, are for years to come. Generations will be able to enjoy them, so making them, especially—and the outdoors is always safer during a pandemic. As you see, we were opening up according to that outdoors are safe. This will certainly enhance that outdoor experience.

When we announced the CCR—we know it's a very popular stream of the ICIP, and we know that it was over-applied. I should say “we know.” I've said it many times,

I know. I think it was over 1,200 applications that were brought in, totalling about \$10 billion, of which the fund had \$1 billion. So tough decisions to be made, but the good news is that 245 projects were approved for that stream.

I know that the ICIP stream is over 10 years, but because there were so many projects that wanted to get involved, we made it one intake, let's get everything approved, because with construction seasons, municipalities sometimes just can't build it within the one or two years. So they have the time to build out the CCR projects. I know everybody wants to get them built tomorrow, but at least in some of the projects, there's the flexibility of some time.

With these projects, they are local job creators, too, right? They enhance the local communities. They drive local economic growth. In this case, in Whitchurch-Stouffville, they were shovel-ready. So I think this is going to be great for not only your municipality but many municipalities through those CCR projects. They're not quite all approved or publicly announced yet, but, again, it's going to be a very busy few months coming up, with more and more announcements coming. So congratulations for your advocacy in your municipality and putting forward a project that we were pleased to do, the Whitchurch-Stouffville skating trail.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Thank you very much, Minister. I appreciate it. Earlier, one of my colleagues asked a question about the building of long-term-care facilities in the province and the importance of not just building them but building them fast for the people of Ontario. Honestly, Minister, when I heard the conversation—and I heard it first in the House, that the previous government had created only 611 beds in almost eight years—it's unacceptable. The people of Ontario, certainly our seniors, deserve a lot better than that.

1050

I was very thankful; I walked over to Minister Fullerton and thanked her for having seen it and the importance that was being shown to make sure that those who have paved this province—have opened all these doors for people like me—have an opportunity to live in dignity. They deserve nothing less than that.

This was touched on earlier about building long-term care. I know they were going to be expedited. We're looking at some in our region. I was wondering if you can perhaps elaborate on the facilities up in my riding that we're looking at opening up, because it's a welcome addition, Minister, certainly in our community.

Hon. Laurie Scott: No question. I will say that probably the Humber site is the one that you're referring to, maybe, for the long-term care rapid builds that affect you—Mississauga, yes.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Truthfully, in this region here, it doesn't have to be specific in a riding. Ontarians want—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Two minutes left.

Mr. Michael Parsa: —long-term-care beds built, and they want them built fast. I know Mr. Lindsay alluded to this earlier when he was chatting about it, so I don't know if you would want to—

Hon. Laurie Scott: Yes, absolutely, I'll speak. Look, I've had the opportunity to be in opposition for many years before I had the opportunity to be in government. Long-term-care homes and the capacity—I think our government, previously when we were in power, built 20,000 new long-term-care beds, when Premier Harris was in government and our team. I can certainly tell you that I had many new builds in my riding. And then, as you mentioned, the previous Liberal government in the last 15 years with only 600 new builds, when we have all seen the tsunami, we like to say, of people who were aging and the fact that we knew this was coming and that only 600-and-some new beds had been built, with thousands, over 30,000—over 35,000 now—people on wait-lists for long-term-care beds.

I know the Minister of Long-Term Care, Dr. Merrilee Fullerton, knows this issue very well, being a family doctor for over 30 years—very, very compassionate. I'm glad she is receiving the accolades, not just from you, for moving these projects. She had restructured and was about to launch new construction formulas for more long-term-care beds to be built, and then the pandemic hit.

But we moved quickly, with the help of Michael Lindsay and the IO group, and said, "How do we build long-term care faster?" You know the Premier is very passionate about this also. Going to the new model of the rapid builds in long-term care and working with those three hospital sites involved to get the over, I believe, 1,200 new beds that are going to be built, and built quickly, in a design and a process—you know, we were living real science. I keep telling people, every day it evolves, but—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): And I'm sorry to say, with that, your time is up.

We go now to the official opposition. I understand, MPP French, that you will be starting off? MPP French, the floor is yours.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you very much. I will also say, hearkening back to the earlier conversation about broadband, that I'm not in a dead zone, but I keep disappearing and having to reset my Internet. So if I abandon you, it's not something you said, I assure you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Good.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Well, depending on who—it remains to be seen.

I just wanted to circle back, because I know that Mr. Lindsay and I were having a spirited discussion about the value of P3s. I wanted to rebut some of that, because, Mr. Lindsay, I have spent some time at committee through the years, opposite Ehren Cory. We've had some interesting conversations about that \$8 billion. It's always been IO's position that, as you said, this \$14 billion being part of the conversation, but as the Auditor General made clear, and as I understand, those are numbers where there's no data, there's no evidence, that it's a matter of the money guys go behind the door and that this \$14 billion—we don't see where that comes from.

The Auditor General has raised that, that we're not understanding that data or evidence; they're kind of fairy numbers. That has always been the argument. That is something that we kind of fought out at committee before

and, interestingly, some of the things that IO had promised us at committee—and I don't remember if it was estimates or public accounts, but—

Failure of sound system.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): We're having trouble with you, MPP French. MPP French, you are not coming through clearly. Would you take off your video for the moment so we just have sound? That may give us a connection.

Failure of sound system.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): It looks like everyone is frozen.

Interjections.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): It seems that we're frozen at this end.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Stop the clock. Yes. So we should all be having fun conversations about the Chair. Maybe it's not us that are having trouble.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): No, the problem seems to be at the Legislature end.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Oh, good.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): No need to make jokes about that.

Interjections.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I will recess for a few minutes while we try and sort out the technical issues.

The committee recessed from 1057 to 1111.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): We are back in session. Apparently, we are back on the Internet.

We had left off—MPP French, you had the floor. We stopped the clock at that time. You have 16 minutes and 20 seconds left. It's all yours.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Oh, good. Thank you. I may have squeezed in an extra minute of talk time, Chair, that I don't think you could hear, but everyone else could. I'm sorry that you missed it. I'm happy to circle back a little bit. And I won't even take exception to when you said that the committee was having trouble with me. I think you were having trouble with my Internet.

I was working myself into a lather there, but we have a number of times at committee talked about the management parts of P3s, especially around hospitals. That's perhaps a conversation for another time. Mr. Lindsay and I, I'm sure, can find time to have a conversation and delve into that—not here at committee—and debate all of the ins and outs of P3s.

I will wrap that up there with that \$8 billion. I recognize, to Mr. Lindsay's point, that that's part of the conversation. It's the same numbers that have been raised for years, with that \$14 billion in risk. But that assumes a 50% cost overrun if everything was publicly delivered. Yes, obviously 50% is higher than the 30% that we see with the P3 risk premium or what have you, but anyway, I don't think there's any point in us debating this today. When we're signing contracts with a limited liability corporation, they've got some power that maybe we end up paying for.

I am going to take this opportunity—and if MPP Armstrong is on, I know she had a question that she wanted to ask, so I'm going to hand that over to her.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Armstrong?

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you, MPP French. I have a question. I met with the London Children's Museum just a couple of days ago, and London is building an actual new facility. The facility they've had over the years is outdated and doesn't meet the needs of the growing capacity, with kids and families accessing the children's museum. They have been asking about the Ontario Trillium fund. It's called the community building fund on the capital side. They wanted me to ask the Minister of Infrastructure what details are available, where can they find that information so that they can proceed with an application under the capital funding piece in order to access that money available to build a new museum.

Hon. Laurie Scott: That's a good question. I don't know if anybody on the team may have a direct answer to where that may fit under. We certainly do Infrastructure Ontario loans with municipalities for certain projects. I don't know if anybody else on the team—I would think it is Minister MacLeod because it's a museum, under the ministry of heritage, sport—I'm trying to remember all the other acronyms that go with that name. That might fit, MPP Armstrong, under there. I don't know if anybody else in this team could do that. And especially, of course, since you mentioned the Ontario Trillium Fund that does fall under her ministry also. So, happy to pass on the message, but I think it's more directed towards that ministry specifically.

As you know, we've had many streams of ICIP, and it may have fallen under—I don't know if they applied through any of those streams. But I can just repeat that the community culture and recreation stream, it was incredibly over-applied. But they were [*inaudible*] in the London area. I don't know if that helps at all, MPP Armstrong, but it gives you a bit of guidance.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Yes, I did think of that, but they wanted me to pose the question on committee for infrastructure. So I will go back to that ministry and get more details. Thank you so much for the opportunity to ask the question.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Always nice to see you. Thank you.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you. And actually, that sparks another question, Minister. It was something that I've been quite interested in, as we're talking about the different ICIP streams. You have mentioned that—I don't remember the numbers, and that's not the sort of crux of this part, but of the projects nominated, how many have been completed or are under way and whatnot.

My basic understanding of the various streams in the ICIP funding is that groups and municipality folks have applied for it. When the province nominates them then for their federal funding portion, then that's a go. I don't know if it's 100% of the nominated projects that have been approved by the feds. I don't think that there's a layer there that the feds are rejecting; you can correct me if I'm wrong.

But what I would like to know is, can the committee have a breakdown, by stream, of how many applications were received and then how many have been nominated

with the streams that are completed? I understand that with any that are under way we obviously don't have those numbers, but I'm interested to know how many applications were received by the province, and of those, how many were nominated to the feds, and of those, how many have been approved for funding by the feds.

Hon. Laurie Scott: So the deputy may be able to fill you in a little bit more, but I can tell you, on the total nominated from us to the feds, the ones approved by the feds and the number remaining to be identified by the feds—I can give you public transit outside the GTHA: we nominated 201. The total projects approved by the feds, which will be called INFC, is 196 of those 201. Remaining nominated is one. So the total projects announced of that public transit outside the GTHA is 196. Inside the GTHA for transit, there were 69 nominated, 57 approved by the feds and 11 remaining nominated or projects to be identified. And then 53 of those are announced.

So we nominate; the feds approve. Length of time of the approvals are a challenge, which I mentioned before—we asked to speed those up. Then they can't be publicly announced until we coordinate that communication with the feds. So just to give you a little background, maybe I should start it with—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: No, no, that's fine. And actually, just a clarification—not to interrupt, but just to clarify what you said. The ones that have yet—is it “yet to be approved” that have been nominated? Have any been rejected, or is that not a layer?

Hon. Laurie Scott: It's not really a layer. There's the odd one that we're still in process with, making sure they meet all the parameters, but by far, the federal part is usually just approving the ones nominated by the province.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: That's what I thought. I just wasn't sure why the numbers weren't quite aligning. But it's still in process, then—

Hon. Laurie Scott: There's tons that are in process. I can give you other numbers. The rural and northern was the first stream to go, for roads and bridges and airports. There were [*inaudible*], 143 have been approved and 142 have been announced publicly. The CCR stream: I think 278 were identified, 245 approved. Only 165, though, have been publicly announced. That's one of the things that I say is still in process and coming hopefully soon.

1120

Ms. Jennifer K. French: And those are good news. I know how grateful the municipalities are to have those answers and timelines and be able to move forward.

I would ask, in the interest of saving time, just for something that can be shared with committee, a list of projects that had applied or applications, because I am interested in how many—you said yourself that certain streams were over-applied, understanding there would be a lot of interest, but how many applications were received per stream and then how many were nominated? Because on the federal side, thank you, I have a clear understanding now that that takes its time, but that's not a rejection layer or whatnot. So if that's something I can ask just to be submitted—is that something that I may have so we can move on?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I think we can give you total numbers. I might have to call the deputy to see how much information we can actually give. For the CCR, what I commonly say and what you hear is like 1,200 applications and we could only do 275—that type of information. We can give you what I can give you—total numbers, for sure. Going back to the rural and northern, I think there were 400-and-some applications maybe, and only 144 we had capacity for, with the monies involved and the parameters, so that type of high level.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you. We all know, because we all live in different communities, that there are a lot of needs, a lot of interest in [*inaudible*] recovery. I understand that. Thank you.

I'm going to move on in my I'm not sure how many minutes left, probably 12 or so—a question about the Upper York Sewage Solutions. I realize there are different layers here, so I'm going to set my understanding. What we're seeing with the Upper York Sewage Solutions—this is a conversation I was having for a while before it hit the papers and hit general interest.

Durham region has been quite concerned since it first was proposed or since they first understood that there was something in the works. It would usually be the province paying for municipal infrastructure, but now, with the Minister of the Environment doing the planning and it's been handed over, it would seem, to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing—I don't really know where the Minister of Infrastructure would fall in this.

I guess what I'm asking you is if you could help me understand what I consider to be a genuinely weird project in that the Ministry of the Environment has taken over the planning. The Ministry of Infrastructure would normally be involved in funding those projects. The government would be required to approve the environmental assessment and say, "Yes, the EA is complete. You can proceed," or "No, don't proceed," or "Go ahead with conditions," or what have you, traditionally speaking, but the Ministry of the Environment would not be involved in the planning process. The Ministry of Municipal Affairs is involved in setting policies for land use planning, but wouldn't be involved in telling a municipality where to put their sewage pipes. So here we have kind of uncharted territory and something that I'm having a hard time understanding. It's sort of a mystery to me why the government is creating a new process.

Why I'm bringing this to this committee is because, in the final moments of our last sitting day at the Legislature, the government tabled Bill 306, which was to block lawsuits against the provincial government in relation to this project. I don't know what's driving those changes. There's lots of speculation about what politics or angles are driving the changes. Bill 306 seems to be mainly about blocking lawsuits against the government, since Minister Yurek does not need a new law to not make a decision, because that's basically what they've been doing for years.

My question is if the minister knows who was planning to sue us, "us" being Ontario. Who was planning to sue the government?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Obviously there was a bill introduced; it was introduced by the Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks for a reason, because they are the lead on this project. You've seen what's in the bill. My understanding, from what I see, is that it's a collaboration between the municipalities and the First Nations. We're happy with the—I don't know if they call it a task force, but anyway, an advisory to report back at a certain time on the York pipe. That's really—there's no other involvement with me or my ministry. I can talk about the green stream part of the infrastructure, but I'm not the lead on that project and what the minister introduced before.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: That's fair. Because I expect that the Ministry of Infrastructure will be—will they be funding this? The region of Durham estimates it's going to cost a lot of money, and I would like to know if the Ministry of Infrastructure is going to be paying for this. Is or was any provincial money going towards funding the proposed Upper York Sewage Solutions project?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Well, MECP is better to answer this, but this is not a new issue, and I know that Duffins Creek has been built for a long time and there have been contracts. Again, I do not know details to provide you here.

Now, municipalities are responsible for their infrastructure. There are some opportunities that they can get funding from different levels of government and, of course, an Infrastructure Ontario loan. Those are what we have available if a certain municipality asks for assistance. Infrastructure Ontario is also contracted by other ministries—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have one minute left.

Hon. Laurie Scott: —when there is a need for advice to build infrastructure and the types of procurement. So Infrastructure Ontario is contracted by many ministries, if not all of them, at one point in time or another, when there is construction going on for hospitals, for long-term care, for education facilities and, obviously, by MTO, which is our main dance partner at times, but Metrolinx also has a role in that.

So, yes, Infrastructure Ontario has a role, if asked, by a certain line ministry. Of course, this is advice for procurement types of information.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: At this time, there's not funding that's happening or whatnot; it's a "remain to be seen." And I will watch this as it unfolds. Okay, I appreciate the minister's answer. That's probably us out of time.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Well, 20 seconds.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay, then I will get back to—

Hon. Laurie Scott: I guess stay tuned. Watch the papers; see it unfold.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Yes, and I'll circle back with the municipalities who I know are watching—

Hon. Laurie Scott: They're involved. They've been consulted and been in consultations with MECP and MMAH—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: But are they going to be on the hook, is the concern, because it's a truckload of money, potentially—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): With that, you're out of time.

We now go to the government. MPP Skelly, please proceed.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Good morning, Minister. Good morning, Mr. Chair.

Minister, one of the areas that, as a former city councillor, I'm always focused on and very interested in is the amount of infrastructure deficit that many municipalities face and have to struggle with. In Hamilton, it was significant. When our government was elected, we came forward, and I can tell you, in Hamilton, there was almost \$1 million allocated to address—they're not sexy issues, but, in my opinion, they're very critical issues. It was just roofs on a number of the arenas that we had in Hamilton.

I have a number of other projects that I'd like you to address and give us an update on in a minute, but can you just speak to the importance of funding and addressing the non-sexy, if you will, infrastructure needs such as helping municipalities with repairs on things like roofs at arenas? When you have so many hockey moms—and I was a hockey mom and spent an awful lot of time at an arena, but if you don't maintain them, you can't use them. So I'd like to get your take on the importance of helping out municipalities with these projects.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Excellent question. You're right; there's a never-ending list from everywhere for assistance. I know that you've been a strong advocate for projects within your riding, but, absolutely, we have, in the four streams—and now five streams with the COVID stream in ICIP—spoken to municipalities or other private sector partners on what their needs are and what their applications could be focused on within those now five streams. I know we just did some ICIP announcements this morning for the COVID stream, but over all, it is a \$30-billion program over 10 years that unlocks both federal, provincial and partner funding, most commonly the municipalities, but not held to that.

1130

There are, as you know, many arenas that would like updates. You mentioned your involvement with your sons over the years with arenas. They were certainly part of the mix in the community, culture and recreation stream. We actually nominated 278 projects from that stream, but overall, there are more than 770 infrastructure projects under ICIP alone, which is a lot of projects that will help get people moving, stimulate the economy, and maybe rebuild some of those arenas that were lucky enough to receive funding. It's just great that we can do these joint announcements. I know in your area, you may bring up some of the projects that we've been able to—

Ms. Donna Skelly: We had a number of them. As I mentioned, some of the groups—

Hon. Laurie Scott: Yes.

Ms. Donna Skelly: We had the Dundas—I'll speak for the city of Hamilton; it's my hometown—the Dundas Valley School of Art expansion there.

There was also, of course, a significant amount of money allocated through your ministry for health care,

specifically the Juravinski Hospital on Hamilton Mountain and the West Lincoln Memorial Hospital, for expansion and redevelopment. Can you speak to that, the status and what those funds will be used for and why it is so important to support these projects?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Excellent question. As we uncovered the deficit within health care which you mentioned, some of those projects that we were left with and the reports that have come back to see the aging infrastructure within the health care system—and certainly in some areas with a certain growth burst, we needed those facilities. You're right: In the hospitals that you have mentioned, for sure, we were pleased to add additional details about those projects to our Infrastructure Ontario market update from December 2020, but the redevelopment project at Juravinski—am I saying that right?

Ms. Donna Skelly: Juravinski.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Juravinski: I didn't know if you pronounced the J or not. It will involve the renovation and expansion of the site and upgrade the aging infrastructure. Upgrades had last been made in 2011. The project is in the early planning stages. Michael Lindsay might want to expand on that, but the request for qualifications is going to be released in 2023, and the request for proposals should be spring 2024.

You mentioned the West Lincoln Memorial Hospital. That's well into the procurement phase. That also involves replacement of the existing facility with a larger hospital on the same site. It will provide 24-hour emergency care as well as improved maternal and newborn health services to support low-risk births. The West Lincoln Memorial will certainly improve community surgery—there's a lot here—an innovative day surgery model, three operating suites, procedure suites, and it also offers community medicine focusing on healthy aging and senior care, which we've spoken a lot about with infrastructure in the rapid long-term-care builds. Of course, the first option is always if we can give health care for our seniors to keep them at home as long as possible.

It's going to eventually evolve into more specialty clinics with rapid assessment clinics. Those requests for proposal, I think, will be released to three qualified teams in July. That construction is going to start, hopefully, in the spring of 2020. I don't believe there is anything off that.

We've got lots of building in the province of Ontario. I know in the 2021 budget, we certainly noted investment in those strategic facilities, as well as other infrastructure: highways, schools and, of course, my broadband topic, which I have spoke a great deal about. In the budget, it's \$30.2 billion over 10 years, with an additional \$3 billion since the 2020 budget, in the hospital infrastructures like the two that you have mentioned. Thank you very much for that.

Michael, I may have said all that needs to be said, but if you want to come on—or you can just say no, if you want to.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you very much, Minister. Thank you very much, MPP Skelly. I'll express our

enthusiasm as an organization that on West Lincoln we're going to be releasing the RFP this summer. Just more thematically, on these and other projects we continue to work with the Ministry of Health as we bring these projects through procurement to make sure that we are learning some of the lessons around infection prevention and control that have been taught to us by the recent pandemic, to make sure that the design of these hospitals is as optimized as it can be. I think that would be the only thing that I would add, Minister.

Ms. Donna Skelly: I'd like to add that when this announcement was made—and I can tell you, MPP Oosterhoff was advocating very hard to have the expansion at the West Lincoln Memorial Hospital—the community really rallied behind this. Often, as politicians perhaps and even bureaucrats, we forget that there are people who are impacted on the ground. This was truly their community hospital. They were passionate to keep this hospital, and not only are we keeping it, we are expanding.

Michael, I don't know if you had an opportunity to really understand the importance of that particular hospital to that community, but maybe you can speak to that.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: I do, MPP Skelly, and I've had the opportunity to actually tour the prospective site of the project. Look, one of the things—and I think Minister Scott made reference to this—that is a subsumed part of the programming that goes into this hospital is maternal and newborn services. It is indeed for the local community very much the place where life begins. Really, I think you're right: We're fortunate at Infrastructure Ontario—privileged, I would say—to be able to work on a collection of these types of projects in communities from Mississauga to Moosonee, whether it is West Lincoln or it's the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario or the Grandview children's treatment centre. You are exactly right: I get to experience how potent and resonant the emotion and the connection of the local community to these hospitals ultimately is, and it's the best part of my job.

Ms. Donna Skelly: I'd also like to get a little bit more information on the expansion at Juravinski. For your information, for those who are watching who aren't familiar, Charlie and his wife, Margaret—the Juravinskis—are incredible philanthropists in our area. They've donated millions and millions and millions of dollars to projects across the city, the Juravinski Hospital and other hospitals within Hamilton. We appreciate it, and we welcome it, and their character. We love them for what they've done, and, of course, all philanthropists. But we do also as a government have a responsibility to recognize that we play a key role in health care in our communities. Can you share with me: What can we expect with the dollars that are going to flow to Juravinski and the timeline attached to it?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Sure. Michael, go ahead.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you very much. MPP Skelly, if I stand back for a moment, Juravinski, to your point, is one of a couple of projects where there are significantly sized redevelopments and greenfield creations of hospitals across the province of Ontario. I think it would be the Civic redevelopment project in Ottawa and the

M-site development in Mississauga as being very much on that order of magnitude of the kind of investment that's being made by government to dramatically progress, to advance functional programming related to health in constituencies across the province of Ontario.

The status right now of Juravinski is—as the minister said, the first thing that we do is that we go out and we get the third-party advisers that we rely upon to ultimately bring design, given the functional program that we've been handed by the Ministry of Health, to the moment of being ready to go out to commence the procurement. We call them planning, design and conformance consultants and technical advisers, who are going to help take some of the programming that the minister was referencing before and turn it into output specifications that are then at the heart of our procurements.

We anticipate that we're going to go get those key technical advisers at some point early in 2022, and then, as the minister said, once that design has been progressed to a point where we know what ultimately the output specifications are, we will go out and we'll commence the pre-qualification process that's presently planned for the fall of 2023, with the RFP to follow in 2024. We very much hope to be in a position of executing that contract and beginning the construction in 2025. But I'll just link this to conversations we've been having in committee so far, and that is, part of what we do is that we come to output specifications, how we think the building envelope should ultimately look given the functional program that goes into it, and then pass the burden of fulsome design of that facility to our counterparties, trusting that they will find innovative ways to better serve the programs that, ultimately, we want to put into these hospitals.

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As a final thought—it might have been MPP Parsa who made reference to this earlier—increasingly, it's not just the bricks and mortar in these hospital projects that matter to us; it's also the ICAT systems and technology that ultimately make people's experiences in these facilities as optimized as they can be. With Cortellucci Vaughan and other hospitals, we've really come to appreciate how that needs to be an embedded part of the type of contracting that we do. That, too, will be a discussion about how we align the incentives of designers, constructors and people who ultimately put the systems into these facilities that make them as efficient as they can be.

So that's the work that lies ahead of us. It's important work, but boy, are we happy that this project is in our pipeline and we're advancing it as fast as we can.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Thank you. As I look at my colleague MPP McKenna, I recognize that while bricks and mortar are clearly very critical to a good, healthy health care system in Ontario, we also need people. Of course, our government has been committed to training people, not only in the skills but in the health care sector—PSWs and nurses etc.

Again, I recognize MPP West is on this committee as well. We're both from the same community in northern Ontario, although, as he referenced earlier, some of our

northern colleagues don't think it's northern Ontario; they call it central Ontario. But, Minister, could you speak to some of the projects that you have funded through your ministry for northern Ontario?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you very much. What I say quite often is that we are building in all of Ontario, and that includes connecting broadband. To northern Ontario: There are so many projects that have been up there. You mentioned you're from the hometown of—I guess Sudbury is now central Ontario? I thought I was in central Ontario, but—

Ms. Donna Skelly: I don't think MPP West and I will argue. It's still northern Ontario, especially when we're talking to people from Barrie. But when you talk to MPP Mamakwa, he'll say, "No, no, no. You're in central Ontario."

Hon. Laurie Scott: I know—it's hilarious. Yes, the Minister of Economic Development and Trade always says that. They say North Bay is not northern Ontario, so I hear this—

Ms. Donna Skelly: It isn't; Sudbury is.

Hon. Laurie Scott: It's so fun. True.

Just in your former hometown and MPP West's hometown: I mentioned some of the transportation investments that we've made through ICIP, whether it be the accelerated bus fleet replacement program, implementation of various technology improvements for greater Sudbury transportation, traffic signal renewals, the major mobility hubs' detail and design construction or bus rapid transportation design with those corridors. All of those projects have millions and millions of dollars with them. But also, in the CCR stream, the community, culture and recreation stream, we have the YMCA of Sudbury for the renovation and renewal of elevators. At the health fitness and recreation centres, we have the—I'm not going to get this pronounced correctly, so I do apologize—N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre. I know I didn't do that right. But we assisted them with a health and safety coolant system, a roof hatch and floor upgrading. The greater Sudbury court revitalization project came under CCR, and that was a total project getting almost \$4 million.

I have a lot here for Sudbury, because I know we're focusing on Sudbury there in that question: the Tom Davies Square one-stop-shop project; the Delki Dozzi track and lighting improvement project—I think I did a video the other day for those projects that got approved; the Bell Park Walkway and loop trail development project. Also, of course, west Sudbury gets their OCIF—I know we spoke lots about the Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund for those smaller municipalities of less than 100,000 and those totals of almost \$10 million that they get consistently and reliably over the last—well, 2019-20 and 2020-21, for sure, those dollars. So always in continuous mode to try and help municipalities.

We're fortunate that we have an ICIP stream of funding, with the federal, municipal and other partners, at this period of time, which some of this that I read came to, but also to help if there's anything for Infrastructure Ontario loans. I'm sure most municipalities of over 400,000

and some have loans through Infrastructure Ontario, which gives them low-interest loans to build big projects that they need and can debenture over time—so lots of investment in communities. We want to see them prosper, for sure, even though we're all going through a tough time. But we feel we're getting close to ending the pandemic, or controlling it and living with it, and we can help those municipalities make those builds, economic stimulus and create those jobs.

Sudbury seems to be very well loved throughout the province of Ontario and the government. I can see you smiling, MPP West.

Ms. Donna Skelly: It's a beautiful city, as is Capreol, which is really where I lived. Even though I was born in Sudbury, I grew up in Capreol, and it's—

Hon. Laurie Scott: Northern Ontario—I want to come and tour.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Two minutes left.

Ms. Donna Skelly: I've only got two minutes left, Minister. This is something I know you're passionate about—you've spoken about it so frequently over the course of the last two days—and that is broadband. I don't think we can say it enough, and I've spoken privately to you: You are incredibly passionate, and you should be so proud that we've taken this on.

This really isn't even—it does not fall under the provincial mandate. It doesn't, but we recognize, and you recognize, how critical broadband is. Every one of us on this call today has a portion—and I know MPP French was saying she was struggling with her own Internet, and we are in southern Ontario. My riding has a significant segment—part of my population is a rural component and farming, and they don't have good broadband. They have wanted this for so long. Of course, COVID-19 has simply highlighted the need for broadband, but obviously you recognize that this is one of the most important issues for Ontarians today. Maybe you can just share why, even though it isn't really a provincial issue, you decided to take it on and do what we have to do for Ontarians.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Absolutely right on all those things that you said. We as a government heard, and I've been hearing it for almost two decades, that everywhere in the province of Ontario, they need help to connect. I know that the Legislature just went off for 10 minutes. I can't explain that, in downtown Toronto. But it is the number one ask of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, the Rural Ontario Municipal Association—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say that you're out of time. My apologies, folks.

We go back now to the official opposition. Who will be speaking for the official—MPP French, the floor is yours.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Oh, good. Thank you very much, Chair. As I promised earlier, I have a number of questions here about Bondfield. My question won't be when the government decided which ministries to pull for estimates, or to call to estimates. I think that was right around the time that a lot of the news was coming out, updated news was coming out, about Bondfield. I won't ask how people felt about the prospect of heading to committee with this issue on the table, but I'm glad to, again,

have this conversation. I have, through the years, at various opportunities, raised a number of questions and issues, and many things have come to light now.

So I'm going to delve into it and get fairly detailed. I'll take it back to the fall of 2015. The Globe published the first of several astonishing investigative reports looking into corruption and procurement fraud at Infrastructure Ontario and Ontario's hospital sector. The Globe revealed that Vas Georgiou, the St. Mike's senior executive in charge of overseeing a new \$300-million expansion project, had admitted to procurement fraud a few years earlier when he was a senior executive at Infrastructure Ontario. The Globe also revealed that Vas Georgiou had an undisclosed business partnership with John Aquino, the owner of Bondfield Construction, the contractor that eventually won the St. Mike's P3 contract in 2015 and became one of Ontario's largest P3 partners.

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After those reports appeared, Infrastructure Ontario conducted an investigation into whether the St. Mike's bid was rigged. Its report, published in the summer of 2016, concluded that no, the bid was not rigged and the contract was awarded fairly.

However, fast-forward five years, Bondfield is bankrupt and under police investigation after fresh allegations of fraud and money laundering. John Aquino is facing criminal charges. Three major hospital P3 projects being built by Bondfield are delayed by years. Bondfield's insurer, Zurich, has hauled St. Mike's into court, alleging that the St. Mike's contract was awarded under a corrupt process, possibly leaving the public on the hook for millions of dollars that still must be paid to complete the project.

Then, two months ago, the Globe and Mail revealed the existence of a massive trove of evidence uncovered by Zurich, showing that the St. Mike's bid was indeed rigged and that fraud and corruption had repeatedly occurred right under Infrastructure Ontario's nose.

So my question is, do Infrastructure Ontario and the government still believe the St. Mike's P3 contract was awarded fairly? I guess I'll leave it there. I have more but, for right now, do you guys still think that St. Mike's P3 contract was awarded fairly?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Chair, I'll just ask Mike Lindsay, the CEO of Infrastructure Ontario, to respond. Thank you.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you very much, Minister. Thank you, MPP French.

Let me begin by saying that at IO we pride ourselves on an extremely high standard of integrity, both for ourselves and for our partners. When any allegations made in any forum call this into question, we take them very seriously.

I just want to unpack a little bit, MPP French, if you'll permit me, the process that the board of directors of Infrastructure Ontario followed when these allegations first came to light, because I think their findings in some detail are important. A special committee of the board retained Blake, Cassels and Graydon LLP as a third-party legal counsel to oversee review of our projects with Bondfield to determine whether the procurement was

compromised or whether there were any fiscal or financial improprieties with respect to expenditures on the Bondfield projects. We asked them to report back to us with any recommendations for process improvements that we could make to further strengthen the integrity of our work on behalf of the government of Ontario.

Blakes, it should be noted, subsequently retained Cohen Hamilton Steger and Co. to carry out forensic audit responsibilities in that review. Blakes—I think it goes without saying—is regarded by many international legal rating services as a leading firm in the country in the field of procurement and Cohen Hamilton Steger and Co.'s principals have been retained on some of the largest financial disputes and investigations in Canada.

The report that was made to the board of directors from these esteemed entities concluded that IO met or exceeded industry standards in 81 of 83 best practices. It did also identify several improvements to our practices, processes and procurement policy. These included, for instance, new obligations on bidders, who are now required to provide third-party confirmation that they meet ethical bidding standards and are subject to additional conflict-of-interest disclosure screening. In total, the report made 13 recommendations, all of which have been acted upon, and we have continuously, year over year, sought opportunities to improve our procurement processes, their integrity and their propriety.

A special committee—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: This is taking us back, though—you had asked me to permit you to kind of take us back in time. Yes, and I've had this conversation opposite Ehren Cory. This is on the record as well in terms of the steps that IO took. I've got a truckload more questions, so you will, I guarantee, have the opportunity to continue this. But fundamentally, in light of what has just come out, does the government, and do you—does Infrastructure Ontario still believe that the St. Mike's P3 contract was awarded fairly?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Let me just contextualize, then, what has recently come out, which is unsealed testimony made by John Aquino in the action as between St. Mike's and the surety, which is Zurich, where he makes allegations in respect of the nature of the procurement process. I want to say two things, the first of which is that any allegations that are net new that have been conveyed in his testimony are being investigated by us right now.

But in the here and now, pending the results of that investigation, we continue to stand by the 2016 special committee report which found that, notwithstanding the very troubling connections that ultimately are now a matter of public record, the procurement evaluation could not have been affected for two reasons. First, the potential advance disclosure of project information wouldn't have been a significant advantage insofar as all bidders were aware of the scoring criteria that we were using, in particular the lowest price. Second, it is difficult for an individual to influence the outcome of bid evaluation because of the way in which an IO P3 procurement evaluation is structured.

All proposed evaluators not only sign off on conflict-of-interest and confidentiality declarations, but they receive evaluator training prior to undertaking evaluations, and then their evaluation is overseen by an evaluation committee made up of people from both IO and the co-sponsor. That whole process is overseen by a fairness monitor, hearkening back, MPP French, to what we were talking about earlier, about conversations, commercially confidential ones, that happen in connection with our procurements and the kinds of safeguards we have in place to make sure that there is fairness in those conversations, even if they can be publicly disclosed. A fairness monitor was also present in connection to this procurement as well.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay. Thank you. I'm going to delve into some of those pieces, the special committee reports of 2016 and whatnot.

Chair, how many minutes do I have left in this section?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have about 11 minutes.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Sweet. Okay, so back to the Globe article which, with the new evidence as uncovered by Zurich saying that the St. Mike's bid was indeed rigged and having evidence to that effect—this most recent Globe article raises, obviously, very serious questions, including why Infrastructure Ontario failed to find any evidence of bid rigging and collusion, despite there apparently being thousands and thousands of pages of evidence available to be found.

I have been raising and the NDP has been raising questions about these matters since 2015, including at this committee. I've been on record for years on this. During this time, Infrastructure Ontario and the government have repeatedly insisted that everything was fine—I'm paraphrasing—that its procurement processes were the best in the world and that there were no integrity issues and the public needed to worry about nothing. However, the latest Globe article shows that things were not fine and still may not be fine.

For most of a decade, Infrastructure Ontario and the government have been in denial, with example after example of a culture, it would seem, at Infrastructure Ontario, that either is unable or unwilling to address fraud and corruption even when it happens, frankly, right under its nose. So do the government and Infrastructure Ontario recognize the serious implications of what the Globe's multi-year investigative series has revealed about the integrity of Ontario's infrastructure procurement processes?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: With respect, MPP French, I disagree with the conclusion. What we have in the present moment, the most recent reporting, is predicated upon testimony from an individual. To the extent that that makes specific allegations, Infrastructure Ontario is investigating them. But to say that we did not take seriously the situation I think is to not give us due credit for all that we have explained, and I've just tried to explain again, about the process that we went through to ultimately take a look at our procurement practices and whether this procurement in particular was ultimately compromised.

As a final thought, I would just say that all throughout—it's important to know that no matter what challenges we faced from the decline of the general contractor on the project or anything that might have been happening in connection to the relationships of people within industry associated with the project, the contract price for these works—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry, all. We are now at noon. We will have used two hours and 22 minutes so far. We have two hours and 28 minutes remaining this afternoon. We are now recessed until 1 p.m.

The committee recessed from 1200 to 1300.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Good afternoon, everyone. We're going to resume consideration of vote 4001 of the estimates of the Ministry of Infrastructure. There is now a total of two hours and 28 minutes remaining for the review of these estimates.

Standing order 69(a.1) allots 15 minutes to the independent member of the committee. They will have the opportunity to use this time today if they wish.

When the committee recessed this morning, the official opposition had eight minutes and 52 seconds remaining. We're on the clock. MPP French, I believe it's yours.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay. Thank you very much, and welcome back, folks. I know that we had left off in the middle of Bondfield. I'm just going to do a bit of a recap, and then I know, Mr. Lindsay, that you were in the middle of explaining things, so I'll give you the chance to do that.

We had gone back in time to 2015 and followed the Globe investigative series into where we are currently. I had asked you whether Infrastructure Ontario and the government still believes that St. Mike's P3 contract was awarded fairly. I'm going to interpret what you had said, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, that as you've said, you stand by that 2016 special report. I'm assuming that that means, indeed, that you still believe that that was awarded fairly.

The questions that I've asked, I won't go back and ask them again. I do know that, as you had talked about, the testimony that has come forward that you guys are investigating, a lot of that testimony that's coming out is from people that IO at the time did not interview. Not everybody who was relevant to this case was interviewed. They weren't strangers to the case, but for whatever reason they were not, which I think begs the question of why they weren't. So as you were delving into things, I'm going to add those to what we had been discussing.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you very much, MPP French. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to finish my train of thought. It's very kind of you. Again, for the record, it's Michael Lindsay, president and CEO of Infrastructure Ontario in Toronto, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I'm having a hard time with the sound. Anyone else?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): There's some difficulty with your audio.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Is this any better?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Yes, it is, actually.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Okay. I shall try to be as vocal as I possibly can be. Perhaps that will help overcome any limitations.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you, sir.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: My apologies to the committee members.

I was thanking MPP French for allowing me to finish my train of thought from before. MPP French, your very specific question about 2016 and whether IO stands by the conclusions of the special commission of the board, I would say that at present we do, because we are unaware of any information that would in any way contradict the key findings of that special committee of the board, which I, admittedly rather briefly, rehearsed to you on the other side of our break. I won't relitigate or rephrase here and now.

I think the thing that I was saying when the committee broke—just a couple of more things for me to convey, the first of which is that it's important to point out, I think, that through all the challenges associated with dealing with the insolvency of a general contractor and any of the revelations associated with the actions of people within industry trying to ultimately shape the outcome of a procurement, we have continued to progress with our hospital partners, the projects ultimately that Bondfield won in 2014-15, and that the contract price itself for those works has remained unchanged, which is one of the key benefits, we would argue, of the P3 contract model. Again, money is reserved until a substantial completion of those works, and I am happy to note that indeed several of those facilities are now reaching substantial completion, including Cambridge and Hawkesbury. Portions of the St. Mike's project itself are now open to the public as well.

The last thing to say is that we continue to actively cooperate as witnesses in the serious fraud office investigation into the conduct of individuals previously connected to Bondfield, and we will continue to support that process in any way we can.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay, thank you. For anyone looking in that has been following this—and it's been a tricky story to follow across many years. It was my distinct impression—again, strictly my impression—when we had brought this up at committee before, that there has been a sense of “let's move on, let's move on,” but there keeps being new information. Obviously, of course, you'd be cooperating, but the lessons to be learned from this are still being learned. I think it speaks, frankly, to the culture of accountability, because if these things can happen, even if it's perceived to be under the nose of IO, that's problematic. And we'll continue to delve, because as we're looking at these P3 contracts, which we've heard today are well celebrated by the government and IO, at the end of the day, if we can't enforce our contracts, I think it speaks to the value for money, which is why, as we've already discussed, there's an ideological difference here.

But to stick to the Bondfield story, there are some documents that I think would be useful for this committee to have, to understand what I would deem the serious shortcomings of the 2016 IO investigation into the St.

Mike's procurement. On November 17, 2015, this committee was informed that the infrastructure ministry had appointed the now late William Braithwaite, “to act as the minister's eyes and ears on the Infrastructure Ontario investigation” into the St. Mike's procurement. His job was to make sure that IO got to the bottom of this whole mess. I would ask, please, to be provided with a copy of all of the directives from the ministry to Mr. Braithwaite and all of Mr. Braithwaite's reports to the ministry on these matters. Is that something that I can have?

She waited with bated breath.

Hon. Laurie Scott: We would have to ask. I don't know if the deputy wants to comment on the legal—I can't answer that question right off hand. I think that it would need to go back to our legal departments.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay. So I guess what I'm going to do then, Chair, is—because it has been an understandable theme. I'm not saying that anything I've asked for earlier, that I've been told folks need to consult with legal—I'm not arguing that. But I am asking, I'm formally requesting, contingent upon legal permissions, so to speak—I'd like the committee to be able to have a copy of the directives from the ministry to Mr. Braithwaite and Mr. Braithwaite's reports to the ministry on these matters, should I be allowed, should the committee be allowed to have that legally.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Okay.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: That's noted? Thank you.

Infrastructure Ontario's special committee report that we had talked about from the summer of 2016 includes a document from Cohen Hamilton—how do I say that?

Interjection.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: —Steger, thank you—which is the accounting firm that performed the forensic audit of the St. Mike's Bondfield procurement and somehow failed to find any of the evidence that Zurich found and that the Globe has reported on. The CHS document refers to a letter received on August 2, 2016, from Minister Bob Chiarelli to the chair of Infrastructure Ontario requesting further information regarding the report, specifically about its part C, entitled, “Vas Georgiou and Bondfield projects forensic audit.” It seems the minister was not fully satisfied with the initial report. I certainly know that we've discussed this at previous committees. This has been a point of interest through the years.

Again, contingent upon legal permissions and whatnot, please provide this committee with a copy of the minister's letter and any other correspondence between the ministry and IO about the adequacy or inadequacy of the IO investigation and report. If that is something that I can request, I am requesting it.

Hon. Laurie Scott: I can say that we can look further into it. A lot of this predates me too, so I'm limited in my response, but my team is there listening, and we will supply what we can.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you.

Hon. Laurie Scott: —some time prior that I just don't have knowledge of.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: And I recognize that this goes back in time, but as it's continuing to unfold, it is all still relevant, of course, and I know that you know that.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry. With that, you're out of time.

We go back now to the government. Who will be carrying this for the government? MPP Crawford, please proceed. The floor is yours.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Thank you, Chair. I'd just like to finish up a little bit on what MPP French was—just in terms of P3s in general, it's my understanding that Ontario is a world leader in P3s. In fact, we've had delegations from Europe and abroad visit Infrastructure Ontario to see what a world-class organization we have here. I wondered if I could hear from the minister or perhaps Mr. Lindsay a little bit about the success of Infrastructure Ontario and how it's viewed abroad in terms of its standing in the P3 community worldwide.

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Hon. Laurie Scott: Sure. I'll start and certainly let Mike Lindsay follow up. But you're right: Ontario is globally recognized for the P3 model delivered by Infrastructure Ontario. There have been many examples used throughout this committee of how we deliver future big projects, create jobs, and prove to the world that Ontario is the best place in North America to invest. We do attract global players in the market space.

Just before the pandemic hit us, I had the privilege of being in Washington and speaking to a forum about P3s and their effectiveness. Of course, we were reciprocating, actually. All the governors of about 18 states were coming up to Toronto in I guess it would have been the spring, a year and a half ago, to see what our accomplishments have been in the P3 and the infrastructure builds. So that was quite remarkable that we were hosting the governors' convention in Toronto, in another country. That was an exciting thing, and hopefully, when times permit, we will host our US counterparts again with open arms. And I always put the plug in that I'll serve Kawartha Dairy ice cream.

By March 31, 2020, there were 66 projects that had received substantial completion. In that P3 program, 95% were completed on budget and nearly 70% on time. That's why we feel—Infrastructure Ontario—that the P3 model delivers the best results for infrastructure builds and the protection of taxpayer dollars. That has been discussed at length here, but this is why we're a showcase for the world and why we attract global companies.

We now put out market updates four times a year to show where we are in the process of infrastructure builds. I know that our next report is out in a couple of days, our market update, and maybe I'll turn it over to Michael Lindsay to elaborate a little bit further. I appreciate the question, MPP Crawford.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you very much, Minister. Thank you very much MPP Crawford. I hope, committee members, that I am coming through a little bit more clearly now.

I would add only two things to the minister's commentary, the first of which is, we are—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I apologize. I'm just going to ask you to repeat your name and your title again just so that Hansard won't have to guess.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Yes, Mr. Chair. Michael Lindsay, president and CEO of Infrastructure Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you, sir.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: I would add only two things to the minister's commentary, MPP Crawford, the first of which is that we are never satisfied at Infrastructure Ontario. I would affirm everything that we were just discussing with MPP French about the need for us to continuously evolve our processes, make sure that they continue to be best in class—world-class, really.

That selfsame 2016 Auditor General report that we were talking about earlier on concluded, "Infrastructure Ontario has a strong track record of delivering projects such as hospitals, courthouses and detention centres on time and on budget. It may now be in a position to utilize its expertise to directly manage the construction of certain large infrastructure assets and thereby reduce the cost to taxpayers of private sector financing." We would concur. Indeed, much of our planning and much of strategizing as an organization, in order to better serve taxpayers and end users, is based on that premise.

The second thing that I would say, MPP Crawford, is that if there is one theme that I think is highlighted by people who look at Ontario and what we collectively have managed to create, it's around our transparency. A couple of different facets of this: the first of which is the pipeline announcement that we make; there shall be one tomorrow. That kind of transparency and commitment of what projects are going to get delivered in a jurisdiction, when they are going to get delivered, and what we think the size of those projects on an order-of-magnitude basis ultimately is, is something that other jurisdictions are trying to replicate right now because they appreciate that it allows for private sector counterparties to better plan themselves, to ensure that we have the right market capacity to deliver what is a really ambitious capital agenda.

A couple of other things that we do to ensure transparency that I think are worth highlighting and now being replicated by other jurisdictions: the first of which is that we have a fairness monitor participate in all of our P3 discussions. It is true to say that, obviously, much of what we discuss with counterparties has to happen under a commercially confidential cover. But we have a fairness monitor, an independent third party sitting with us in all of those discussions to make sure that our procurements are fair, and that those conversations and the information being exchanged that is between the parties doesn't create advantages for any particular party. There is a certificate at the end of each and every one of our procurements that signs off on the fact that we've executed it fairly.

We also publicly report value-for-money third-party assessments. They are on the website for every project that we've ever done, and if committee members are looking for a particularly gripping read, I can commend to them a document you will also find on our website, which is *Assessing Value for Money: An Updated Guide to Infrastructure Ontario's Methodology*.

We've put it right out there to talk about how we ultimately think about risk transfer and the value associated with it. This is something that other crown agencies, like Infrastructure BC and SaskBuilds, are increasingly finding themselves doing. I'm particularly proud that of the things that seem resonant for other jurisdictions in respect of what we built here in Toronto, they're first and foremost upon our transparency.

Thank you very much, MPP Crawford.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Thank you—good to hear.

I guess now I'd like to move a little bit further to another conversation, which is about Waterfront Toronto. Minister, I know Waterfront Toronto is undertaking one of the largest waterfront revitalization initiatives in the world, and I'm wondering how the ministry is supporting this initiative.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Great. Thank you very much for the question. I know that we have some of my Waterfront Toronto friends on the call, so I'll start off and maybe throw it over to them to speak more in depth.

But for sure, Waterfront Toronto is leading transformation in the designated waterfront area to create that accessible and active waterfront for living, working and recreation, and in a fiscally and environmentally responsible way. It involves all three levels of government, and we work to engage the public in this great, prestigious waterfront we could be developing, which is an opportunity that's incredible.

We have invested, since being elected, over \$45 billion in infrastructure. Over the next decade, we are, again, investing \$145 billion into different infrastructure projects that we've spoken about here. One of the critical projects for Waterfront Toronto is ensuring flood protection in the Port Lands. We're all helping to prevent flooding caused by climate change and the rising water levels that we saw in the Port Lands.

I know that we are developing a resilient neighbourhood by protecting the southeastern portions of downtown Toronto from flooding and delivering substantial return on investment by unlocking that area's potential for future residential and commercial development. I don't know if anybody has taken a walk or a bike ride along the waterfront recently, but you can see a lot of action happening. I know that because there are three levels of government, there are lots of conversations and exciting times.

I maybe will throw it over to—I'm not sure who's on from Waterfront Toronto. George? I think the CEO, George Zegarac, maybe, hopefully, if Internet works and broadband works, will appear on the screen soon—and maybe not. Yes, I think he's coming there. Technology: This is hard, not being all in the same room.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Well, I guess we'll move on. If he comes on, we'll certainly give him the opportunity to speak.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Okay.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Just following up, as well, on Waterfront Toronto: How is Ontario supporting the revitalization of Toronto's waterfront?

Mr. George Zegarac: Excuse me, MPP Crawford. My apologies. I've been waiting to be let on. It's George Zegarac.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Oh, great.

Mr. George Zegarac: I don't know if I can jump on. I'm just waiting—

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Yes. Yes, please do.

Hon. Laurie Scott: We can hear you.

Mr. George Zegarac: All right. Okay. Let me, first of all, thank Mr. Chair and the minister and the committee members. I should introduce myself for Hansard. I'm George Zegarac. I'm the CEO and president for Waterfront Toronto. And I'm in Innisfil, which I know everybody referenced yesterday, so I can probably help to end the debate. I don't think we see ourselves as northern Ontario, but happy to have that discussion.

As the minister identified, we were created back in 2001 by three levels of government to revitalize the waterfront area. We have been diligently at work over that period of time. I'll speak to the current flood protection project, but I'd point out that we originally, through the original \$1.5 billion by the three levels of government—there was an original \$500 million by each level to help revitalize the waterfront—contributed to the development of Corktown Common, which actually opened up the lands at the West Don Lands and East Bayfront for development in downtown Toronto. We're doing the same thing in the current flood protection project, which is our Port Lands Flood Protection Project, of which \$1.25 billion has been contributed collectively by the three levels of government, so over \$400 million each.

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I'm happy to say, despite the challenges of trying to work through the pandemic and seeing rising costs, like lumber going up 100%, steel going up 25%, we have stayed on budget and on time. I give a lot of credit to my team: David Kusturin, my project officer, all the project management that we have. I think part of that is that we have a lot of scrutiny by all three levels of government on this project.

We meet monthly on the flood protection project through our executive committee. We have quarterly meetings with all three levels through our intergovernmental steering committee. Because we assume all the risk in this model, we actually have the board—we have contracted a risk management company.

I can see they're going to start my video here. There we go. Hopefully, you can see me now.

We have hired HDR, which is an independent third party that assesses all of the risk associated with our projects. This is a complex project; it's not just a flood protection project. We are redirecting a river—not a simple thing—to prevent flooding, but we also are creating an island. Villiers Island, which is 88 acres, will, at the end of this—one third of that 88 acres will be contributing to three beautiful parks that will serve the public. But it also creates affordable housing, a full community, along with commercial and retail space. So it is not a simple project. Even though we call it one project, there are 23 sub-

components to this. We manage the risk. We, at the 30%, 60%, 90% design, look at all of our risk issues. We report back to the board and we manage through that.

I think we're quite pleased with the progress to date. As I said, we're on time, on budget. This will be a spectacular site. As the minister said, we have started to receive—and last fall, we got our first bridge of four bridges. We recently received half of our Commissioners Street bridge. These are quite spectacular designs. Even our stormwater treatment plant won an international award for design, so not only is it functional, but it is something to look at.

We would be very happy, MPP Crawford and others, to invite all of you for a site tour once we're able to open up that waterfront area again to the public.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Yes, that would be great. I'd certainly be interested in that.

Just to follow up, Sidewalk Labs, obviously, was involved and walked away from the project. Could you give us an update on where the project stands? You mention it's on budget and on time, but did that throw a wrench into that plan? Where are things at with that right now?

Mr. George Zegarac: I'd be happy to give you an update on that. As you pointed out, we had originally tendered, and the successful proponent was Sidewalk Labs. We had worked through a number of issues through that period, but once the pandemic hit, Sidewalk Labs, which is a sub-company under—it's a Google sister company under Alphabet. They had gone through some financial difficulty right at the time of the pandemic and decided to pull out.

The benefit for us is that it gave us a chance to reassess what the needs were post-pandemic. Obviously, a lot more focus on public space, where clearly—during the pandemic, the waterfront attracted a lot of people. Clearly, we need more space for the public. We have issued a new RFQ, which ended—the deadline was May 28. I can tell you, I'm probably sharing with the legislative committee—I haven't even given this number to the board yet. We have 10 very good proponent proposals that are quite exciting, so I think we're in a very good position. We hope to shortlist that group by July and get it down to three to five proponents. We'd issue the RFP.

We're very excited about what we've received. I think it will give lots of hope to the public as we go forward in the redevelopment of that waterfront property.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: That's great. We're looking forward to that. This is a big project, huge.

Mr. George Zegarac: Yes, it's—

Mr. Stephen Crawford: For a city—

Mr. George Zegarac: Sorry.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: No, go ahead.

Mr. George Zegarac: The only thing I was going to say is that not only is it huge in terms of the Quayside project, but the Port Lands Flood Protection Project—until you see it, I don't think you see how complex it is. We're digging in a new river and creating those parks, dealing with the soil reclamation.

I would encourage people to go on our website. One of the neat videos that we have is a drone video that actually

shows the progress over a period of time and what it looks like today. So just to suggest to the MPPs on the committee and others, I invite you to take a look at the website. It is pretty astonishing, the work that we're doing.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Okay. Thank you. I will do that for sure.

I know I've probably only got a couple of minutes left. I'd like to move from Toronto up to Thunder Bay and ask Minister Scott, just to get a little bit of a sense on—I know that the Thunder Bay Jail in the region is in need of a new, modern facility. It's pretty outdated. It's been an issue for some time. I wonder if you could give the committee an update on how the ministry is taking action to address that situation up there.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Absolutely; a pleasure. I spoke with the Solicitor General a few times on the needs of the Thunder Bay Jail. That need was great in the community for a long time. I'm very happy to say that under the Solicitor General's leadership in conjunction with Infrastructure Ontario to assist, as it does with many ministries, we made a commitment to provide a safe environment for both staff and the inmates housed within the new facility and, of course, recognizing the tremendous work that corrections officers do across the province.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Two minutes left.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Okay. In our latest market update—in fact, it was March 31, I guess, 2021—Infrastructure Ontario and the Solicitor General issued the request for proposal to a list of shortlisted bidders for the project to deliver a new Thunder Bay Correctional Complex to replace the city's existing jail and correctional centre. It's going to be a 345-bed multi-purpose correctional complex designed to meet the leadership in energy and environmental design—I know many of you know it as LEED silver certification—with a focus on energy efficiency and healthy indoor environments.

It further supports our strategy of replacing aging institutions to address health and safety and security issues with infrastructure design inefficiencies that were before and put us into the new innovation that we speak about for technology and space limitations. So these modernized facilities will certainly improve living conditions and provide better access to programming and education.

I know the municipality of Thunder Bay is also very excited for this much-needed correctional facility to be built there. I look forward to, hopefully, good times, when we can travel again and going with—Michael Lindsay, I'm sure you'd like to be invited and involved; you've done a lot of work with Infrastructure Ontario to work with the Solicitor General—to make that great announcement when that project gets further down the road, but we are acting on it. As I said, it's gone out for requests for proposal and then to the shortlisted bidders. I don't know, Michael, if you have any more dates on that than I can think of off the top of my head, but we're probably almost out of time. It's very soon that we will see more progress on that, and we're very much looking forward to the new facility and the new innovations that come with new designs for buildings and providing that safe environment.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): And with that, I'm sorry to say that you're out of time.

We go now to the official opposition. Who will be—MPP French, the floor is yours.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you very much, and I'm glad to have a bit more time.

Chair, I wanted to ask: You mentioned earlier that an independent member would have 15 minutes. Do we know yet whether there is an independent member who will be joining us?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): It's a good question, MPP French. At this point, we've got no notice that an independent member will be appearing.

If they do not appear, the time that would be allocated to them will be divided between the opposition and the government.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You're welcome.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I just wanted to circle back to something earlier and then continue, of course, on the Bondfield track here.

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Mr. Lindsay, it's interesting, I recognize that comment that you had made about the AG giving credit to Infrastructure Ontario for its strong track record of delivering projects from hospitals to jails and what have you. That wasn't the direct quote. But I also know that a big part of that comment was sort of looking at: Could we avoid the private financing altogether? In that Infrastructure Ontario indeed has this strong track record of delivering public infrastructure and traditional project procurement, I would make the argument, then, why add new layers of private profits and financing costs? If you agree with that, that is awesome. But I won't put words in your mouth; I don't think that that is what you were saying, but just the rest of that quote and what that was about.

I want to go back to the 2016 report. A lingering shortcoming of that 2016 report is its failure to find out who at Infrastructure Ontario knew about Vas Georgiou's fraud admission and what they did or did not do about it. For example, in September 2015, the Globe and Mail reported that senior Infrastructure Ontario executives, including IO CEO at the time David Livingston, had been informed that Vas Georgiou had admitted to procurement fraud at York University. According to the Globe, before Livingston left Infrastructure Ontario to become Dalton McGuinty's chief of staff, Livingston claims he passed on this information to the IO board chair, the late Anthony Ross, as well as to an executive in the human resources department. Despite evidence that senior IO executives and possibly the board were aware of Georgiou's fraud admission, he was able to leave IO with an unblemished record and even have a severance package.

We remember this from—as the story has unfolded in past years. In fact, in that IO report, Georgiou had a letter of recommendation from Ross, which he used to obtain a senior executive position at St. Mike's, at a much higher salary, where he worked with IO officials on the \$300-million hospital P3 project.

After the Globe article came out, my colleague Taras Natyshak, the MPP for Essex, stood in the House and said, "We have evidence of a culture within Infrastructure Ontario that tolerates and covers up procurement fraud, but the government has trusted IO to investigate its own cover-up." That was the quote at the time.

Minister, will this government take this investigation away from Infrastructure Ontario and perhaps commit to an actually, truly independent public investigation?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I'm going to let Michael Lindsay expand further, I think, on the comments that he's already made about the independence of the process that has gone on for a while, for the review. I will just turn it over to Michael Lindsay.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: But is there any consideration of not having IO do the investigation? When we look back in time, as it appeared and as more has come out, Infrastructure Ontario was investigating its own process, regardless of the others involved. So I'm asking you as minister if the government would consider removing them from that investigation process and actually having it be a truly independent public investigation.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Well, I will reiterate my confidence in Infrastructure Ontario. The processes that exist there, which have been mentioned—several of them have been mentioned by Michael Lindsay—and I'll refer back over to Michael Lindsay to explain to you. I don't think I agree with a lot of the comments you've just made, but I will send it over to Michael Lindsay to dissect it for you.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, MPP French. Again, Michael Lindsay, President and CEO of Infrastructure Ontario.

MPP French, I can't speak to what former CEO Livingston said to the chair or to HR, nor, really, can I comment on the terms under which an individual employee left the organization. I will say that I think that there is an important fact that you've pointed out, which is that the fraud in particular that Vas had disclosed in the day wasn't related to his activities at Infrastructure Ontario but rather related to something that had happened at York University.

Be that as it may, it is absolutely a principle that I would affirm, and I hope that I have done it a few times for the committee today, that we as an organization need to continuously improve our own standards and codes of conduct and the ethical standards to which we hold all of our employees. It is the very reason why, annually, we undertake to review our procurement processes, that which we require of employees, that which we require of counterparties etc. It is part of the reason why, in 2016, the board of directors at Infrastructure Ontario took what I perceive to be real [*inaudible*] care of retaining independent third parties to open everything systematically and take a look at all of our procurements and our procurement policies to understand the extent to which they could be compromised. The results of that investigation we have discussed. I think that would be my statement on the matter.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay. As we're seeing with this recent Globe piece, it is absolutely fair to say that it was a failure of Infrastructure Ontario's investigators at

the time to find any evidence of collusion and bid rigging on the St. Mike's bid, despite the fact that we now know there were thousands and thousands of pages of such evidence waiting to be found. That, I think, speaks to something earlier I had said about folks that were connected to the case that were not interviewed. I don't have the answers as to why. It does beg the question, but those investigators at the time, which, yes, I acknowledge predates maybe everyone on this screen—but does the minister now agree that it was a mistake to leave Infrastructure Ontario in charge of investigating this procurement?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I think that Michael Lindsay has explained many times the processes that were followed with the board at IO and what the results were. I don't know if Michael Lindsay would like to add any more to this, but I would give him that opportunity if he wishes.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Michael, if you don't want to, I've got more questions, so you can absolutely answer what you would like. You'll have more opportunity as I continue through, so whatever.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you, MPP French. We take it deadly seriously, of course, absolutely, and welcome the questions 100%. I would characterize the exercise in 2016 as having attained a certain degree of independence, would be the first thing I would say. It was meant to be two steps removed from certainly the management team at Infrastructure Ontario. It is the reason why it was a special committee of the board that was ultimately formed and independent third parties of repute that ultimately did the analysis and made the recommendations, which have been faithfully implemented by Infrastructure Ontario. So I do think that there was a certain independence associated with the nature of the exercise.

I will say just once again that we take any allegations incredibly seriously, to the extent that testimony that is part of a civil suit, which we are not a party to, has been uncovered and has now put an alleged set of facts back on the table in respect of what may or may not have happened back in the day. We will investigate those as well. But I continue to take great confidence from the fact that the special committee and the independent investigators concluded, as they did in 2016, that the procurement wasn't compromised and that ultimately the people of the province of Ontario had not been defrauded.

Ultimately, I would end on this note. I think one of the most important facts to remember is, whatever fraud was attempted, ultimately the contract price that Ontarians are paying for the works that were awarded to Bondfield is as contracted—again, a benefit of the P3 mechanism that makes, in particular, private financiers like Zurich responsible for the default of general contractors. The reason that these projects have continued to progress—admittedly not on the timeline that we wanted, but progress—is because Zurich, the private lender, is responsible for the default of Bondfield and has had to do things in order to continue to move these projects forward. So there's at least that benefit.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: And interestingly, of course, because Zurich, as you said, is responsible, but if there is

fraud and collusion, all of us can understand and appreciate why Zurich would want to do some digging into the process, which it has. That may be an oversimplification of the process, but at the end of the day, they have found thousands and thousands of pages of evidence and, as I said, testimony of witnesses who were accessible, who could have been interviewed by the folks back in the day.

So I don't know. I really do hope that you're looking back at that process, not just looking forward. Because we can all surmise—and I don't know that it benefits us, but at the same time, if Infrastructure Ontario knew that there were people to interview and chose not to, and it turns out those are the people who are providing now evidence of bid rigging and whatnot, that's obviously a problem with the at-the-time process.

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So as you're investigating, perhaps ensure that years from now, there can't be—well, it probably won't be me, but somebody else sitting here, holding you to account how many years down the road about a process that, one would argue, may or may not be accountable.

I'm going to continue on. In February 2020—so we're getting closer to current day here—the Globe published an earlier story about Bondfield, reporting that PricewaterhouseCoopers resigned as Bondfield's auditor in 2013, having allegedly detected fraud. This was long before Bondfield filed for bankruptcy protection in 2019. So PricewaterhouseCoopers worked extensively for Infrastructure Ontario after 2015, including preparing value-for-money reports in support of various P3 projects. During this time, Bondfield became one of Ontario's biggest P3 partners. So did PricewaterhouseCoopers warn Infrastructure Ontario that Bondfield might be committing fraud?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: It's a good question. I will have to take that back, MPP French. I can say, more broadly, that Bondfield was a partner in IO's P3 program since 2005. They won a total of 11 P3 projects over the intervening years. Approximately half—the first half—of those projects were successful, with them being completed either significantly early, on time, or, in one case, [*inaudible*] Women's College Hospital. So at the time of the procurements, in 2014-15, we ran our competitive process. Participants in our process have to demonstrate significant financial health in order to bid on our projects—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Right.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: —the impact of two separate gates. And I would just say that they came through that process on the basis of the information that we had been provided. On your specific question, I'll need to take that back. But hopefully that helps contextualize a little bit of 2014-15 and the award to Bondfield in the project.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I would appreciate if you do take it back, because if PricewaterhouseCoopers resigned because of allegedly detecting fraud, it would be interesting to know if they told Infrastructure Ontario that it's possible or warned IO that Bondfield might be committing fraud. So that would be good information for you to find and for us to know, frankly.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: I know of no such notification, I will confirm. I will say that at the time of bidding in 2014-15, Bondfield had support from reputable financial institutions, including major Canadian banks like TD, BMO and National Bank, as well as bonding companies, all of whom conducted their own due diligence and came to the same positive conclusion regarding Bondfield's ability to successfully bid and complete the work.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay. Now, continuing along that vein, after PricewaterhouseCoopers quit in 2013, Deloitte took over as Bondfield's auditor. According to the Globe, PricewaterhouseCoopers wrote a letter warning Deloitte about its concerns with Bondfield. So they shared their concerns with Deloitte, yet none of this was mentioned in Deloitte's value-for-money report for the Hawkesbury and District General Hospital P3, which was awarded to Bondfield one year after Deloitte took over as Bondfield's auditor. Again, the same kind of question here: Did Deloitte warn Infrastructure Ontario that Bondfield might be committing fraud?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: I know of no such notification, MPP French. I will take that back, too. Questions about Deloitte's behaviour vis-à-vis various notifications that they received and how that did or did not bear upon their advice to Infrastructure Ontario are probably best—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay. So at this time, you know of no such notification either from PricewaterhouseCoopers or Deloitte warning Infrastructure Ontario about Bondfield and their possibly committing fraud?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: I am not personally aware of that.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay. Talking about the value for money, which I think is kind of the crux of Infrastructure Ontario and the government's enthusiasm for P3s—it's something that has been raised today, but certainly is raised often. But what good are these value-for-money documents or these forensic audits, the fairness monitor reports and so on if they fail to uncover massive evidence of fraud, corruption and bid rigging kind of—well, under their noses, is how it appears.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: The value-for-money assessments have a very particular function, which is to ultimately assess the benefit to taxpayers associated with proceeding with an alternative finance procurement. That is their purpose.

Again, I return to the notion that whatever else has or has not happened in connection to Bondfield, the price paid for these works by the taxpayer ultimately has been consistent with the value-for-money assessment as conducted, so that benefit is there.

To your point about the extent to which an accounting firm uses value-for-money assessment work as a mechanism to comment on things that are unrelated to the computation of value-for-money assessments, I can't comment on the organizational policies of Deloitte or EY or PricewaterhouseCoopers or anybody else who produces them for me. But the purpose of a value-for-money assessment is very much to assure the taxpayers that ultimately value is being achieved for the cost of the work.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I can appreciate that, but if they're not factoring in or if they are not uncovering evidence or if they're not being informed by evidence of fraud or corruption or, as we've talked about, bid rigging, then are they indeed able to fairly assess the value that taxpayers get for their money, if there are these awful problems lurking, potentially? What faith do I have as a consumer or as an Ontario taxpayer if I have to trust a process that doesn't uncover—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you very much for the question.

In answer to "how do you take confidence," I would point back to some of the process- and policy-based recommendations that were made by the special committee to the IO board in 2016, some of which included new obligations on bidders, who are required now to provide third-party confirmation that they meet ethical bidding standards, and that deepened conflict-of-interest screening that happens in the present moment.

Coming out of that 2016 recommendation, for all of our procurements now, there is at least a third-party estimate of the ethical bidding behaviour of our counterparties, which, as you're rightfully pointing out, is a surety that a third party has independently assessed whether those bidding practices are going to be adhered to. So I think that is a process evolution directly arising from the independent committee in 2016 that ultimately helps give confidence.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I think that's probably our time, but I have more, so we can look forward to that later.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Great.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You do have a minute left, MPP French.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay. I've already mentioned Zurich, Bondfield's insurer—that they are suing to get out of paying for losses incurred when Bondfield went into creditor protection. It argues that it shouldn't be required to pay for those losses on a P3 project that was awarded to Bondfield through a corrupt process. That will be what I ask about when we come back after this break.

Chair, that's my minute.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): With that, we go to the government. MPP Pettapiece, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Before I pass the minister questions—I think I just heard some sad news from MPP French, that she probably won't be here in the future. That will be sad. I'll truly miss her presence in the Speaker's chair. Anyway, thank you for warning us of that, MPP French.

Minister Scott, I've been involved in several announcements, with the SWIFT announcements in this riding and certainly throughout Ontario. I was born and raised in Essex county. I had a junior farm leader down there and—actually, he ended up owning Hully Gully in London. Randy Collins is his name. He used to open up every meeting by saying, "Act enthusiastic and you'll be enthusiastic." He'd make us shout that three times. He

actually doubled the number of members in the club because of his enthusiasm, which I see with you: your enthusiasm for your ministry, in how you attack its problems and also attack—not its problems so much, but attack problems we see in Ontario, in how you've put money towards many projects that have made life easier.

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It's interesting; I just got a call from a constituent. He bought a piece of rural property northwest of Stratford and now is in the city of Stratford. He just has dial-up. He was wondering if he could get involved with projects involving SWIFT, but he says he's in the city of Stratford; that probably is not going to happen.

We have heard from many members here today and we've seen our screens freeze up. In fact, we saw the Chair have issues with his Internet. This is an issue not only in rural Ontario, but certainly in the populated parts of Ontario.

I wonder if you could expand on SWIFT. This has been such a success in southwestern Ontario. Like you say, the announcements we've made—I just had another one about a month ago around a little town called Wallenstein, which is in the southwest corner of my riding, and it goes north to Arthur. I wonder, Minister, if you wouldn't mind expanding on your involvement with SWIFT and how well it has worked in our area.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Absolutely. You're singing my song—the Randy in your story and you, Randy, MPP Pettapiece—of the great work that's being done by SWIFT. That is, of course, the Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology project. We, as a provincial government, contributed \$63.7 million towards SWIFT, and the total project costs more than \$190 million. I know that you and your office and Minister Hardeman, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, have been very involved in a lot of good announcements and good connections down in your part of the southwestern region. To say that 60,000 homes, businesses and farms will be connected by 2023 under the SWIFT program that's currently in motion is fantastic. Everybody wants it yesterday, but it's still in a good projected time period to be completed.

When SWIFT put their proposals out, there were 17 requests for proposals. There was one for each of your counties down there. Eighty-eight contracts were awarded in 19 different service providers. So you've got a lot of enthusiasm to get people connected down there, not only by the people who want the connections—and I'm sure it's the municipalities and, of course, our MPPs—but also the ISP providers.

Moving forward, connecting thousands, done by 2023, and the bigger plan is the almost \$4 billion that the provincial government has put on the table to connect everyone by 2025, which is a historic investment compared to any province—and even, really, to the federal government—in the whole country. I'm very passionate about it because, as you live and breathe it in southwest Ontario, I live and breathe it in eastern and central Ontario—myself and my riding.

SWIFT was part of one of the programs that we have out there. We also have ICON, the Improving Connectivity

for Ontario program, which we have applications in. I keep teasing everybody on the committee that there are going to be announcements coming soon. June is going to be a big month. We have leveraged all our partners that we can—the federal government; we've been speaking with municipalities. We've brought in legislation to decrease the barriers to that favourite hydro pole story that I always tell of, “Why can't that connection go on the hydro pole that's outside my door?” that I get from my farm communities and my own family, on our rural sideroads.

We've got to revolutionize. The time is now. Economic stimulus opportunities for everyone in Ontario are there, and we have to connect people. I love the opportunity to be able to do that in this ministry. As we've said, the Ministry of Infrastructure now talks about broadband as well as roads, bridges, hospitals, courthouses, jails, correction facilities etc.

I appreciate your championing the issue. It always gives me great hope that we will make these connections, and it highlights the great need that's out there.

SWIFT has done a great job of facilitating more than \$10 million of new construction that will bring reliable broadband to those households I mentioned before—not only in your part of the world, but also in the Simcoe–Grey area. So there will be lots more to talk about—I know you mentioned some communities; don't hesitate to mention more—that are getting connected or soon to be connected.

Thank you very much for that question.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Thank you, Minister, for that answer.

There's a little community just north of Stratford, Milverton, that—it runs from Milverton west to a little town called Donegal, which is—and that announcement was made before this one, in Wallenstein, and we're very grateful for that.

I talked to a beef farmer near Mitchell—a very large beef farmer. He has about 700 head on feed all the time. When they're identifying cattle, which they have to do for age and whatever else, and they have to know where they came from and all this type of thing—they put that onto their system, but that barn is located about a mile down the road from where his computer is. He can't transfer that information from his barn to the house; he actually has to take that down to his house, put the information in, and then take that back to his barn, if he has to process any more cattle when another load of cattle comes in. It would be so easy if it would just do it automatically, but he can't do that because of a lack of broadband. He says he's lucky, actually, that he can do that, because there are a lot of farmers in our area who don't even have that luxury.

They are running million-dollar machinery up and down our fields—these huge combines. Every fall, I go for a ride in one of them just to be with one of the owners and to see what this technology is telling the owner as he's actually harvesting the crop. It will tell him how many bushels are being yielded as he's combining. It will also tell him the weight that he has in his bins so he knows when to unload the bin. And it drives itself up and down the field. But this information is no good unless you can

put it into a computer program that gives him the information. They also use it for spraying, the GPS technology—to make sure that they're getting sprays, fertilizers, whatever else onto their land, to make sure that they're keeping their costs down, but also put these inputs where they need them. So the technology is unbelievable. Farmers, and businessmen in general—if you give them the tools, they will use them. That's just kind of the way it works.

I'm very appreciative of the announcements. You say there are going to be announcements forthcoming in the near future? That's very good news. You can make all you want in my riding. I will personally invite you here to do that if you like because, like all parts of Ontario, we need this service right now, not yesterday.

I wonder if you could also expand on northern Ontario. I know you spoke about northern Ontario and what you're doing up there and what you hope to do up there. Northern Ontario is a major part of our economy, and certainly they need broadband as much as anybody does.

Hon. Laurie Scott: I just learned a lot from listening to you speak about the technology needed for farming. I knew some of these stories before, but I loved actually getting into the granular—if I can use that word; a bit of a pun—aspect of planting and the need for that connection.

Technology has moved so fast. Farmers are innovators. I can say that the Ontario Federation of Agriculture and any agriculture group I've ever spoken to mentions the need for broadband and tells me the story of, "It's just a mile down the road. Why won't it connect my place?" That's what we have definitely been working on at the Ministry of Infrastructure, to address those "spaces between places," I think is the terminology—there are lots of catchphrases that go with this—"building the backbone," "almost reaching me but not quite reaching me."

1400

SWIFT has done a fantastic job, and we know that there are some spaces that just aren't quite getting connected, that need to get connected to those farms, and that's a challenge. The sideroads have longer places between, just by the nature of a farm and there's land between. That is definitely our goal.

I mentioned many times in the committee, and I feel I speak every day about broadband, which I'm happy to do, that looking to that granular—where are the spaces that we're missing; where are the homes, the businesses, the farms, that we're not quite catching? That's why, as technology has come along with farming and gauging the weight and automatic planting machines and GPS for those planting—so they can connect to markets as well as to planting. It's just fascinating, the innovation that has gone on in agriculture. That's why we say everybody is going to be connected by 2025. We've put almost \$4 billion on the table, and we're leveraging that with the Internet service providers. We're talking to them constantly. We're talking to the associations—not just OFA, but obviously all municipalities.

I was just hosted by OREA, the real estate association, yesterday, and in everybody's top five is broadband

infrastructure—when I say "across Ontario," it's across Ontario.

The north will not be left out. I've mentioned some projects for northern Ontario that we continue to roll out. And we continue to roll out multi-ministry, with northern affairs with Minister Rickford, economic development with Minister Fedeli, education with Minister Lecce—whichever streams we can to connect people to broadband and how we can do it in certain areas.

For the north, in January of this year, we announced, just in one small project, the \$10.9 million to bring faster broadband to several towns and First Nation communities across northern Ontario. We did the Matawa project, and I actually got there to be in person.

Your invitation to come to your riding did not go unnoticed in your comments. I will certainly, if I can, come down. I love to travel, and I'd love to travel to my province of Ontario. So when it's all safe to do so, I'm going to come out. There's nothing more that I like than to meet people, especially when it's talking about broadband infrastructure—any type of infrastructure—and to see the difference, in person, it makes in their lives, to see the relief that they can get connected not only to broadband but maybe the bridge that's built on the way to get to the ceremony that we maybe get to have eventually.

In Matawa, especially when we were in Thunder Bay, it was great—the Premier, Minister Rickford and I, and the First Nations, the ceremony that we had. This can be life-changing for them—accessing services that they never had before, and opening the world up to better health care, better mental health services, better education.

We've done broadband in Chisholm, Marathon, Terrace Bay, rural Thunder Bay. We've done 22 kilometres of fibre backbone for the Treaty 3 territory in northwestern Ontario; upgrades to the K-Net for 80 First Nations communities in Keewatinook Okimakanak—those are just some of the locations that we have done.

When I say I am excited for the future announcements—we have been working very hard behind the scenes and collaboratively so there's no overlap and there aren't places left behind in the programs that exist. We're going to have more to say as the summer goes on.

I know you're very passionate. I'm very passionate about these projects.

I know the Association of the Municipalities of Ontario, which comes up in August, will be happy to hear a lot more news by the time we get there.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Thank you, Minister. I'm sure you have some of this equipment in your riding in places, but if you're here, we'll get you on one of these large combines or tractors. They actually have a little jump seat in them, so they have room for a passenger in these machines. In fact, I don't know a farmer who isn't passionate about showing off his operation. They love showing people what they do, how they do it, and the safe food they deliver because of what they do.

Again, we get back to—it's all right to have a product to sell, but if people don't know you've got it to sell, then you can't sell it. We're in a worldwide market now, and

the marketing is so important to farming or any business. We need to have this connectivity all through Ontario so we can put our products on the market, so people can access us too, to see what we have.

A lot of commodities, if I can put it that way—corn, wheat, beans, cattle, hogs—are sold through futures markets, which are based out of Chicago, and you have to keep up on that stuff because it can change overnight. You can make money, or you can really lose money if you're not connected to a reliable source of broadband or the Internet that can get you that information. It's so nice that our government is moving ahead with that, and your enthusiasm for it is very welcome. It hasn't gone unnoticed, certainly, in rural Ontario, which I am proud to be a representative of.

Time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have almost three minutes left.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: All right. We've had some long-term-care announcements made in the riding, which I'm sure came through long-term care, but you certainly are involved in the infrastructure part of that. There was one in St. Marys announced. One in Palmerston, a little town north of me, is in construction right now. One in Mitchell is in construction right now. So we are thankful for that.

I think it's imperative that this government has taken the bull by the horns to try to move Ontario ahead instead of staying the same. The sameness has been going on for just too long. Certainly, with the past government, it just didn't seem to get ahead like I see we're getting ahead with this government, as far as programs and services to our communities and the speed at which this is done. The speed at which some of these projects have been done is incredible.

I know you know that the Premier said we are open for business in this province. That's the way we're going to run it. COVID-19 has put a damper on some of it, but I know when we get out of this, we are going to be able to leap ahead, if I can put it that way, with some of the programs that we have in place and some of the programs we are using.

I wonder if you could expand on some programs that you think are really going to help us jump ahead and have a more thriving province.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Absolutely. We're coming out of COVID-19 and adapting to how to live with it—keeping those numbers down, and hopefully we've all got our shots in the arms to start with, and maybe hoping for a booster.

The economy, we forecast, is very positive—and having broadband and connectivity, as you mentioned, is part of it. I think this is an opportunity for rural Ontario and our small communities in northern Ontario to have participation with connectivity.

You brought up the point about the long-term-care homes. I know the Minister of Long-Term Care, Dr. Merrilee Fullerton, is incredibly passionate—and her great advocacy since she has been Minister of Long-Term Care, but also with 30 years as a family doctor and seeing the

needs. I know that I can speak about health care—I say it a lot, and I thank all the front-line workers who are in those long-term-care fields who worked through very trying times with the pandemic. God bless them. My mother was looked after for seven years—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): With that, I'm sorry to say you're out of time for that rotation.

We will go to the official opposition. MPP French, the floor is yours.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Just to clarify: I think I've got 30 minutes left for us, if there isn't an independent member who arrives. Is that correct?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You will have 20 minutes in this rotation, and then we will be dividing up what's left.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay. I thought we were dividing about 20 minutes the next time around—anyway, 20 for sure. Thank you.

I want to circle back. MPP Pettapiece seemed concerned about something I said earlier. Just to clarify: When I said that I hoped I wouldn't still be here in a handful of years discussing Bondfield, that's certainly true; also, yes, I will not be at this committee, likely, holding the PC government to account, but I will be very proud to serve Ontario as a minister accountable to all Ontarians. For his concern about where I might be, I just wanted to clarify.

1410

Back to Bondfield: As Mr. Lindsay said, and as we understand, Zurich, who is Bondfield's insurer, is responsible, which is why it's obviously concerning that they are suing to get out of paying losses incurred when Bondfield went into creditor protection. Zurich is arguing that it should not be required to pay for losses on a P3 project that was awarded to Bondfield through a corrupt process.

My question is—I expect Mr. Lindsay will answer this—is it possible that the public is going to find itself on the hook for additional costs as a result of the fraud and corruption surrounding this project? If Zurich is successful in suing to get out of paying for the losses incurred, what could that mean for the public? Is there any way that this turns out that the public is on the hook for those additional costs?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: I appreciate the question.

This is perhaps my last opportunity to express my admiration for the painting behind you. You pointed at my poster at the start of the day; I think that your painting is equally beautiful.

The answer to the question: I want to be very careful about not commenting on active litigation, civil or otherwise, that's presently playing out, so I will go back to a more thematic answer about the fact that the P3 model is protecting the public from the costs that are being disputed. It's true to say that the Bondfield situation is continuing to impact numerous projects across the province, including other public institutions and levels of government, that are using, for the record, a variety of delivery models, P3 and beyond.

It's fair to say that given the unique circumstances of a court-imposed stay of all contractual rights and remedies,

there wasn't any contract form that would have protected any level of government from delays. But by its nature, the P3 contract is ensuring that the public sector partners and not the communities have to cover the extra costs of this project. The lenders, in particular, have played an active role on each one of these projects. Each took action after the projects defaulted. They brought a receivership application before the courts for the purposes of calling upon the performance bond that had to be posted. The fact that the lenders have money at risk has ensured that they are as interested as we are in ensuring that the bonding company ultimately honours its obligations. It's for situations like this, as I think we've been discussing through the day, that we have private financing on these projects.

I will also say that there are specific contractual provisions associated with our project agreements in these cases that make the project company liable for additional costs or direct losses incurred by the hospitals as a result of the delay. To date, both Hawkesbury and District General Hospital and Cambridge Memorial Hospital have benefited from this contract provision, with each of them receiving compensation for direct losses, already, associated with the delay.

Ultimately, put simply, no contract could provide protection from general contractor insolvency delays, but the P3 contract ensures the hospitals won't pay more than the guaranteed price for construction, that they'll be compensated for their additional costs, and that the lenders themselves are prompted, incentivized, to ultimately see the successful resolution of these projects, which I would say we are beginning to see. We are reaching substantial completion of these projects now.

But to comment further on the present litigation, as between Zurich and any of the hospitals, I think would be to go a step too far.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I can appreciate that. That said, I think it's fair to say that if everything goes sideways—not to predict what happens or not to make comment on how anything will turn out or whatnot—is there any path that would lead to the public being on the hook for additional costs? Regardless of what was intended with the contract, regardless of the best P3 that's ever been designed, we are staring at this one and wondering, is there the possibility that the public could be on the hook?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: I don't wish to speculate about the outcome of any litigation that's active, but I will tell you this: The contract form that we have as a contracting authority in this particular instance provides us with the best protection against these types of costs.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: As you had said, everything with Bondfield is ongoing right now and obviously is of interest, but I would ask from Infrastructure Ontario or from the ministry if the committee could please have a report with an update on all three P3 hospital projects that are contracted to Bondfield. Can we have updated timelines for the project completion and all additional financial and non-financial costs and risks to the public incurred since the contracts have been signed? I don't think that

there's anything legally blocking that, or at least that's not my understanding on its face. So can I ask to have a report with that information submitted to the committee?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I believe that we will submit what we can. As you have noted, because some things are still before the courts and legal matters, we obviously cannot give that information, but I would say to the committee Chair and the officials on the virtual time we have today that we will present what we have to you, for sure. And most of it's on the market update, and there will be new ones in two days.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Again, I wait with bated breath for that.

There's an end in sight, folks, with my Bondfield questions, so we will continue on.

The Globe has also revealed that even after Vas Georgiou was fired from St. Mike's following the Globe articles in 2015, Bondfield had another "asset" at the hospital, who was also another former Infrastructure Ontario senior staffer, by the name of Michael Mendonca. Mendonca was hired by Georgiou to oversee Bondfield's construction of the St. Mike's project. The Globe said that Georgiou referred to Mendonca by a nickname. "Smooth" was the nickname. The Globe reported that Georgiou passed messages between Mendonca and Aquino into 2017 and allegedly arranged for various gifts from Aquino to Mendonca.

Has Infrastructure Ontario or the government conducted an investigation into Mr. Mendonca's activities during the St. Mike's procurement and construction or his previous role at Infrastructure Ontario? And, connected to my earlier question, is there any reason for the public to worry that Mr. Mendonca might have signed off on aspects of Bondfield's work that should not have been signed off on?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: The reality is, anything done by any employee when not a part of Infrastructure Ontario is not something that is subject to our ongoing investigation. As I said to you earlier, it is absolutely the case, both in 2016 and on a continuing basis, that when allegations are raised associated with the conduct of Infrastructure Ontario employees, we ultimately investigate.

I just want to stress one more time that I do not want to comment on the validity of claims arising from testimony made by an individual connected to this case. Legal matters need to proceed. So please don't take any of my commentary as in any way validating what is the recently revealed testimony of one individual.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I will not, and I thank you for that.

As we have unpacked this all the way back from 2015 with different layers, different reports, different times, I've already heard the minister, and I've heard yourself, Mr. Lindsay, kind of refute my themes or my takeaways. That's fine, but I would say that there has been a failure of Infrastructure Ontario and the provincial government to detect fraud and corruption, which—the testimony and evidence and whatnot, as you said, playing out through the process, but it would seem there has been fraud and

corruption, bid rigging and various things happening essentially right under the nose of those who should—well, happening right under the nose of Infrastructure Ontario.

1420

Does Ontario need a public inquiry into public infrastructure procurement similar to the Charbonneau commission in Quebec? Is that where we need to land with everything that has unfolded? As we look back and as we look forward, is that something that we should consider?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I'm quite confident in a lot of the processes that were done, starting with the 2016 special committee to the Infrastructure Ontario board—those recommendations that were done and are being implemented. I have every confidence that Infrastructure Ontario is following with their different practices, third-party reviews, their risk assessments, risk transfers, investigations—procurement was not compromised, based on their investigations. And matters before the court we cannot get into detail about.

Everything is taken very seriously. Processes, investigations were done with the special committee to the Infrastructure Ontario board, retaining third-party reviews through our procurement process.

I know you're reading articles from the Globe and Mail. They are articles in the Globe and Mail. We can't comment, really, when an investigation is going on.

MPP French, I don't know if we have anything more to say other than what has been said on the processes, the investigations and the seriousness that we do proceed with in those accusations that may have been made by individuals. They were taken seriously, processes were followed, recommendations were received. And there are many, many third-party reviews that take place on people who bid in processes and those procurements—it's virtually impossible for individuals to influence the outcome of a bid, because the agency selects winners by consensus as part of a committee. I think I will leave it at that.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I don't know if Mr. Lindsay wanted to add anything since my wrap-up on Bondfield, frankly. So if there's anything else?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: I sincerely appreciate the entire line of questioning and the discussion that we've ultimately had.

The two things that I would affirm as being fundamental and true on a continuing basis are: Number one, we want to have the highest standards of integrity. We have faithfully implemented the recommendations of the 2016 special committee. We continue annually to look at our processes for ways in which to improve. Second, just to give you, hopefully, a sense of confidence—again, that as substantiated information is ultimately made available to us, should it in any way bear upon processes that we execute in Infrastructure Ontario, we will act upon it accordingly.

I thank you for the conversation.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Well, I'm glad to have it. It's something interesting, that I remember learning all of this Bondfield mess years ago, and having more continue to come out. I guess we will all watch as things do continue

to proceed. It certainly does not just raise questions, but we do want to be able to reassure all Ontarians that all processes are not only fair but that there isn't an ability to affect the outcome.

I don't rest easy at this time. I want that accountability. If government isn't perceived as being accountable or if there's a process that folks can't believe in or whatnot, it needs to be fixed.

Certainly, you've been very clear on pointing back to the 2016 report, but I think the learning that will come from what's before the courts now should shape where we continue down the road. I'll be glad to continue to do that work opposite the ministry or alongside the ministry, because at the end of the day, it's not just about taxpayer dollars; it's about the confidence in government fundamentally and delivering the public infrastructure that people need and should have, and should trust.

Chair, time check?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have four minutes.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: And then is it one more rotation?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): After that, the rotations go to 12 minutes each. If the independent doesn't show up, then there will be a rotation of seven minutes and 30 seconds each. So you have almost 20 minutes left after this.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: So then I'd better come up with something. But I have one for now.

Minister, you've explained that the Ministry of Infrastructure—it's interesting how it spends its money. Sometimes it's through other ministries. Talking about the Ministry of Education, you had—I'll let you remind me of the number, but I think it was around \$700 million that the government has spent on education. Can you revisit that for me and let me know, as folks are obviously very concerned about a safe return to school and what have you, what some of the infrastructure investments look like and what that covers? There's a lot of talk around ventilation. I feel like you said that some of it was for that. How much is, or how much is yet to be spent on that?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Under the Ministry of Education itself—I can't speak to their direct spending in respect to all the COVID-19 supplies, protections and enhancements that have come. I know through the ICIP stream, the COVID-19 stream, within the other four streams—the fifth stream is the COVID-19 stream—that was developed, I think it was up to \$700 million, just shy of that, that ended up being put into the education system. That analysis was done through the Ministry of Education. Of course, they have a counting of their schools that needed the assistance, that needed extra ventilation assistance.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Okay. I think it was just shy of \$700 million, at the end of the day, of education-related projects. In that stream of \$1 billion in total, with federal and provincial dollars, the Ministry of Education selected those projects. They submitted them to us, who then went

to the feds for approval, and they were announced—I think it was about six weeks ago—to education to use to enhance their air purification systems, HVACs—whichever were identified through the Ministry of Education. In that \$1 billion was also \$250 million for the formula-based municipalities, some of which were just announced today and we discussed, and then the other \$100 million was for long-term-care projects which long-term care identified for enhancements to, again, ventilation systems within their facilities.

Those are part of education, as I said. I can't speak to exactly where the schools are, at this point in time. I think we broke it down by school board when we did that announcement. That was part of the COVID-19 stream that was added, again. Unfortunately, we did not get new monies from the federal government, so we did have to divert monies. In our case, as in the province of Ontario case, we only had the green stream left that was not totally allocated.

As you've heard me say several times and I will continue to say, we continue to ask the federal government for more infrastructure dollars. In fact, not only Premier Ford but all the Premiers of the provinces and territories of Canada have asked for more infrastructure dollars—up to \$10 billion per year for 10 years—to get shovels in the ground and get more needed community infrastructure projects. We'll continue to advocate for that.

But absolutely, in the education—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you. I'm sorry to say that you're out of time on that rotation.

We now go to the government for their last lengthy rotation. MPP Coe, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Good afternoon, Minister, and to your officials who are with you this afternoon.

I want to move into an area that I know, from my previous 13 years' experience in municipal government, is really important: Infrastructure Ontario lending, more commonly known as IO loans. Since we've been the government—and Minister, you'll know this—we've been making it easier for communities like mine and other parts of the region of Durham to maintain and build their local infrastructure using every tool possible. That's important, because there are a variety of tools that government does provide to help municipalities serve the constituents and residents they serve.

1430

What I'd like you and your officials to please speak to, Minister, is, what is the Infrastructure Ontario loan program, to begin—because not everyone knows about it; municipalities certainly do. The region of Durham council is meeting today. They know well what the program can do and how it can benefit municipalities like Whitby, Oshawa, Pickering, Ajax and Brock, which form the great region of Durham, that are looking for infrastructure funding. And they're all looking for infrastructure funding, Minister; you know that.

So I'll turn it over to you and your officials to talk about the program and the good work it's doing in financing approaches that help municipalities and public sector partners.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you very much for your service to your constituents, both in your municipal council days and in your provincial days with us. We really appreciate your input, advice and, of course, standing up for the constituents in your riding in Durham region.

I have the northern part of Durham region, and I very much enjoy working with my local municipalities.

Infrastructure Ontario's Loan Program offers affordable long-term fixed-rate loans to help municipalities, universities and other eligible public sector partners renew and build Ontario's public infrastructure. And you're right; it's a very popular ministry—and I get to be popular, I guess, because I'm associated with it. I don't know how long it will last, but I will take that popularity. It's good when you're bringing good news and not so good when you're not bringing good news.

The loan part is exciting. I know municipalities in my riding have all taken advantage of the Infrastructure Ontario loan value. There are 11 sectors that are eligible for loans: Aboriginal health access centres, community health and social service hubs, hospices, housing providers, local service boards, long-term-care homes, municipal corporations, municipalities, professional arts training institutions, sports and recreation organizations, universities and affiliated colleges.

It has been a great success. Since 2003, it has provided more than \$11 billion in loans for approximately 3,200 projects, representing over 447 communities and organizations; and it has supported more than \$18 billion in local infrastructure investments across Ontario since December 31, 2020—a very great facilitator of investments for public infrastructure. It can go right down to the skating rinks in the community parks or the fire pumpers—the list goes on.

Innovative ways that we can build projects that our communities and the people in our communities want—I know it has been a challenge with COVID-19. We certainly have asked and worked with municipalities. We deferred the loan payments for IO, including the municipalities' housing providers and health care providers, so that they could have a bit of a break during COVID-19, as we've all struggled. This deferral was designed to provide a grace period of three months for municipalities, six months for affordable housing and health care providers, including long-term-care homes.

We understand the impact that COVID-19 has had and have made adjustments accordingly to assist our municipalities and the opportunity of those people who have Infrastructure Ontario loans to accommodate to COVID-19.

I have great stories in my riding. I don't know what Durham council is discussing today—maybe it is about an Infrastructure Ontario loan; I don't know for sure.

We're always happy to assist as best we can on loans and projects through the Ministry of Infrastructure.

Mr. Lorne Coe: You touched on this a bit, in the last part of your response to my first question about the benefit in municipalities and how we're helping them with their infrastructure funding. We're also helping them out, Minister, with some of the hardships on many levels with

COVID-19, including the [*inaudible*] that have received loans from Infrastructure Ontario. We talked about some of the deferrals that we've done. There are other steps that we've taken, as well.

What is the ministry doing to mitigate these financial hardships both that are existing now and that might be anticipated on the way ahead? I'll leave that question with you, and if your officials want to step in, I'd be interested in their perspective.

Hon. Laurie Scott: I did mention earlier about deferrals of some of their loans because of COVID-19 and the hardships financially that some of our municipalities—although they've got some great help from the Minister of Municipal Affairs, working in partnership with the federal government.

I'll ask Michael Lindsay if he can drill down a little bit more in depth.

Thank you very much for the question, Lorne.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you very much.

Yes, as the minister said, beginning in July 2020, through our lending program, we provided up to three months' payment deferral for municipalities that were borrowing from Infrastructure Ontario and up to six months' payment deferral for housing and health care providers. It's interesting to note that that prompted a whole set of discussions with people who were ultimately borrowing from Infrastructure Ontario, but there was indeed only one formal request for the program, by the Toronto and Community Housing Corp., which was approved, effective August 2020.

MPP Coe, what I would say is that's probably just evidence of the talented lending team at Infrastructure Ontario and our counterparties thinking about ways, in respect of the lending that we do, to ultimately change the nature and governance of the loans in order to create greater flexibility, stopping well short of a deferral of repayments. It prompted a whole very good set of discussions with counterparties about the hardships that they were facing in the moment. That was the program that we ultimately put into place last year.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Minister, you'll know that you announced a loan for Prince Edward county. Can you speak about how much money was provided through this loan and the effect that will have in Prince Edward county, particularly as it relates to supporting modern and efficient public infrastructure, please?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you for the question.

The great member from Quinte, Minister Todd Smith, was very happy to be part of this announcement with his municipality.

They were able to enter into a program for a new commitment to provide financing to Prince Edward county for multiple water projects—and coming from rural Ontario, I know the municipalities do have multiple water projects. In Prince Edward county, the loan was over \$21 million to finance 11 water and waste water projects—projects that are in Ameliasburg, Carrying Place, Consecon, Picton and Wellington, and more than 440 clients, including municipalities and non-profits. The loan program has helped to

finance those various types of infrastructure; I mentioned before, it's everything from roads and bridges to long-term-care facilities.

Oh, my gosh, I feel like I just heard the minister echoing about Prince Edward county and the beautiful area that it is and the tourism and the people who want to come when we can travel again—which is happening now, and hopefully there will be more restrictions lifted as we continue on—the great draw that occurs there, and how in our rural areas we have many water systems and those need to be supported.

Through that, there are other projects: The municipality of West Nipissing has got over \$9 million, a loan for a new police station. The town of Bancroft, one of my neighbouring municipalities, has got a \$190,000 loan for a roll-off truck and trailer. The municipality of Kincardine has got an IO loan of almost \$9 million to replace and upgrade the water and waste water infrastructure there. So you've got wide-ranging examples of Infrastructure Ontario loans.

1440

I know a couple of arenas in my communities have got Infrastructure Ontario loans. We renovated, through an Infrastructure Ontario loan, an arena that—I think it's public now—has an OHL team that used to be in Whitby that's coming to Minden Hills. I tell you, the community is incredibly excited. Hopefully, they'll start in full action in the fall on that. We love our hockey, up where I am. Those are the types of things that impact—in fact, the arena was just completed and, instead of hosting a hockey game for the first opening, they hosted vaccine clinics. So that's a great working relationship with the municipalities. That arena was able to be renovated through an Infrastructure Ontario loan and assist us in, of course, fighting the pandemic.

All those great stories that exist out there—and I'll probably stop talking while you ask more questions.

Mr. Lorne Coe: It's really a strong example of how, with your leadership and that of your officials, you're investing in infrastructure that improves the quality of life for Ontarians. That's great, great work on your part.

Minister, I want to transition into another area right now: long-term care. In your response to my first question about the IO loans, you referenced long-term care.

We've had a couple of celebrations recently of the success of investments in long-term care, one in our colleague David Piccini's riding. It involved celebrating the start of the construction of the new Golden Plough long-term-care home in Cobourg—the long-awaited long-term-care home. And who made it possible? Infrastructure Ontario, along with some other partnerships. It was made possible with the support from an IO loan program.

If you want to speak a little bit about—and some of this might be a little bit repetitious, but I think it bears repeating because it not only demonstrates the benefit of the program to creating jobs and stimulating the economy and the recovery of that economy, but it speaks to the health and well-being of individuals as well, and how many beds that lodge in Cobourg is going to bring. Would you do that, Minister, and talk about that?

I'm going to transition to another area after that, in adjoining counties like Northumberland and the united counties of Prescott and Russell.

But to begin, if we could focus on the Golden Plough long-term-care home in Cobourg—because I know our MPP Piccini was ecstatic about that happening.

Hon. Laurie Scott: I appreciate that opportunity, because one of the first questions that I asked when I come into the Ministry of Infrastructure portfolio was about the IO loans and long-term care.

We're actually, currently, supporting five long-term-care projects, creating hundreds of new beds, with a combined total of \$182 million in loans, and one of them does include the Golden Plough long-term-care home in Northumberland county, which is represented by the most able David Piccini—again, a neighbouring constituency area with me. I have a lot of neighbours.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Me too.

Hon. Laurie Scott: I have a quite large territory to cover. But yes, the construction of the Golden Plough Lodge officially got under way on December 14, 2020. It's a 180-bed lodge, which will include a combination of one- and two-bed rooms across six resident home areas. The facility has been designed to ensure resident comfort and safety, promote resident independence, and provide for residents' privacy.

This is so important—as we know, and I've spoken about it over the last couple of days, the need for long-term-care beds in our communities; how the previous government built only 600, roughly, new long-term-care beds; and the absolute, solid commitment that our government has made in building over 30,000 beds over 10 years. This is certainly an example of what we can all do when we work together. The Minister of Long-Term Care has moved mountains to accommodate these builds as quickly as possible.

Michael Lindsay from Infrastructure Ontario and I have spoken at length about the rapid builds that are occurring in our three different locations throughout the province. Then the other construction—I know I was very fortunate to get a new long-term-care addition that will be coming to my riding, too. There are many ways—Infrastructure Ontario loans are one of them—that we're helping long-term care build new homes.

Thank you very much for the question.

Mr. Lorne Coe: One of the other areas that I wanted to cover was northern Ontario, because I know that on our committee today, we have some representatives from northern Ontario.

Can you talk about the effect of the IO loans in northern Ontario and how widely they have helped residents up in northern Ontario going forward, please?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Absolutely. We have a long list tonight.

Welcome, my friend MPP Vanthof. I see you on the screen. I wondered where you've been. I'm so happy that you've joined us.

I'm very happy to talk about northern Ontario again. We've talked a lot about northern Ontario in the last few

days in estimates, MPP Vanthof, in case you missed that. For example, in the city of Thunder Bay—again, over a million dollars for sanitary sewer rehabilitation. Still in the city of Thunder Bay: pollution prevention and control, fuel tank replacement, rescue vehicles, fleet replacement, bus replacement facilities, storm sewers, public parks and recreation trails, pavement rehabilitation, sidewalks, water main replacement, traffic street lighting—I have, actually, quite a few pages, everything from fire pumpers to my favourite, fibre to the home and business—broadband, broadband.

Investments that we've made—I know that MPP Vanthof has joined us. There have been some great announcements in his area of Temiskaming Shores: a fleet replacement plan, almost \$500,000; recreation projects, over \$600,000, in the city of Temiskaming Shores. There are all these IT upgrades. He and I talk about IT quite often—and I'm still going to connect you, my friend. Haileybury STP digester rehabilitation, firefighting equipment, the Haileybury medical centre upgrades; in the municipality of West Nipissing, a police station; the town of Hudson with a 2020 plow truck; the township of Black River-Matheson, a new municipal hall. The township of Kearns got the John Deere grader. I don't know, when MPP Vanthof was a farmer, if they were using John Deere, but I won't get into that. You don't have to disclose that. Actually, there are a couple of John Deere. A loader was also for the town of Kirkland Lake—I love these—and the municipality Markstay-Warren, with a 2019 rescue van. There are bridges—the Nepewassi Lake bridge—graders, loaders. I know New Liskeard got a library relocation; the town of Brethour, a plow truck; the township of Casey, a 2021 plow truck; the township of Chamberlain, a purchase of a grader; the town of Cobalt, a wheel-loader purchase; the township of Harley, the Roy bridge.

There are many water projects in the city of Temiskaming Shores. I know that Temiskaming Shores, the city, had the 2020 roads program and—

Interjection.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Is that the Chair speaking the time, there?

Interjection.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Yes. So those are some that I'm highlighting. There are certainly more that are out there. I want to make sure that we include northern Ontario.

Thank you very much, MPP Coe from Durham region, for extending a hand and highlighting the good things that have been happening in northern Ontario.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Minister, once again—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say that you're out of time. We now move to rotations of 12 minutes each. This one will go to the opposition.

I just want to note, MPP Vanthof has joined us.

I know, MPP Vanthof, you're here for the next minister—although you like this minister, I understand. I'd like you to confirm your identity and the fact that you're in Ontario, please.

1450

Mr. John Vanthof: Sure. I am indeed John Vanthof, and I am at home in Cobalt, Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you so much. MPP French.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I understand that I have this rotation, and then whatever time is left, we'll split it again, so I won't say my farewell and thanks.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Correct.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: It has been an interesting day.

I know I promised that I was finished with Bondfield, but I'm not; I thought of something. So I'm going to circle back, Mr. Lindsay.

I had written a letter to the OPP a while ago, but I'm curious: Has the OPP been in touch with Infrastructure Ontario with respect to its investigation of Bondfield or subsequent revelations about collusion and fraud? I know you had mentioned that IO will be a willing partner and is co-operating with everyone, but I just wanted to circle back because I had sent a letter and I know that things were in the works. Has the OPP been in touch with IO?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: MPP French, we are actively co-operating presently as witnesses in the serious fraud office investigation of the conduct of individuals previously connected to Bondfield, and we're going to continue to help in any way we can.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: You may have mentioned that. I just wanted to be clear, so thank you.

Now I think I'm finished with Bondfield, but I reserve the right to change my mind. I'm a Gemini, after all.

Minister Scott, I had started asking you about education, and you had outlined some of the investments.

Interestingly, at estimates committee, just before infrastructure, with education, the opposition critic MPP Stiles was asking the minister—who ended up admitting that the school repair backlog now stands at \$16.8 billion. That's almost \$1 billion more that it has grown since this government has taken the reins. Among the ignored repairs are HVAC systems, which is a dangerous issue to neglect given the airborne COVID-19 virus thrives in enclosed spaces. In many of our classrooms, windows don't open and HVAC systems are outdated or broken. This obviously isn't just about comfort; it is about safety.

I wanted to ask you, because you were highlighting earlier the money flowing to the Ministry of Education: As schools have been left to fall into disrepair, is there any money that the Ministry of Infrastructure will be spending on schools in Ontario, going forward, that would address some of this significant need? Does the minister know why this PC government has allowed the school repair backlog to increase by another billion dollars?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I can't speak to details about the Ministry of Education and the allocations. I know that the Ministry of Education has a very aggressive plan. Obviously, we assist where needed.

In my ministry, as was mentioned when I was speaking previously, it was about the up to \$700 million that education-related projects have been given in relation to the Ministry of Education's analysis to assist schools for their HVAC needs for the moment, and what could be done and delivered quickly. That's what the federal

government and provincial government assisted the education in.

I know that we've been in not quite—oh, yes, it has been three years that we've been in. We certainly, I would say, from the previous 15 years of Liberal government, inherited a backlog of infrastructure needs, which has been highlighted by independent officers of the government, where those are. We mentioned quite a few in the health care sector, and we will mention them—that we did inherit a lot of backlog from the previous government in the education system.

I know that billions have been spent by the Ministry of Education. They have a very good inventory asset management in their schools. They have the needs. So the COVID-19 stream is where I was mentioning, previously—the ICIP funds, I should say, so the added stream of COVID-19 resilience that has flowed to the Ministry of Education specifically for HVAC improvements in the schools and allocated and decided on by the Ministry of Education, where those schools were [inaudible].

Also, on the ICIP stream, I think it was today that the municipalities were announced their COVID-19 stream of the—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: And I—

Hon. Laurie Scott: I know in the city of Oshawa, if I can just say, under the COVID-19 stream, they got approval for the furniture replacement in downtown—almost \$200,000—and the downtown streetscape redevelopment total was around \$550,000. So just the COVID-19 stream for the municipalities—at their request by application, was over \$750,000. That's just some good news I thought I would share with you, as you represent Oshawa.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: And I'm proud to do so. I'm going to use that as a segue, Minister, if I may.

We've talked about it at committee: There are a lot of needs across communities. They can be big, very complicated projects and applications, or they could be fairly uncomplicated but still needed and necessary. It's interesting because, obviously, comparing now to many years ago, with the asset management plans, municipalities big and small do a heck of a lot of work to do the asset management. As they are still having to jump through such complicated hoops sometimes for these applications for application-based funding, I would like to ask you: What is the government doing to make it easier for some of these smaller municipalities to receive ICIP funding without jumping through a bunch of hoops to complete an application, without the certainty that that application will be approved? We talked earlier a bit about the fact that there was—not over-subscribed, but over-application for funds available. But they're doing a lot. They're jumping through a lot of hoops. Considering that much of the work has already been done and the maintenance work is done of their asset management plans, will the government move towards more formula-based funding so that municipalities have more certainty about how much money will be available for their projects, so that they will be better able to plan?

I will give you a chance to answer, but I had said about the ICON application—which is not ICIP, I know, but with Durham region, they had submitted a wicked awesome plan for Internet that was based on not just hooking up new folks, but more affordable, and options for small business. My understanding is, they were told if they wanted to be eligible, they were going to have to redo that application, because it didn't quite match the boxes—that's my editorializing.

But again, when a community knows what they need, why so many hoops? Can you commit to making it easier for them, and what could that look like?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I will just remind everybody that the ICIP program is federal, provincial, municipal or third-party or First Nations group partners. I think, in 2016—again, it happened just before we came—the parameters are set out by the federal government. The province takes in the applications. It's a \$30-billion program over 10 years. It is certainly oversubscribed in most of the streams. But we work, as the ministry, very closely with the municipalities on the applications and to try to—yes, do I talk to the federal government? Again I'll say, the first chance I can get—to make these things more simplified, especially for smaller municipalities that just don't have the bandwidth, if I can use broadband terminology for the moment, to make it more streamlined, to make approvals faster. Some of these approvals were literally, I believe, 10 months—waiting for the federal government to approve. So, yes, do we ask for improvements? Oh, my heavens, I can't tell you how often I do. It is very frustrating. Anyway, that was set up. We inherited it. I tried to get it streamlined.

Even though the COVID-19 approval stream was supposed to be approved in 21 business days, it didn't all work out that way. But at the end of the day, we want to get it out the door for the municipalities and that funding flowing so they can get those works accomplished faster.

You make a good point on municipal asset management. I know my ministry has been helping the municipalities. It's called AMP it Up 2.0—I know. That type of asset management planning to help municipalities stretch their capital dollars, which is obviously taxpayer dollars, giving them the tools to make informed, evidence-based decisions—so the right infrastructure investments at the right time at the right places. We've strived to continue to consult with municipalities for more than two years now to work to shape that content. That's ongoing. Some municipalities have completed—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

1500

Hon. Laurie Scott:—some we've done the extension on—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Well, and you'd be hearing—

Hon. Laurie Scott: Do you want me to finish the answer, or do you want another question in the two minutes?

Ms. Jennifer K. French: You'd be hearing the same thing that I am—probably more—that they need the money, they need it to flow, that it is quite cumbersome.

That was why the second part of my question—is there any way that we could move towards more formula-based funding so that they can have more certainty?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Well, OCIF is the example of the formula-based funding that I think I said earlier today gives the surety, reliability and predictability to the municipalities, and we maintain that at the \$200 million. We told them early so that they could plan in their budget that they would be getting their share based on formulas, which just fluctuates a little bit. It depends on all the components. But this is a program that is much appreciated, as it is, again, not application-based.

When I speak about AMP it Up 2.0 and their inventory of asset management—we see that other provinces are looking to what we've done and are doing with that inventory of asset management. And you're right; they spend a lot of time on application-based, but as we help them collect better data, it gives us a solid foundation to work with—and hopefully, allocating funding in a more evidence-based way, which is really I think what you're getting at, targeting solutions, bringing in innovation and talent. Infrastructure Ontario is full of a lot of talent to help municipalities with innovation and water, waste water, all the technologies that are changing.

We're looking, certainly, and always listening and adapting, and if you can use the word, “market sounding” with municipalities about solutions-based, so that, in this case—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say, we are out of time.

We'll go to a 12-minute rotation for the government. MPP Crawford, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Is this the last rotation we have?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have 12 minutes. Assuming that the independent does not show up, then both you and the opposition have another seven minutes and 30 seconds.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Minister Scott, I know how you feel about infrastructure, and you're passionate. It's great to have you in this role because I know your passion for it.

We've certainly touched on broadband.

I know it has been a really co-operative venture with the federal as well as municipal governments and First Nations communities—but I want to get your sense on, is the province willing to do more? We are investing significant amounts of money, \$145 billion over 10 years, in infrastructure improvements. How has the response been from the federal government? We've laid out a great plan and they've been great partners, but through COVID-19—correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't believe there have been additional funds from the federal government put to infrastructure. My question is, are you calling for that? Where would you see this money potentially going, and how would it be invested if we could get the federal government to invest more in infrastructure in collaboration with us?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you for the question.

I think that everybody from the Premier to the Deputy Premier to the Prime Minister to the Deputy Prime Minister have conversations with each other, and I certainly know that the coalition of Premiers has asked the federal government for more investment in infrastructure. We have asked for \$10 billion a year over 10 years, to \$100 billion.

That is such a great question.

I speak with the infrastructure ministers from different provinces at different times. We speak about everything from broadband to roads and highways, bridges and allocations. I think that we've learned and we have worked with municipalities for so long, listening to their needs as all the streams, which are now five in the ICIP program—we said we have projects that are ready, because you know the over-application of all the streams, whether they're rural and northern bridges, roads, airports; to water, waste water and clean drinking water; to green streams for disaster mitigation; to the transit projects.

Minister Mulroney and Associate Minister Surma have done a fantastic job in working with municipalities and the formula that they have for the transit and the ridership and leveraging monies.

Unfortunately, with the COVID-19 stream, when it was added, we did not have any new money, so we had to divert money that we had not spent. A portion of the green stream was the only part that we had not spent, so that provided relief for education and health care—in their HVAC systems, which I've mentioned, but also to municipalities in some of the announcements that you thankfully were helping me out in making today, on my behalf, with other members. That was a bit disappointing. I know that I spoke many, many times with my federal minister counterpart, and I know that the Premier had spoken to, obviously, the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister about the need—especially in COVID-19 times, everybody needs the boost. We need to get out of this. We need to have the best economy.

We're working on broadband, getting people connected, but we know that the need for municipalities in all those categories I've mentioned is very real and very much there. I don't think there's going to be any shortage of where we're going to spend the money—not only through the over-application of ICIP. But we also know through the asset management that we're gathering data that the municipalities are now being able to forecast where they need to spend their money; different ministries, obviously, are also—education was just brought up, but certainly, health care. We've discussed health care a lot and the need for infrastructure dollars to go into our public health care system. We have committed, on our own, a great deal of money—not only the almost \$4 billion for broadband, which is actually federally regulated telecommunications. We know the need, and we need to help our people in the province of Ontario, and we need to do it now.

We've come forward with aggressive infrastructure dollars for the health care sector and the hospitals. We were shocked—I know the Minister of Health was—by some of the conditions of our health care system. Their

needs were immediate, and we have acted and invested a lot more dollars, billions of dollars, in the recent budget, to the health care sector and the hospitals alone, as well as the billions that I know the Minister of Long-Term Care has allocated for new builds in the province of Ontario, including our rapid build system.

There is no shortage of infrastructure requests and dollars to be done, and to invest at the right time at the right place to get the right results for our communities and public institutions is always foremost. So, yes, the list never ends.

We'd be happy if the federal government would deliver on the \$10 billion per year for 10 years to assist our communities, but also be economic drivers. We all know when we invest in infrastructure, it's an investment in the economy, for jobs, and for generations to come. These infrastructure projects will benefit those children and grandchildren that you all have.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Yes, for sure.

On that note, I know broadband is probably the most pressing issue that we've certainly heard, but aside from broadband, what would you put as the top two other priorities in terms of infrastructure? I know there's a lot. It's sad, in a sense, because when we inherited government a couple of years ago, we had the largest sub-sovereign debt in the world. You'd think if we had that kind of debt, we'd have some great infrastructure to show for it, but we don't. I don't know where the money went, but it didn't go to infrastructure. We have crumbling hospitals, crumbling roads, no broadband. So my question to you is, outside of broadband, could you highlight a couple of the priorities for infrastructure, where we really need to improve?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Absolutely. We have a historic spend of \$145 billion over the next 10 years in infrastructure. We've released an Infrastructure Ontario pipeline, with updates every three months, so four times a year, and that is obviously seeing the emphasis on transit.

We know that in the city of Toronto, the transit system was in deep need of an aggressive increase in lines. Those in the GTA and from the city of Toronto can understand the need for the transit file.

1510

We've seen great leadership on the transit and transportation file.

We've seen great leadership on the health care file by our ministers.

The new broadband file which—almost \$4 billion to be spent and connect people by 2025 is absolutely a priority and is a huge investment in the province, and new for all of us to learn. I'm speaking a language I never knew the words of before, but that's the fabulous part of the Ministry of Infrastructure, so I thank all those on board who have educated me. We have learned together on the broadband file, I can say. It is important.

Toronto is the fourth-largest city in North America, which I think shocks a lot of people—that it is that large and that international a city.

Again, working with municipalities, the highways, the transit—and then what do we need in the north and in rural

Ontario? Installing roads and bridges; it's broadband. That's where you saw our government make those investments.

We've seen the parallel to—it's like the electrification in the 1950s of rural Ontario and suburban Ontario. It's the new highways of the future—being broadband.

These are absolutely exciting times to be in government. And being the Minister of Infrastructure, I'm very privileged to hold that portfolio and work with a lot of great people and colleagues to move those projects forward.

Everything is important. I know that all the ministries that we work with in Infrastructure Ontario—we're contracted out. We're everybody's friend, when they need some advice and some help to build their projects. It's a very exciting time to build. As I said, we have a historic investment of \$145 billion in infrastructure over 10 years, which is a good, solid commitment to build out on the needs that we've heard from the province of Ontario and that Premier Ford and our government have made a priority.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two and a half minutes. Use it wisely.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Yes. I don't know if you'll have time to answer this, but I did want to touch a little bit on the Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund, OCIF. It's a little different, obviously, from the various ICIP streams we're doing. I know that a lot of municipalities have told us at conferences like AMO and ROMA that they need stable, predictable annual funding for infrastructure, maintenance and upgrades. You've been providing funding through OCIF. I'm just wondering if you could let us know more about how this funding is supporting municipalities in Ontario. I know we've only got a minute and a half left, probably, but—

Hon. Laurie Scott: I can speak quick—not as quick as my auctioneer friend Minister Walker, but I can try to do my best.

OCIF is that stable, sustainable funding that municipalities look for, and it's those investments so that municipalities can partner, Indigenous communities can partner and move on with shovel-ready projects.

In 2021, the municipalities were provided the \$200 million that was the funding that they received for allocations last year, and this is formula-based, so that helps, as I've said—not to take the time to do those application forms. We made that commitment early to them, so they'd have the predictable and stable infrastructure funding they need. This is for northern and small communities—less than \$100,000—so it helps them with their budgets. They know that is coming. They can put it to the priorities that they have in their municipalities.

We also have heard from them that we might have to have a—we are having a look at the OCIF programming to make any adjustments to improve it. We will have that report back within this year, and we'll be sharing that with

them to make sure that any tweaks or changes that need to be made to the OCIF formula are heard.

I think that the Chair might be cutting me off shortly.

You have helped me out, PA Crawford, many times and with many meetings at those AMO conferences. I really appreciate that. We have great news to tell them.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): And with that, I'm sorry to say you're out of time.

It looks like the independent member will not be here to claim their time. The remaining time will be divided equally, with seven minutes and 30 seconds for the official opposition and seven minutes and 30 seconds for the government.

Official opposition: MPP French, the floor is yours.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I will take this opportunity to thank people for their time and attention in what has been, I think, an interesting chance to have a back-and-forth.

Mr. Lindsay, I've already been making it a decision that we should have a longer conversation. I have a whole bunch of encore questions that I'm not going to ask today. The alliance model is something I still don't really understand, so we'll save that for another time.

I am actually going to hand it over to my colleague MPP West.

Mr. Jamie West: Thank you, MPP French.

First, I want to thank everyone for this. It's the first time I've been part of estimates, and I've learned a lot.

I have a couple of questions I wanted to raise, one of them to the minister.

I know that you get a lot of correspondence, like we all do, so I don't expect you to know this off-hand—it was a letter that came from Fred Vance. Fred is from Fairbank forum or FLCOA, the Fairbank Lake Camp Owners' Association. He wrote to the minister earlier this year, and he copied my office. I was going to read the whole thing, but a here's a summary, basically: Netspectrum has a large funding request for Blue Sky Net, and they're going to put two towers on Fairbank Lake. They're very excited about having this, but when they looked into it, they found out that these two towers, although they will be able to hold the hardware for broadband, won't be able to accommodate cell hardware in the future. And then he looked into this and found out that in the Almaguin region of Ontario, the cell and broadband providers have worked together and there is a tower that does both. I'm going to read it here: "In closing, we do not wish to interfere with the existing application; we want to have it enhanced." So they want the broadband.

The question I wanted to raise on this was, how does Infrastructure Ontario ensure that best practices are followed to maximize cell and broadband expansion so we're not putting up two towers this year and next year two more towers relatively close by, and we can maximize the dollars that are being spent on putting up these towers?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I probably can't answer the detailed details of your question, which I don't think you expect me to anyway. But you bring forward good points.

There are application-based, both federally and provincially, as we speak—the provincial one being ICON, the

federal one being the Universal Broadband Fund. We have worked with the federal government, and as I said, more announcements are coming, so maybe some more clarity—specifically on these projects, I'm not sure about, but overall clarity on a plan.

What Ontario needed was to connect everyone. That was the fairness. So we've put on the table up to \$4 billion to connect everyone by 2025. There are definitely different challenges in different areas of the province. Some municipalities are more advanced in taking stock of what they need. It's a space that, as I said before, is federally regulated—but not really any overall plan to connect everyone. We set it as a priority, as government, to connect everyone by 2025. So we have been working a lot behind the scenes to look at maps, to look at what technology is available, to see the low earth orbits coming in to fruition now for Pikangikum, as I mentioned. But my neighbours have Starlink—that is changing. And those are low earth satellites that can be sent to people's houses, even though they might be close to those hydro poles that I love to talk about, as to, why aren't we stringing the cable? And we do have a road map, working with hydro and the utility companies, which—we brought in that legislation of building broadband faster in part to sit everybody at the table to say, what are the barriers? So we talked to the ISPs. The Internet service providers—

Mr. Jamie West: Minister, can—

Hon. Laurie Scott: —would be probably there.

Mr. Jamie West: Sorry; I didn't mean to cut you off. I just know we have very limited time. I have a follow-up question, and it might be better for Mr. Lindsay.

I'm just wondering, is there an end cap or process where, after we finish a project like this, they look into the future and say, "When we put in these towers in another community, we should use this product because it's more adaptable for the future and it will save us money in the long-term"? Is there something like that in place, Mr. Lindsay?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: MPP West, generally speaking, across our projects, that kind of information-sharing about infrastructure does indeed happen. I think your question is specific to broadband-related infrastructure, which is less the purview of Infrastructure Ontario presently and more the sorts of programs that I think the minister is referencing.

1520

Mr. Jamie West: It doesn't seem clear to me, but I'm hopeful we can get there—

Hon. Laurie Scott: Probably because I didn't get to the end. I'm so sorry about that.

Basically, whatever government level—so the Ministry of Infrastructure itself, the ministry, did the ICON project—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Two minutes left.

Hon. Laurie Scott: —doing their projects. So whatever level of government—it's infrastructure there.

The Internet service providers also are the contracts with the governments or the municipalities, depending on what the program is. They work on, obviously, best practices.

But again, there will be more evolution coming soon that will help explain our plan further.

Mr. Jamie West: I think we got a two-minute warning, so if I can wedge it in—you've been talking about connecting everybody by 2025, which is very exciting for people in the north. Before I start telling people this, will this be affordable, unlimited and fast? It's very difficult to compete when you're spending hundreds of dollars more than our southern businesses or if you just can't afford, as a family, to have your kids connect online.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Actually, the rates are set by the federal government. I can speak to the fact that we're partnering with them on certain projects to make sure we don't duplicate builds in our areas. The CRTC—again, federally regulated—sets the speeds. High-speed is defined as 50/10, 50 upload, 10 download.

There is no question; we understand the communities and the need to build for the future. As I said, we've been working with the federal government. We've put up to \$4 billion on the table, and we're leveraging with them, we're leveraging with the Internet service providers—different areas have different providers, some small, some big—to address a lot of those issues that you just brought forward.

We have been developing a plan for the whole of Ontario to connect by 2025. With the Building Broadband Faster Act, we heard that we needed to take any impediments away so we can build it quicker. So it's all involved, and there will be a bigger picture unveiled sooner.

Mr. Jamie West: Sooner?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Sooner, as in—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry; your time is up.

The last rotation, seven minutes and 30 seconds, is for the government. MPP Crawford.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: In the remaining time we have left, I did want to ask Minister Scott how the Ministry of Infrastructure has dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic. Has it been dramatically affected? Have projects slowed down dramatically? Are they all on track? And in terms of overall investment from the province to develop infrastructure during this difficult time—we know the benefits of infrastructure, the jobs created and whatnot. How has the ministry played a role through COVID-19, to help us get out of it and have a strong economic recovery?

Hon. Laurie Scott: It's a great question.

Absolutely; we've successfully negotiated and launched with the federal government the \$1 billion in the COVID-19 resiliency infrastructure, which you helped announce part of today. Obviously, again, we worked with the partner ministries, whether they be long-term care or the Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries to leverage savings from this approach, including developing a new provincial-only program to fund community and sports infrastructure, which you're going to be hearing more about. That's with the MHSTCI, if I can put that acronym for the tourism ministry out there. That was announced in our budget 2021.

We have the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, which I spoke about, which is—I know it's

hard to see right at the moment, but it will be transformational when we do the build-out, so that we can access what we need to access for infrastructure to deliver that high-speed Internet by the end of 2025.

As announced also in the budget—\$200 million per year in OCIF, which you mentioned earlier in your questions, that helped 424 communities. So don't undervalue that OCIF fund; it makes a big difference in our smaller communities, for their needs.

We have certainly addressed the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes the inquiries about restrictions on construction activities during the initial stage of the emergency. We have definitely pressed forward during COVID-19 to adapt, to invest.

I don't know if Michael Lindsay wants to add more to that, but I do want to ask for two minutes maybe even at the end or in my time just to address the question about the Next Generation 911 that was mentioned yesterday. I just want to update on that.

Michael, I didn't know if you wanted to add anything.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Sure, Minister. I will try to be brief to preserve that time for you.

I would highlight only three things, the first of which is on our procurements—they have continued full speed, and indeed, we have reached financial close on three very important, very significant procurements: the twinning and the rehabilitation of the QEW/Credit River Bridge; and the two advance tunnels contracts, the Scarborough subway extension and the Eglinton West subway extension, during the middle of the pandemic.

In respect of construction, here, I need to salute our counterparties that are out there and continue to make progress on these projects, consistent with their obligations under the project agreements. Cortellucci Vaughan Hospital perhaps is the best example of a project that was completed in the teeth of the pandemic and was put into service almost immediately for the purposes of surge capacity for the pandemic and now is reverting back to what it was originally planned to be, which is a new hospital for the region. But whether it's that or the Kipling bus terminal or OPP modernization or the CAMH redevelopment project—all of these closed during the course of the pandemic, so it has very much been full speed ahead.

The final thing that I'll say is, with the other half of itself, Infrastructure Ontario managing the government's office portfolio, we have certainly done much to ensure that indispensable public service places and spaces stay open, whether it's ServiceOntario or the government office buildings that have been populated by the small number of essential personnel who continue to go to work.

Hon. Laurie Scott: I really appreciate that input. As I said, a lot has been going on with COVID-19, in the safest way possible, and we've continued to build.

Chair, I don't know how many minutes I have left.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have three minutes left, and I know the minister wanted two minutes at the end.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: I'll let you finish with your time now, Minister.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you very much, PA Crawford, for those great questions.

I know that yesterday there was a question about next-generation 9-1-1. I just wanted to update and correct my record a little bit. The next-generation 9-1-1 is actually under the CRTC, and the federal government is responsible for the accessing of 911 emergency services. We know that we need to modernize, as a province, the emergency communications system. The telecommunications service provider networks are evolving and will soon offer much more than the traditional 911 voice services, such as video and text messaging.

The CRTC has directed telecommunications service providers to meet the phased deadlines of the specific next-generation 9-1-1 services, also known as NG9-1-1. In consideration of COVID-19, the CRTC suspended the upcoming NG9-1-1 deadlines, and they are now proposing that full phase-in be accomplished by March 2024. The Ministry of the Solicitor General continues to work with the many public service answering points across Ontario to bring NG9-1-1 into service in the province.

What I mentioned yesterday—I'll be more clear on the Public Safety Radio Network. In October 2019, our government announced the investment of \$765 million for the Public Safety Radio Network to reconstruct core infrastructure, replace outdated equipment and maintain the new radio network, which will help keep communities safe. Since then, we've invested even more money in this system so that first responders can access their radio systems in northern and remote communities.

Just to clarify, there are two separate things: the next-generation 9-1-1 for, I think, one of the questions from MPP West—which is a very real and serious situation, when you can't access and you don't have cell service in our areas, which I'm addressing as best I can through the broadband file, but the CRTC is also working on the next-generation 9-1-1, but it is with the Solicitor General; and then the Public Safety Radio Network update that I just gave.

Chair, I probably ate up most of the minutes or seconds that I had left, but I just wanted to bring that to the committee, to help answer MPP West's question.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): With that, we come to the end of your rotation.

Before we go to voting, we have been joined by two more MPPs, and I'd like them to confirm their identity and the fact that they're in Ontario.

I have MPP Monteith-Farrell.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Judith Monteith-Farrell, MPP, Thunder Bay—Atikokan, here in Thunder Bay.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you so much.

And MPP Barrett, it's good to see you. If you would confirm your identity and the fact that you're located in Ontario.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Toby Barrett, MPP. I'm present in Port Dover, Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you, sir.

This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Infrastructure. Standing order

69(b) requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates.

Are members ready to vote? Thank you.

Shall vote 4001, ministry administration program, carry? All those in favour, please indicate by raising your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. That is carried.

Shall vote 4003, infrastructure policy and planning program, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It is carried.

Shall the 2021-22 estimates of the Ministry of Infrastructure carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. That is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2021-22 estimates of the Ministry of Infrastructure to the House? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. That carries.

We will now recess for 10 minutes, until 3:42 p.m. I look forward to meeting all the agriculture folks.

Minister and your staff, thank you so much for the work you've done.

The committee recessed from 1532 to 1542.

MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Good afternoon, everyone. The committee is about to begin consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs for a total of seven hours and 30 minutes. Are there any questions from members before we start? There are none. I think all the members who are present have already confirmed their identity and location.

I'm now required to call vote 101, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 30 minutes from the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, followed by a statement of up to 30 minutes by the official opposition, and then the minister will have a further 30 minutes for a reply. The remaining time will be apportioned equally among the two parties, with 15 minutes allotted to the independent member of the committee.

Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Good afternoon, Chair Tabuns. It is a pleasure to be here.

Before I start, I do want to say that a number of years ago, the last time I met at your committee—it wasn't estimates at the time, but I know there was a little challenge that I did speak at great lengths and it was sometimes questioned by the Chair as to whether I was staying on topic. I can assure you that I've learned my lesson and I will be staying on topic here today as best I can.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Good afternoon to you and the members of the estimates committee. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you virtually today. It's a pleasure to be here for the review of my ministry's estimates.

I also want to take a moment to acknowledge my staff and officials who are here with me and who will help support these proceedings. I want to introduce Deputy Kelly and ADMs Cordelia Clarke Julien, Kelly McAslan, Lee-Ann Walker, David Hagarty and Randy Jackiw. They will be helping us going through this for this meeting.

I'm very pleased to appear before estimates committee to speak with you about the work my ministry is doing to support and strengthen Ontario's agriculture sector in rural communities as we continue our fight against COVID-19. We are proud of the work we have done, not only in this past year but well before that, so I'm happy to be here before the committee to talk about it.

I especially want to highlight that despite the significant impact of the pandemic on the agri-food sector, we worked tirelessly to make sure that Ontario's food supply chain continued to operate effectively to keep food on the store shelves and on kitchen tables. We achieved this through dedicated efforts to deal effectively with the impact of COVID-19 by listening to our stakeholders and responding quickly in order to support the agri-food and rural sectors.

Throughout it all, our government made significant investments to support Ontario's agri-food sector, and we continue to make investments in rural communities; for example, through the Rural Economic Development Program. Since September 2019, \$11.3 million has been committed to over 220 economic development projects. It's no exaggeration to say our agri-food sector touches every corner of this province. Everyone eats, which means we need a strong agriculture foundation to maintain the high quality of food products that we are so fortunate to enjoy. It's a hugely important sector, and it's an economic powerhouse. Our excellent soils and technological advances in food processing ensure that we have one of the most diversified commodities in the world, with more than 49,600 farms producing over 200 commodities in the agri-food sector, contributing \$47.3 billion to the provincial GDP. We also create one in every nine jobs in the province. The sector employs Ontarians from both urban and rural communities—more than 860,000 Ontarians, representing over 11% of our province's labour force.

I want to bring a positive and hopeful message to the committee and to the people of Ontario. In spite of the pandemic challenges, our agri-food sector is thriving and growing. Ontario's farmers have shown great resiliency over the past 15 months, and I'm proud to work with them every day to support this critical sector.

I know that most people are not aware of the complexities and the amount of time and effort that go into producing our food, and that's okay. Our farmers have always been our unsung heroes, but I think it's fair to say that the effects of COVID-19 did show some of those complexities and, with it, more awareness of our food system.

The past year has been challenging for everyone in our great province. Thankfully, we see some hopeful signs that we are on the path to regaining a sense of safety and stability. Through it all, my ministry has stepped up to the

challenges by working with our stakeholders and responding quickly to their needs and their concerns.

People who know me know I'm a person who likes to see challenges as opportunities that we can tackle together. We were committed to a unified approach from the very moment we heard about this pandemic. We worked to assure Ontarians that there would be food on the shelves and that our food supply was not only secure but very safe to eat.

The agri-food sector is full of incredibly dedicated, knowledgeable and professional groups of stakeholders. It's how we became the world leader in food technology, research and development. More than three quarters of our agri-food exports are now value-added, quality products like bread, pastry, cakes, biscuits, mixes and doughs made right here in Ontario and exported around the world. In 2020, we exported \$4.3 billion in goods to the US, our main export market.

That type of success doesn't happen overnight. It takes hard work and a shared vision. That shared vision is what guided us over the past year, one of the most challenging in most recent history. As we look back, COVID-19 has certainly made us think about everything we knew and gave us opportunities to think creatively to solve problems. The agriculture and food sectors and our rural communities were no exceptions, as they were placed in positions they had never imagined, faced with obstacles that seemed at times too large to tackle. We heard from our farmers, food industry workers and agri-food business owners, and we made swift and concrete decisions to protect Ontario's supply chain; to support our farmers, processors, food businesses; and to ensure Ontarians had access to all the food items they had come to rely on.

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As the pandemic continued to evolve, it was clear we needed to dedicate resources so that we would have a focused and sustained effort, specifically on the outreach, collaboration and coordination activities that involved all facets of protecting workers and the food supply chain. That's why we created the COVID Agri-Food Secretariat to work collaboratively with our partners and stakeholders with a one-window response to COVID-19 challenges in the sector. We listened to what our stakeholders needed most during this challenging time, such as support towards purchasing personal protective equipment, enhancing cleaning and disinfection, redesigning work stations, and keeping our workers and their families safe and healthy. We heard from the industry about their concerns about the need to guard against the spread of COVID-19 in agri-food workplaces so that worker health and safety were protected and Ontario's food supply chain remained strong.

As the pandemic situation continued to evolve, we recognized that we needed to put a structure in place that would support focused and sustained efforts on the outreach, collaboration and coordination activities that involve all facets of our temporary foreign workers. The creation of the COVID Agri-Food Secretariat was done to help us work collaboratively with our partners and stakeholders to continue to support the agri-food sector with a one-window response to COVID-19 challenges.

Our outreach and collaboration involved industry partners and advanced the 35 actions outlined in our comprehensive Prevention, Control and Outbreak Support Strategy for COVID-19 in Ontario's Farm Workers. There's no doubt that COVID-19 has changed how we work, and we understand how important it is to focus on prevention and ongoing worker safety.

With this in mind, we launched a dedicated program aimed directly at supporting the food supply chain. Last year, we launched the \$36.6-million enhanced Agri-food Workplace Protection Program, which includes \$10 million in 2021-22 to support the implementation of measures for control and safety issues to help farmers and other agri-food workplaces with expenses related to protecting workers against COVID-19. We renewed our commitment to this with a \$10-million one-year extension for this program so that the agri-food sector can continue to address any worker health and safety issues as part of their prevention and control measures.

When Ontario fruit and vegetable growers told us about their need for culturally appropriate resources to ensure they were able to share health and safety knowledge with their workers, we stepped up. We provided \$400,000 in assistance so they could develop and distribute COVID-19 resources aimed at worker health and safety, which included developing an app to make it easier for workers to complete self-screening, as well as providing information about vaccines to help workers make an informed decision.

On another front last year, we developed the joint government-industry Prevention, Control and Outbreak Support Strategy for COVID-19 in Ontario's Farm Workers. The strategy aims to protect farm worker safety and wellness, ensure continued progress on prevention and control on farm operations, and maintain the viability of our agri-food sector. The strategy recognizes all partners: governments at all levels, stakeholder organizations, farmers and workers. They have a part in preventing and controlling COVID-19 outbreaks on farms. The strategy has helped reduce disruptions in business operation and risks of COVID-19 exposures in the workplace, and helps limit the risk of community spread in rural Ontario. It also aligns with the investment of \$25.5 million over three years under the agri-food prevention and control innovation program announced in last fall's budget.

The Ontario Food Terminal was deemed an essential workplace. As a critical part of the food supply system, we provided the investments needed to ensure that there were enhanced safety measures in place to keep it open. To support the board in their efforts to safely maintain operations at the terminal, early last summer, we provided the Ontario Food Terminal with up to \$546,000, and last fall, we supported the distribution of local food and food products by increasing the range of products sold at the Ontario Food Terminal.

Most recently, our government worked with the Ontario Food Terminal to organize a workplace vaccination clinic. Almost 7,000 agri-food employees, including workers at the food terminal and employees of local agri-food businesses, received vaccines during this incredibly successful week-long clinic.

Another area I'd like to highlight is our work to protect temporary foreign workers. In Ontario, we welcome more than 20,000 temporary foreign workers every year, and about 90% arrive between the months of January and July. We know the difficult choice that these workers make, leaving their families behind in Mexico, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and Trinidad and Tobago to help us plant, tend and harvest our produce and crops. They are absolutely essential workers, and their health, safety and well-being are of the utmost importance when they are here. In fact, protecting them from the virus has been our top priority over the last year and remains so.

Workers across our food chain, whether Canadian citizens, permanent residents or temporary foreign workers, provide an essential service. Both government and farmers are partners in the need to keep all farm workers safe while also ensuring the continuity of food production. That's why our government prioritized them in our phase 2 rollout of the vaccine. At the earliest opportunity, we worked quickly to set up a clinic at the Toronto Pearson International Airport to vaccinate workers as they arrived in Ontario. We saw strong vaccination rates among our temporary foreign workers, and many of those who did not get the vaccine at that time did receive a vaccine in their community later. We know it is critical that we continue to work together and remain steadfast to keep our workers safe and avoid disruption in the agri-food sector. This is a priority that I do not take lightly and one we will not let up on.

Before I move on, I want to take a moment here to recognize and acknowledge and pay respect to the workers in our sector who lost their lives to COVID-19. This is very saddening and weighs heavily on me. We will continue to work hard to ensure that other such tragedies can be avoided.

Thanks again for letting me acknowledge those workers.

As I mentioned before, it does bear repeating that the province's agriculture sector contributes nearly \$50 billion to the GDP while providing food to the world. While we watched other industries come to a near-standstill during the pandemic, in 2020, our agri-food exports rose to \$17.2 billion, up 4.2% from the \$16.6 billion of 2019. This made Ontario, I'm proud to say, the top agri-food-exporting Canadian province, followed by Saskatchewan. The reality is that Ontario's agri-food industry drives the Canadian agri-food sector, and during this time of uncertainty, our government understood how important it was to protect it.

Agri-food is a sector that touches every single corner of this province and provides jobs to a diverse array of Ontarians in communities across the province, so it makes sense that the effect of the pandemic has been just as broad. COVID-19 may have brought many parts of our lives to a halt, but one thing it did not change was the need to eat, and therefore the need to produce food. Despite the pandemic, we saw the demand for good things that grow in Ontario continue, and our government worked diligently to ensure the continuity of the value chain to bring food to the tables of Ontarians. At the same time, we worked hard to increase the health and safety supports for

our agri-food heroes working hard to put that food on our tables.

During the times of adversity and challenges like those we faced over the last year, our agri-food sector provided stability to the provincial economy through consistent growth, despite negative cycles in other sectors. There is much value in our agri-food sector, and that's why I want to emphasize to you today just how committed our government is to support our farms and food processors. We are dedicated to keeping the sector strong, despite COVID-19, and to meet the domestic and international demand for safe, high-quality food, which Ontario is known for worldwide.

We're doing this all while prioritizing the safety of the people who work in these important sectors. One of the key reasons for Ontario's continued success and continuity of the agri-food sector during the pandemic can and should be directly attributed to the people who work in the industry. Over the last year, all along the value chain we saw, first-hand, hard-working and innovative producers, processors, distributors, retailers and front-line staff who worked tirelessly during the time of unprecedented challenges. We worked hard to ensure that they had our support.

Recently, I announced the new \$22-million Agri-tech Innovation Program that will help farming operations and processor businesses adapt innovative and new technologies, like an automated rack handling system and seeding machines in greenhouses; optical grading systems with visually guided robotics for the grading and sorting of vegetables to replace manual sorting; and solar-powered, autonomous robotic vineyard pruning robots with optical spectral guidance systems in place for manual pruning and transplanting that are semi-autonomous to replace manual processes where distancing employees is difficult. This intake will enhance protection of workers against COVID-19 and address labour shortages in the sector, which, in turn, will help build the sector's resilience.

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As you know, friends and colleagues, food safety and security has always been the top priority for me and my ministry, and the past year has shown us why. OMAFRA is dedicated to continuously enhancing food safety and animal health, and we continue the important work to become a more modern regulator.

Over the last year, OMAFRA worked with food safety partners at the provincial and federal level to respond to the 2019 Ontario Auditor General's value-for-money audit on food. We reviewed the important results of the report, and we were proud but not at all surprised to read that overall the auditor concluded that sufficient systems and procedures are in place to keep the Ontario food supply safe.

We're also open to new ideas and approaches on how to improve food safety, which is why we are currently working on enhancing our licensing and inspection programs. In fact, this past spring, my ministry provided a detailed report back to the Auditor General about the completion of actions noted in the audit. I'm happy to say that, even in the midst of a pandemic and with stretched

resources, OMAFRA continued to provide fulsome inspection services to protect the people who enjoy Ontario-made food. It meant that we worked with provincial plans extensively to maintain workers' health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we went further, by considering the regulated processing environment as a whole, we instituted a resource-sharing agreement, in place with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, to allow for provincial inspection support in federal plants and federal support in provincial plants, if needed.

We also listened closely to the needs of the meat industry about their need for increased processing capacity to address a growing demand for abattoir services across the province. That's why we worked together with the federal government to provide additional support for Ontario's meat processing sector with an investment of \$127,000 to launch a research initiative by Meat and Poultry Ontario. We're helping our industry expand Ontario's meat sector. The project identifies opportunities to increase meat processing capacity in order to address a growing demand for abattoir services across the province.

Our government is a key partner in the successes of the agri-food supply chain. We listened and responded to the needs of stakeholders as best we could during this time of crisis, just as we always do. We understand that the agri-food system is complex, and that our farmers and food processors face many challenges, not only related to COVID-19 but also due to other factors outside of their control like weather, trade and red tape. We hear our farmers and processors when they tell us that they need a stable and positive business climate, which our government helps to create, and which I'm proud to say my team at OMAFRA and across the government has provided.

A large part of my ministry's work is to help build resilience in the system to support farmers, and that resilience has been incredible as we've faced our most difficult challenges yet through the pandemic.

In September 2020, the governments of Ontario and Canada invested more than \$7.9 million to help farmers improve their business operations and bring more safe, high-quality foods to markets. This funding supported more than 670 projects across Ontario for eligible farmers and agri-food businesses.

Last August, together with the federal government, we provided more than \$5.4 million to help food processing businesses improve food safety, increase labour productivity and enable better access to markets. These strategic investments supported more than 75 projects across Ontario and strengthened Ontario's crucial agri-food supply chain.

We also listened to the need to support farmers' markets. Through an Agri-Food Open for E-Business cost-sharing program, this targeted intake helped businesses and organizations quickly expand their marketing channels and respond to new market challenges, increase online sales in the sector, and provide consumers with access to more local food.

An anchor of our support for producers in Ontario is our suite of robust risk management programs that are sound

and dependable. In partnership with the federal government, we delivered \$259 million to Ontario farmers through our farm income stabilization programs, like AgriInvest and Production Insurance.

I'm proud to say that Ontario is a national leader in business risk management. Unlike most other programs, business risk management is demand-driven. Fluctuations in payments do not represent budgetary decisions but rather producers' need. These programs matter to the farmers who depend on them in times of need when uncertainties hit—and there's a lot of uncertainties in agriculture.

In the last year, our government permanently expanded the risk management program funding from \$100 million to \$150 million for the year 2020, one year earlier than we originally promised, to continue to support farmers who face uncontrollable fluctuations in commodity prices and import cost, which we see is needed in an industry that can face so much unpredictability. We're very proud of the ongoing work we do with producers to ensure our risk management programs are meeting the needs of our farmers. In response to COVID-19, OMAFRA worked hard to extend enrolment and reporting deadlines of risk management programs for livestock and grain and oilseed producers, and reopened enrolment in July as a result of the enhanced \$50-million investment into the program.

Through the feeder cattle and commodity loan guarantee programs, we backed over \$250 million in operation loans which had real benefits for more than 1,000 farmers across the province. We listened to what kind of support our industry needed most in response to COVID-19 processing disruptions and worked with our federal counterparts to launch two joint federal-provincial AgriRecovery programs for the beef and pork sectors, committing up to \$10 million in support for producers impacted by the disruptions.

I'm proud to say that we also expanded coverage for Production Insurance for COVID-19-related production losses in 2020-21 and extended Production Insurance enrolment deadlines. We helped Ontario farmers manage the challenges due to COVID-19 by enhancing agri-insurance coverage to include labour shortages due to COVID-19 during the 2020-21 growing season. I'm proud to say that Ontario was the only province to offer enhanced coverage for COVID-19-related labour disruptions. Our government also increased AgriStability interim payments from 50% to 75% in the 2020 program year and extended the 2020 enrolment deadlines in response to COVID-19.

The challenge of COVID-19 does not mean that other risks disappear. Our industry continues to remain vigilant about other threats, such as the risk presented by the African swine fever virus for Ontario hog producers and the agri-food sector. It's not present in North America, and we hope that it never arrives. It would be devastating to our pork producers. But hope is not a strategy. Our ministry has been working with the industry, the federal government and other provinces to be ready in response should the virus be confirmed in Canada.

We're also investing in all potential aspects, like biosecurity, wild pig management, emergency preparedness

and sector recovery. Starting in 2020-21, permanent changes were made through the Commodity Loan Guarantee Program to extend repayment deadlines from February 28 to March 30 to increase the program's lending capabilities from \$120 million to \$200 million, as well as other changes to improve program responsiveness and reduce program cost.

Despite the interruptions of COVID-19, we did not lose focus on the things that help our farmers, food processors and agri-businesses maintain their businesses. We use all the tools we can to ensure that they are well positioned to meet any and all opportunities to grow.

The effects of COVID-19 did not only impact the agri-food sector, but rural municipalities were also placed in positions they too had never imagined. We listened to our municipal leaders and communities about what they needed. Over the last year, the challenge to protect our communities has been a constant priority for me and our government.

From the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs has carried out a number of measures to support rural businesses and communities. When the crisis struck, we quickly examined our current rural economic development programs and tools to assess how they could be adjusted to meet the changing needs. OMAFRA staff hit the ground running to provide hands-on economic recovery advice to help rural Ontario businesses. The ministry hosted webinars to support rural communities in business recovery efforts, with sessions to share success stories and actions that communities could take to address the many challenges they faced.

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I also directed my ministry and staff to take part in community recovery teams and planning activities which provided helpful advice on the tools and funding that were available to rural Ontario businesses and communities. Working together, we have made good progress in tackling the challenges that have come our way. Despite the challenge of COVID-19, our government recognized that we still need to remain committed to growing rural Ontario and helping to build strong rural communities.

We listened to small communities about their need for affordable broadband Internet to not only help local businesses compete but for everyday essentials like school-work or spending time with family at home.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: In the spring budget, our government committed to improve high-speed Internet across every community in Ontario by 2025. Part of that plan includes some of the work that's already under way in southwestern Ontario, and we've seen real results, with shovels in the ground in Wellington, Essex, Lambton and Grey counties, Simcoe county, the town of Caledon, Norfolk and Dufferin counties, and the shovels are in the ground at Oxford county.

The Rural Economic Development Program is another foundation of support for rural Ontario. Last September, we modified and launched a targeted RED program with

higher government cost share to better address COVID-19 challenges. I'm proud to say that we committed nearly \$1 million to cost-shared funding for the intake to help rural communities diversify their economies, retain skilled workers and create jobs. I think we are seeing great results already. For example, last summer, 82 projects and organizations from across the province received \$3.4 million in cost-shared funding through the last two intakes of the RED program.

With that, I will stop there, Mr. Chair. I don't want to go over my time. We'll turn it over to the opposition.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you very much, Minister.

I will go to the official opposition. Mr. Vanthof, you have 20 minutes, sir.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you very much to the Chair for this opportunity. I will be speaking on behalf of the official opposition.

I would like to start by thanking the minister and the ministry for all the work that they have done and that they do on a continual basis, but specifically this year with COVID-19. We disagree sometimes on political philosophy, but I think if there's one ministry that understands that people need to work together—and I think it comes from the fact that in the country, we believe in helping our neighbours. And although it has become one of the biggest job drivers in the province, I don't think we have ever really lost that. We can agree to disagree on things, but we also have a common goal: That's not only making sure Ontarians have access to good-quality food grown in Ontario, but making sure that everyone who is involved in that process is safe and sound. I would like to thank everyone in OMAFRA for the role that they have played in that.

I'll spend a few minutes on COVID-19, on how it turned the agriculture world upside down, as everyone on this call will remember, when the epidemic first came to light and the lockdowns happened and buying patterns changed. As someone who has a lot of experience in the dairy sector, when even things like packaging changed—because buying patterns changed, restaurants weren't buying and the processing sector had to scramble, because they had the wrong-size packaging. No one could have predicted that, and in many sectors that happened. Everyone had to do exceptional work, long hours, to minimize the problems.

I've said in the Legislature, when the epidemic first started, I was worried and I think many other Ontarians were worried about the food chain, and I think it's to everyone's credit that our worries—while they were substantial, the system was strong enough and the people involved in the system were resilient enough and quick enough to see what needed to be done. They all deserve credit for that. It shows that we have a resilient system. It also showed there are things that could have been done better, things that we needed to change. I think we will discuss that later in the questions. But overall, I think everyone did what they could do.

Some of the things that I think the minister said, that most Ontarians—I'm not going to paraphrase exactly, but

many Ontarians, probably most, don't know how complicated, how intricate food production actually is. If you think about it, you are dealing with fresh, perishable products grown on a seasonal basis. They need to be sold or stored, processed. You can't leave this for a month and think about it, because in a month it will be worthless—not only worthless, but it will be wasted food, and no one wants to waste food.

I think Ontarians have gained a bigger appreciation—I hope—of how important our sector is to them. But they've also learned some things that they didn't, quite frankly, know before. I think one of them, in my talks with people outside the sector—not inside, because inside the sector people knew—regarding temporary foreign workers is, very few Ontarians, before the pandemic, knew that temporary foreign workers played such a huge role in agriculture. That was a shock to them—not so much that there were temporary foreign workers, but when there was—and I would like to echo the minister's comments, on behalf of the official opposition, and extend our condolences to the families who lost loved ones. As all temporary foreign workers do, they risked everything to make their lives and their family's lives better, and some of them paid the ultimate price. Ontarians, as a whole, were not aware that temporary foreign workers played such a huge role. As a result, their first experience of temporary foreign workers was a very negative one. I think that's something we all need to understand. We need to work to ensure that the experience of temporary foreign workers, of the workers themselves, is not a negative one for any of them. I think we need to do that to maintain the trust of Ontarians in our food system.

When your first experience with something is a negative one, it takes a lot to change that. We're going to have to not just change the perception, but we have to ensure that all temporary foreign workers are well treated, fairly treated and work in a safe environment—actually, all agricultural workers and all people in the food system.

Many Ontarians had never really thought, because it's so automatic, how important the people who stock shelves are, how big a role they play in the food system. If they're not there—

Interruption.

Mr. John Vanthof: The pleasures of working from home. I'm just going to let the dog out.

1620

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Well, at least there isn't a dog squeaky toy. We've sort of moved on.

Mr. John Vanthof: He's gone. My sincere apologies.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): We're used to it now.

Mr. John Vanthof: That issue and others, but I think that's the one—when you talk to random people, that was one no one thought of.

We have an advertising program, "Good Things Grow in Ontario." Everybody knows the jingle. But the people stocking the shelves and the people working in the greenhouses weren't featured as part of that.

Overall, we as a society and certainly as a government—the minister mentioned it, and I think we need to

work on that: Essential workers need to be treated as important as they are. It's one thing to call people essential workers; it's another thing to actually treat them as such. We can't stress that enough.

We have gone through a year unlike any other. Hopefully, we are nearing the end of this pandemic, and that challenge will be lessened.

Farmers and the whole sector, the one thing that we—one of the reasons that agriculture was resilient is because farmers and everyone involved in the sector are used to challenges, are used to having their world turned upside down.

The minister and the OMAFRA staff will know this: A few weeks ago, when we had 30 degrees Celsius and then minus 5 a couple of nights later, a lot of farmers across the province and in my part of the world—a lot across the province—had heavy losses and depended on government programs and the availability of seed to reseed. Nobody was planning on that. It's something that you don't plan on, but it's always—I know from personal experience—in the back of your mind. It's always a risk.

Specifically, in southwestern Ontario, southern Ontario, we are blessed—I'm sure the minister knows this, but a lot of other people, maybe not—that we have one of the most stable climates for agricultural production, coupled with some of the best soils. That's why we have such a vibrant agriculture industry. Agriculture is viable in many other parts of the province, including where I live. There are great farms here. But our climate is not as predictable, and that's something we have to think about.

A challenge for the future is, we have to—and we will be interested in hearing what the minister has to say about how the ministry is going to deal with the impacts of climate change. We can't look the other way. They are happening. I know in my part of the world, we are growing things now that—actually, I shared the minister's post about extending crop insurance for northern Ontario because of the frost. A lot of us grow soybeans in northern Ontario, and 20 years ago, I know my banker would have openly laughed and wouldn't have been conducive to me growing soybeans. That's partly because the varieties are better and because of tile drainage, but also because our climate is much different. It's more volatile as well, but we didn't get the heat 20 years ago. Certainly, when we moved to northern Ontario, we didn't have the heat at all. When we moved to northern Ontario in 1971, I believe we were at 1,800 heat units. We are much higher than that now, on average. So there is something. We need to be able to look at that.

Furthermore, I think one of the things that is catching up to us slowly is—or quickly, depending on your viewpoint, and this is a more long-term view—we need to come to grips with our resource, which is farmland: How do we protect it? How do we ensure that we maintain that resource? It's not an easy thing to do, because—and we've discussed it in the Legislature—we are also an incredibly quickly growing province, population-wise. But if our population continues to grow on and sprawl over the best

farmland certainly in Canada and maybe in North America, how do we justify that?

COVID-19 hit us in one year and the whole world was turned on its head. The whole world is trying to cope with it. The slow erosion of our resource is maybe not happening in one year, but it is happening. We can talk about, and I know the government is going to talk about that we might increase the greenbelt, we might—it's not about the greenbelt; it's about how we are actually protecting the agricultural soil, the resource. We are incredibly fortunate to have been given that resource. We are the stewards of that resource and it's important that we maintain it.

To look at that, you have to look at the history. Most of our major cities in southern Ontario started as farm towns and have now become major cities, and that's a great thing, that shows progress. But in the past, there hasn't been a lot of thought of how we're going to protect farmland long-term, and I think we are at the point now where we need to decide and to talk about that. I think that is an issue that is going to face us in the future.

I think we've faced COVID-19 through a combined effort on the agricultural side. There has not been a food shortage in Ontario because of COVID-19, and I think that's due to everyone's hard work. But something probably more or as insidious is the slow changes. So 20 years from now, 50 years from now, are people going to look back at us and say we knew that we were losing farmland and yet we failed to act? I think that's something that we really have to look at.

I look forward to the questions, and I look forward to going over the briefing book a bit. And with that, I would like to hand it back to you, Chair. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you very much. I will go back to the minister, who has—

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry. Member, you do have 14 minutes, if you want to ask questions of the minister; if you don't, then I will simply go back to the minister.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'm happy to ask questions to the minister, for a start.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Then you have 14 minutes.

Mr. John Vanthof: Perfect. As some of you may know, there have been some developments, and I am the whip of the party, so I may have to leave after that 14 minutes.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I thought that might be the case.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. So I am going to go straight to the briefing book on a couple of parts. The briefing book said that the ministry, through the provincial policy statement, made it stronger to protect farmland. Could you give definitive examples of how it has been made stronger to protect farmland?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for the question.

I think you would know that the land that you spoke of in southwestern Ontario is the best land in the province,

the best land in the country, and the heart of that best land is that 10 acres I own that you were born on. I think it's so important not just to the ministry—but I just wanted to touch on it in a personal way.

1630

Many years ago, I was involved in local planning. Obviously, that's where the rubber hits the road, shall we say, on preserving farmland. In municipal government, they're the ones that decide where things are going to be built and what needs to be done. They're also the ones, in the end, that have to support the agriculture community that's growing all the food. They do work with provincial rules, but again, they set the planning rules and they implement the planning.

When I was in municipal government, before I became mayor, the mayor told me that he was going to nominate me for the land saver award, because I was on the land division committee and I would never say yes to a land severance on a farm, because that was not beneficial to agriculture and so why would you want to build all over the county? Our county, over that time, has recognized that that was the right thing to do. It's still very difficult to get a straight farm severance, as you would be aware, in Oxford county. I think it's very, very important.

Recognizing how important it is, we have to put forward the case of how we're going to deal with that. You mentioned going forward, making sure that we save the best land, and that's one of the things we're doing in the plan—setting up a process that people must go through to make sure that when some land is going to be taken out of agriculture for other purposes, that they do an agriculture impact assessment to make sure that it can't be done in a better way, that they couldn't do it with less or they couldn't do it on soils that were worse. So I think that's really directing people to make sure that we do all we can to conserve number one farmland.

You mentioned how this has been going on since time began—how we're losing farmland but we're just starting to notice it now. One of the things that I think has made it so we just notice it now is how resilient and innovative and forward-looking agriculture has been. You mentioned growing beans in the New Liskeard valley, the change in the seeds, the new technology allowing shorter day crops.

Today, with all the land that has been taken up prior to your arrival and mine, we are still producing more food on the land we have than we ever have in the history of the province. I want to make sure we keep doing that. I want to make sure we are not only looking at the volume we have, but we're getting the best value out of everything we have.

I very much appreciate the question. I'll turn it over to my deputy and he can tell me exactly what we're doing within the ministry.

Mr. John Vanthof: I appreciated the answer.

The issue with the agriculture impact assessments, as I look at that process, is, we need to have more than just the suggestion—and the same with municipal. I was never mayor in Oxford, but I was a councillor. Municipalities, their outlook is less—you're worried about your own

municipality. You're not worried about—or at least, the councillors I know are not worried about the bigger picture. It's the same when I listen to Minister Clark say that MZOs are always directed by the municipality. The municipality doesn't worry; the mayor of East Zorra or the mayor of Englehart isn't worried about food production on a provincial basis 20 years from now.

Another thing I would like to mention is, yes, we have changed, and we have been very resilient, and we have a lot of farmers coming to northern Ontario. I love it here and it's a great place to farm, but an acre of land in New Liskeard, as much I would like it to be, is not the same as an acre in Oxford county. I will give that to you. Oxford county is a great place to farm.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I totally agree with you, but I do want to say that, as you said, looking at the big picture and not looking at Oxford county or Englehart—looking at the big picture, because times have changed, and with technology and better plant husbandry or whatever we're going to call it, being able to do more on an acre of land, the amount of increase of productivity on a percentage basis is every bit as high in your area as it is in southern Ontario. So I think that's part of what I'm saying. We have to make sure that we are doing all we can to get the most out of whatever we're growing, regardless of where that is. On a percentage basis, it will have the same positive impact.

As we first started having the discussion about using agriculture land for other purposes, the answer was always, "Why don't we move people further, off the nice land, and put them into an area where you can't grow as good a crop?" That may be an idea, except people are going to live where they do. That's the same as suggesting that somehow we can change how the decisions are made about conserving the land based on whether it's in Earlton or whether it's in Salford. But I think we need to work on it—that everybody sees the need for conserving the land. Our policies within the ministry are very strict on that to make sure that they have to follow the rules—our provincial policy statement—which we have geared to saving agricultural land. But I don't think that that's unique to where the best land is. I think that's across the agriculture sector across Ontario.

I've had a number of applications from northern Ontario about doing studies and so forth on the northern clay belt to see what we can do in agriculture there, and we're very actively working with them to try to move something forward there. I know there have been other studies on beef production in northern Ontario. I think there is a lot of potential, as we are looking forward, in expanding our industry across areas of the province where it isn't quite as active as it might be in the future. I think we have a lot of future there.

With that, I'll turn it over to the deputy, and he can highlight some of the things we are actually doing in our policy.

Mr. John Kelly: Thank you, Minister.

John Kelly, deputy minister for the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

To support Minister Hardeman's commentary about increased productivity in the land: I remember when I first came into the business, we talked about 100 bushels per acre for corn; now we talk 200 or more, and that goes for a lot of the different commodities. Also, MPP Vanthof, the types of commodities that are grown in northern Ontario certainly have expanded.

In our role as a partner ministry in land use planning, staff at the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs work with Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing staff to ensure that the current policies protect farmland and that these policies are upheld and implemented in municipal official plans.

I'm going to ask my assistant deputy minister David Hagarty to add a bit more flavour to these comments, but the types of connections that we do include providing technical expertise on provincial land use policies related to farmland protection, development of education and training materials, reviewing and providing technical comments on municipal land use planning documents, and also participating in hearings before the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal as that is needed. We also take an agricultural systems approach. I'm sure you're aware there are four provincial plans that are in place.

With that, I'll ask my ADM David Hagarty to provide that detail.

David, over to you.

1640

Mr. David Hagarty: Thank you, Deputy.

David Hagarty, assistant deputy minister of policy at the ministry.

As the deputy said, we do work with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to ensure that current policies to protect farmland are upheld. Our input into provincial land use policies, as well as guidelines and integration of the land use planning and economic development all help to increase farm viability.

The deputy did mention the four provincial plans covering the greater Golden Horseshoe, and they require an agriculture systems approach to identify and protect vital agricultural land and support prosperous agri-food sectors. They are A Place to Grow, the growth plan within the greater Golden Horseshoe; the Greenbelt Plan; the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan; and the Niagara Escarpment Plan.

The agriculture systems approach is comprised of two parts: the continuous protected land base for agriculture and the Niagara food network consisting of a supply chain essential to the sector. Within the greater Golden Horseshoe, municipalities need to—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Mr. David Hagarty: Thank you—include mapping of the agricultural land base and policies to support the agriculture system in their official plan. To assist municipalities with the implementation, the province has released mapping of the agriculture land base within the greater Golden Horseshoe, and municipalities may make refinements to the provincial land base mapping when it's

implemented in their official plans in accordance with guidelines provided by our ministry.

Within the greenbelt, provincial agriculture system mapping is in effect now. Outside the greenbelt, the deadline for municipalities to update their official plans with the agriculture system mapping policies to conform to A Place to Grow is July 1, 2022. So municipal refinements to the provincial agriculture land base are proceeding with OMAFRA support and work is progressing. Most municipalities in the greater Golden Horseshoe are expected to be substantially completed by July 2022.

Outside of the greater Golden Horseshoe, the new provincial policy statement that was mentioned earlier encourages municipalities to adopt the agriculture systems approach as well. Some municipalities have started to adopt that approach.

Agriculture impact assessments were mentioned. They're required for settlement area expansions, infrastructure process projects, aggregate operations and other non-agricultural uses in the greater Golden Horseshoe to reduce the impact in the development of agriculture since adverse effects must be avoided, minimized and mitigated.

Thank you for the question. I'll leave it there.

Mr. John Vanthof: In the next round, I'd like to have some more information on an agricultural impact assessment. Is it something like an environmental assessment? Is it a suggestion or is it something that causes a mitigation impact, because it's two different—like saying, "Okay, you should do this." No one likes to hear "thou shalt"; as a farmer, I don't like it either.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say this, but you're out of time. We'll go back to the minister.

Minister, you have 30 minutes for a reply.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much. I want to thank the critic too for his comments.

A couple of things I just wanted to point out in his comments that I think bear repeating: The first one was, I mentioned the dairy farmers. He will know that when the pandemic started, that was the one place where all of a sudden we had an oversupply of product for the marketplace, and at the same time we had store shelves that didn't have milk on them. That was all, as he mentioned, because the food service sector needed it packaged differently than the people who were buying it in the grocery store. It took a few days for that to be transferred over to different packaging, and it was all put back together.

One of the reasons I mention that is the great system we have in our milk system. The Dairy Farmers of Ontario worked with the industry to make sure that the problem was solved by the processors and the producers and that the detriment to the producers was felt across the board, not to individual producers. So it worked really well and it was in very short order that we had the smooth flow of milk in the province of Ontario.

The other thing I think that was interesting, or that's worth repeating, was the challenges with the workers. If you remember, when the pandemic started, it was just when the workers were coming in. And I have to commend all the people involved for working very hard, because, at

one point, we didn't know whether the workers from offshore were able to get into the province at all by the time they had to start working. We had quite a number of outbreaks, but we also had a lot of people working, and we got the crop off and planted and harvested in a fairly orderly fashion. What we've learned there and all the things we have put in place—it has worked much better this year. Everything seems to be well under control with the workers this year.

The thing I want to point out, and John made the comment, is how important it was to recognize that all workers were the same; everybody could get sick if they got the virus, and everybody needed to be—it wasn't different for people who came here just to do the work in agriculture or people who lived here all the time. A worker is a worker, and all the things that our ministry did or worked towards, we didn't ask where—the Minister of Labour mentioned that it doesn't matter what your passport says; you will get all the help and the attention that you need based on that you're a worker in Ontario.

The other thing that I want to mention from John's comments: He mentioned the frost in northern Ontario and, again, the challenges that we all live with are quite extensive. I appreciated that he did put on Facebook that he agreed with the deadlines and with recognizing that the frost could be very damaging, even for replanting. I think that's really what our whole support program is based on—unforeseen circumstances that hit the agriculture community, and the government is there with the support programs to help them out. It's not a matter of whether we should or shouldn't; it's a matter of whether the need is there and we're there to provide it. I very much appreciate those comments.

It's funny; there are different titles: "climate change" and "global warming." The name has somewhat changed over time as we deal with it, but one of the things that—I remember having a discussion with a minister of climate change, and I said, "There are some positives to agriculture for growing food, because we can grow things further north than we ever did."

I remember, when a certain party moved to the north when they left the house I live in, growing corn was not considered a very profitable crop in that part of the country. What they really grew was grass, and they planted grain but didn't get a harvest every year—because if the weather was just wrong, you cut it down for grass rather than for combining because it didn't get to ripen. Those times have changed considerably there.

The deputy mentioned that now we were talking about 200 bushels to the acre; the talk now is about 300 bushels to the acre—200; everybody gets that. Not to find fault, but I think the hybrids and so forth that we're growing have become much more capable of adjusting to the climates and to the circumstances in which they are. Again, I think it's very important.

I did run out of time in my first bout; I had more to say than I had time for, so I think I'll just carry on.

Our agri-food sector has grown and adapted to the overwhelming challenges of COVID-19, but we're not out

of the woods yet. Today, more than ever, it's important to make even greater strides to stay safe and competitive. I think this is true for the whole agriculture industry. That's why it's important to balance the need for safety with ensuring that we remove unduly cost burdens from the agri-food sector while maintaining rules that help keep Ontarians safe and healthy.

1650

During the COVID-19 emergency orders, we provided red tape relief by extending six licences or certificate regulations to assist our agri-food sector. We listened to our producers and made changes that repealed the Live-stock Medicines Act, which contained outdated requirements, and put in place more streamlined requirements around the sale of livestock medicines.

We heard from non-commercial beekeepers about the need to cut unnecessary red tape and acted to reduce the frequency of registration.

The farming sector told us they wanted to participate in the emerging renewable gas market, and OMAFRA consulted with the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks on further changes to the regulations and the Nutrient Management Act to remove barriers to the non-farm production of biogas, with upgrading to renewable natural gas.

The future success of Ontario's agri-food sector depends on our ability to recover from COVID-19, which includes gaining access to new markets and research, along with ensuring environmental sustainability.

Future international demand for food is predicted to increase, and I believe Ontario is in an enviable position to fill this international demand for safe, high-quality food products. We know we're competing with other jurisdictions, but that's why it is so vitally important that we advocate for our interests when trade deals are being negotiated, so that we continue to grow in international markets. Our business development branch has the expertise to offer those agri-food businesses that are interested in accessing international markets the knowledge to make that happen.

Research, innovation and commercialization are vital to maintain a globally competitive sector, capitalize on new and emerging market opportunities, contribute to a healthy Ontario, and support a safe and robust food processing industry in a post-COVID-19 world.

This year, OMAFRA is investing up to \$68 million in research and innovation. Over the last four years, we have invested over \$282 million. This is anchored by our long-standing partnership with the University of Guelph. To deliver on research and innovation to help see the agriculture sector grow, the Ontario Agri-food Innovation Alliance continues to support the growth and competitiveness of Ontario's agri-food sector by creating jobs and further solidifying the province's position as a global leader in agri-food education, research and innovation.

Our government continues to invest in the renewal and modernization of the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario, also known as ARIIO, with 15 research stations

spread across the province. Through ARIIO, we are working with the University of Guelph to invest \$6.5 million in the construction of a new field crops services building on the Ridgetown campus. The investment will centralize agronomy research services, reduce operating costs and significantly modernize the field crops research operation on campus. We also continue the important research in northern Ontario to support the growth of agriculture as an economic development opportunity.

Given what I've outlined, it is clear that there are great opportunities for the agri-food sector in rural Ontario and at OMAFRA. We intend to pursue these for the benefit of our sector and, just as importantly, for the people of Ontario.

We've also heard from our farmers and producers, who are excellent stewards of the land and who, every day, show up and show their commitment to making sure Ontario is an agri-food leader not just for today, but for many years in the future. That's why we continue to work with our stakeholders on environmental sustainability.

Last summer, together with the federal government, Ontario invested more than \$2.5 million to help farmers improve environmental sustainability and water quality in the Lake Erie and Lake St. Clair watersheds. In addition to delivering on our continued commitment to protect the environment, this investment helps improve productivity for farm operations in the region.

To that end, the Lake Erie Agriculture Demonstrating Sustainability initiative, or LEADS, supported the completion of more than 210 farmer-led projects in year three of the program, targeted to improve soil health and reduce the risk of nutrient losses in the Lake Erie and Lake St. Clair watersheds. This year, we are investing an additional \$2.5 million into 220 farmer-led projects. Over the course of this initiative, our government will have invested up to \$15.6 million, supporting an estimated total of more than 1,100 on-farm projects to help improve water quality in the Lake Erie and Lake St. Clair watersheds. Our government's Made-in-Ontario Environment Plan has committed to reducing phosphorus runoff by 40% by 2025, and I am pleased we're making great progress in meeting that goal.

As we start to look forward after this challenging year, I'm confident about the future of the agriculture sector because I see signs of innovation and business growth across the industry. Ontario's agri-food industry and rural communities are nothing if not resilient, and we will grow, come out stronger and build on our position as a leader in agri-food innovation.

Because we have so many advantages, like our beautiful land, hard-working people and access to the best research, this province is well positioned for the future. We have the lion's share of our country's prime agricultural land, we have world-class scientist research communities, and we have people who are resilient, adaptable and the very best stewards of the land. We are ready to look towards the future and leave the challenges of the past behind us. Part of that vision is to ensure that our rural communities remain great places to live, where our children can learn, grow, work and play, both now and in the future.

As we navigate through the COVID-19 recovery together, our government will keep building on the strengths of Ontario's rural communities and our agri-food sector. We continue to stand by our rural communities, even in the most difficult times, to grow more opportunities for rural Ontario residents and businesses. We've worked hard to protect our critical food system from disruption while maintaining our responsibilities and funding programs without interruption.

As I said at the top of my remarks, I want to bring a positive and hopeful message to the committee and to the people of Ontario. Our agri-food sector is thriving and growing. Of course, we have faced challenges, but we are responding in ways that have shown just why I am so confident that we will come out on the other side better than ever.

Again, I want to thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I would be pleased to answer any questions. Obviously, John has already started with that, so I suppose I can talk for a little while longer, but I don't think I will. I think it's appropriate that we end it there and say thank you for letting me make this presentation.

I'd be happy to turn it over back to you, Chair, for questions going forward.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): We now go to 20-minute rotations. MPP Monteith-Farrell, the floor is yours.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I'm very pleased to be here today to talk about a subject that is very near and dear to my heart.

Peggy Brekveld, who is the president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, is a constituent of mine. I often talk to her and seek her advice on all things agricultural.

I also have a dairy farmer who was in my family, and I spent time helping her with calving and working on her farm. We had a good time working the land. She also had a hobby farm. Those were fond memories for me, I guess because I probably come from peasant stock way back when, so we made our living on the farm.

I think I would be remiss, coming from the constituency, if I didn't mention that it's Local Food Week. We have an incredible group of farmers here in northwestern Ontario, if you would believe it or not. Those who are familiar with agriculture know that to the west of us we have people who are very good beef farmers. Around Thunder Bay, we've actually recruited new farmers, young people who are taking on farms, new beef farmers, new dairy operations. Our hobby farming and growth in eggs and our farmers' market has expanded and doubled, and they have a very symbiotic relationship with our local restaurants. So they use that resource.

We have a hydroponic cannabis operation that has also opened up here in our city. It's an exciting sector in our area and one that we really don't think a lot of when we think of northern Ontario. We think of mines, and we think of forestry.

1700

For many people, forestry is sort of a portion of—farmers sometimes use part of their lots or their land that

aren't able to be farmed to actually harvest some wood. It's an exciting sector in northwestern Ontario.

I would like to start my questioning by allowing Mr. Kelly to talk about the agricultural impact assessment process. That intrigued me, because when I am talking to the federation of agriculture, they often talk about the need to protect land and to do more in that area. I'm really interested in what that process is.

Mr. John Kelly: Minister, would you like to take this? I'm happy to go after your comments, Minister.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for the question. I think that's really the way it goes. I appreciate the question. I think it's an interesting question to the extent that you say you're from the north and you appreciate all the opportunities and all the things that happen there in agriculture. I can say that it could be from any other part of the province. The situations that you're speaking of are almost the same.

Ontario has a thriving sector in both, and a strong community as well positioned for the future. We have all the makings of everything we need when it comes to agriculture and food. Everybody is looking for that to be local. As local as we can get it, the better we like it. As you mentioned, this is Local Food Week, and we've been working very hard to get the message out.

While I'm at it, I want to touch on the question earlier from my nephew John. It was about the advertising in Foodland. Of course, that's related. It's likely the most recognized brand in Ontario of any kind. What that means is that Foodland Ontario—anything that has that brand on it is local food. He mentioned that we needed to also show the people in it. I want to say that I think every Foodland ad contains somebody in it who is in the business of marketing that food. I think that's all part of making it local—because it's not only locally grown, it is locally presented for us to buy. So I very much appreciate that.

We have many opportunities to build on that economic powerhouse that we already are. Like I say, we can do all that now, but we can do even more.

One of the things we did for the pandemic is, we put out a support program to help people with their e-business marketing. People who had been selling it could no longer get it out to their customers because people couldn't come to get it. We helped them with putting computer equipment in so they could sell it electronically. We put the program in place, and it was just a matter of a few weeks that it was all taken up, because everybody had set up an operation to market that local food locally. I think that really says a lot for the industry that you were talking about, how we are so local.

In the area where we have—what should I say?—a higher number of production, of course, a lot of that is going for export. There is less export from that which is grown in the north because more of it is consumed locally, because the volumes are different.

I will turn it over to the deputy, too. He can speak a little bit about the last part of your question.

I think it's very important to keep focused on the positive in your question, about all the things that we could

collectively do to not only make people know it's Local Food Week, but know that good local food is good every week of the year. We do everything we can to market that and get people to understand the positives of doing that. Knowing where it's coming from and how it was produced is the answer to everybody's dream when it comes to shopping. The only way they can do that is to buy directly from the people who they know.

With that, I'll turn it over to Deputy Kelly to speak on the other one.

Mr. John Kelly: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you for your question, and also, thank you for the description of what's happening in the north. We do know that there are some exciting things happening in Thunder Bay. I've had some interactions with some of the academics up there as well, and they're very keen on what's happening in the Thunder Bay area.

You asked a question about the agricultural impact assessments. As we briefly referred to previously, the four provincial land use plans that we have—that would be the growth plan, the Greenbelt Plan, the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the Niagara Escarpment Plan—have policy requirements for agricultural impact assessments that provide support for the long-term prosperity of agriculture within the region. They're required for certain types of development within the greater Golden Horseshoe. Where they're not required in land use policies, i.e., in areas outside of the greater Golden Horseshoe, they're encouraged as an effective tool to assess, avoid, minimize and mitigate the impacts of agriculture. The goal is to ensure that farmland, farm operations and supporting infrastructure services and assets are sustained, to support a prosperous agri-food sector and strong rural communities.

I am going to ask my ADM David Hagarty to comment on this because this is his area, but we are working very diligently on the agricultural impact assessments.

David, over to you.

Mr. David Hagarty: Thank you. Specifically, an agricultural impact assessment is a study that evaluates the potential impacts of non-agricultural development on the agricultural system—so farmland, farm operations and the agri-food network generally. It determines how to avoid adverse impacts through things like site selection and minimize and mitigate adverse impacts, for example, through site design and the use of buffers.

For the greater Golden Horseshoe, agricultural impact assessments are required for settlement area boundary expansions, for mineral aggregate applications—that's also required under the Aggregate Resources Act—and for infrastructure projects; and they're recommended for other, non-agricultural uses. We've referred before to A Place to Grow; rural lands for the Greenbelt Plan. For aggregates, agricultural impact assessments address rehabilitation to an agricultural condition where that's required.

Thank you for the question. I'll leave it at that.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thank you for the answer.

What happens if there's a conflict between, let's say, what a ministerial zoning order is proposing because a

municipality wants to append a piece of land, and these agricultural assessment plans? If there is a conflict, what's the process?

Mr. John Kelly: Who is the question for?

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I guess I'll put them all to the minister, and he'll know who to put them to.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for that question.

Obviously, it's not quite as simple as, what do you do when you've done the study? The study is—and I think a reference was made earlier about an environmental assessment. The agricultural impact assessment is, in fact, not that evolved, but that type of thing is that you look at what you need to do, and it's always when you want to change the land use. You do the review and then you put it forward to the authorities who are going to make that decision of whether you can justify that it needs doing, whether it can be done, and whether what you're proposing doing is accomplishing what you're looking for in the most acceptable manner.

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In some cases, they would come out and say, "Well, it won't work." In some cases, they would say, "You can do this remedial action. You can do this or this, and then you can make it work." But they're going to have to do a lot of remedial action and things like that before they can get the approval to carry on with that. That's really what it's about. Rather than just saying, "This is what we want to do," prove it's the right thing to do, taking all the pluses and minuses together, evaluating it, and then find out which is the right one to take.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: So what priority does agricultural land get in that assessment process? Let's say there are 5,000 jobs or 500 jobs, and there's that kind of assessment of economic impact that it will bring so much construction jobs, and then down the road, more jobs. But we have a piece of cultural land that has potential, maybe not even being used, but we know that it's good. How do they weigh those things?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I think that's really what it's all about. It's putting them all together and then weighing them all. From my ministry, our position will be immediately that the highest priority is preserving agricultural land, and our position would not change on one of those studies if they're trying to take it out of agriculture. But then somebody else comes forward and says this is the plus and minus and they have to come up with how they can mitigate what's being done and what's the best possible outcome for the property.

Totally apart from agriculture, in the planning system they use the term "highest and best use." In the real world and the rest of the planning—forget about the agriculture sphere—the "highest and best use" is not defined as which one it is. It's defined on putting everything together and then having everybody agree which is the highest and best use for that property.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I've had some inquiries around, because we have a large number—in my riding, I encompass most of the rural area around Thunder Bay,

which has a lot of communities. Some are agricultural, and most of them have a bit of agriculture. Some are very rugged boreal forest-looking areas, and they're designated as crown land. Some farmers have been asking about the plan around—and I've heard this from around the clay belt as well—that easier access to crown land for farmers. Is that something that is in the works or something being considered?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for that question. It's a really good question, but it belongs to the Ministry of Natural Resources, because obviously agriculture is not responsible for crown land.

When we are working with people—and I mentioned in my comments to John about working on projects of the feasibility of starting a larger beef operation in northern Ontario, and that was predicated on being able to acquire crown land to facilitate that. In order to change that land—the Ministry of Agriculture can't change it. It has to be changed through a process they have to follow, the same as if it was privately owned, and go to the hearings as to whether that could be done. It's a slightly—

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Yes. Being the critic for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, I know that crown land—that was the complaint, that it was a siloed approach and that it wasn't being facilitated, in that they were given less priority than other people who might want to acquire use of crown land. In the forestry industry, they pay stumpage and they get to use crown land.

These people are quite passionate about that clay belt and about the potential for good beef operations there, so they were coming to me, as critic, and asking about that. So I'm just wondering if progress has been made.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: We have discussions and so forth. I can't say on individual—whether progress is being made. But I think it's important to recognize—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have about two minutes left.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Yes. You made a perfect segue into the question, how do you evaluate the priorities when you bring them together? That's what we found with the properties that you're talking about now. When you start looking at whether you can convert it to farming, the people who want to conserve it for natural resources say, "No, that would be bad. For environmental purposes, we should keep it in its present state. The cattle will not keep it in its present state." And so, again, the same as with the environmental assessment, you have to come to the assessment and then the decision-makers would have to come to a decision which one would win over.

They could say—and I think that's where the assessment is and what I was trying to get across before—"You can do a certain amount of this, but if we move that much of crown land over, you have to maintain half of it in its natural state." They may be able to come, with all sides together, to a conclusion. And I think that's what an agricultural land assessment—slightly different parameters of the debate, but that's exactly what the end result would be.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: So nothing fixed yet, but something that is being worked on—

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Yes.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: —not goats. Goats would be a lot more destructive to crown land because goats will eat anything.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Yes, and I don't want to take away from the fact that they are very resilient when it comes to things they eat. But it is becoming quite an industry in southern Ontario, particularly. They also can stand all kinds of different climates, so maybe—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say, your time is up.

We go now to the government. MPP Pettapiece.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Good afternoon, Minister. I'm going to ask you a question about something that has come up through these hearings in different ministries. It's so important that I think that we should get a viewpoint or let the people know what OMAFRA is doing and how they've been an integral part of the process. It has to do with broadband Internet. I think you know as well as I do, and many people on this committee know how important it is to rural Ontario and the need for it. If the pandemic has shown us anything, it's that reliable broadband Internet is no longer a luxury but a necessity for rural Ontario. Families need it for their kids to do their homework, and businesses and farms need it to connect to the global marketplace.

I know you've been a proponent of expanding broadband Internet access in rural Ontario. Are you able to bring this committee up to speed as to your efforts to expand Internet access in rural Ontario?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for that question. It's much appreciated.

You're right. The most important part of the question is how important broadband is, particularly to rural and northern Ontario, because that's the place where so many people are deprived of the connectivity presently. If there's one thing we've learned during the pandemic, it's the need of that. Personally, I'm an example. During the pandemic, I've had to go to the office every day to do the virtual thing because I don't have connectivity at home. I did get a call from one of the providers just a couple of days ago who suggested I might be able to get it now. I don't know what they've done; maybe they put in a bigger tower or something. But it becomes very important.

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There was a time a few years ago that we were putting the broadband, the SWIFT one, the Southwestern—I don't know, but the acronym is SWIFT; I've said it so often. We let contracts for that based on providers who would bid on putting a certain number of the cables and the broadband in the ground with this much government support and so forth. It's working fairly well. I have quite a list of counties that have projects going right now. I believe you have one in Wellington. In fact, I was there to help turn the key for the first customer to start using the broadband from that facility. And thank you very much for the invitation to be there.

We have a number of counties and, as I said in my notes, I went last week to see one in Oxford, where they're expanding the broadband area to provide more services.

We have also made a commitment to spend—I think it's \$2 billion or \$4 billion, but it's a massive thing—to target putting broadband to everyone in Ontario by 2025, and that's working.

One of the things we did at that point is, we put the broadband program with the Minister of Infrastructure. I believe that the committee met with the Minister of Infrastructure prior to having the agriculture people involved and us being here. They are now putting it all together and hoping to expand the program to serve everyone in the province by 2025.

One of the challenges we have with it, of course, is making sure that the federal government comes onside. We're putting in a lot of money, and we can do that, but it's a joint responsibility, and the federal government has not yet come up with the kind of resources that are required to pay their percentage of the installation for the whole province. I think they put slightly less in the pot than we have. We have it just for Ontario, and they have it for the whole country. I can ensure you that we need to get them onside to come forward with the funding, but we hope to expand that to cover everyone in the province.

I don't know if the deputy has anything he would like to add to that. I will turn it over to the deputy.

Mr. John Kelly: Thank you, Minister, and thank you for the question.

First, I would like to stress the importance of rural broadband. It has an importance not only to farmers but to rural communities and rural businesses. The amount of information and data transmission that's happening in the farming sector now is immense, and we will see that growing and growing. It's really a big-data business.

As the minister said, this really is a whole-of-government approach to developing broadband, and we are working with our partners in other ministries.

I would like to reiterate the importance—Minister, I'll help you out: SWIFT is the Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology; SWIFT is way easier to say. We've been working on this project for quite some time, and I'm going to ask David Hagarty to detail us on some of the things that have happened. Really, it's all about faster, reliable Internet to support the creation of jobs as well as economic growth, as well as supporting the communities. As COVID-19 has shown you, when we have people working at home or when—MPP Vanthof had the dog at home. He requires these types of services to really do his job properly. It's the same for many, many people who are in the rural sector.

David, maybe you can give us some direct details about SWIFT.

Mr. David Hagarty: Thank you, Deputy.

I will be passing it to my colleague Randy Jackiw in a moment, who is the assistant deputy minister of our economic development division.

As has been said a few times, broadband has become essential infrastructure, and Ontarians are increasingly expecting digital parity with their neighbours, no matter

where they live. Certainly, as the deputy said, that concern has been highlighted during the pandemic, with so many Ontarians working from home.

Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan under, as the minister said, the Ministry of Infrastructure, was released in July 2019. It outlines four pillars of action to support universal access to broadband and cellular services. There's delivering regional and shovel-ready projects that will expand broadband and cellular action; launching a \$150-million—and it recently doubled to \$300 million—broadband and cellular infrastructure program; maximizing existing government programs and assets to support broadband and cellular expansion; and modernizing government to reduce barriers to support private sector delivery of broadband and cellular projects.

The plan originally committed \$315 million to improve broadband access for up to 220,000 households and businesses in underserved and underserved areas across the province. In November 2020, the government increased its commitment by over \$680 million, bringing a total provincial commitment to close to \$1 billion. This included an additional \$1 million to the ICON program, the Improving Connectivity for Ontario program, thereby increasing the amount of funding available to \$300 million.

The November announcement included previously approved projects, including \$71 million in the Eastern Ontario Regional Network for improved cellular connectivity and \$63.7 million for the SWIFT project that has been mentioned a couple of times.

The ICON program that I mentioned before, the Improving Connectivity for Ontario program, is a four-year capital funding program and a key facet of the broadband and cellular action plan. It completed its first intake, with the second intake closing at the end of January 2021. MOI, the Ministry of Infrastructure, is targeting the first projects and intake to break ground this spring and summer.

As of mid-December 2020, that ICON program received 74 project applications for stage 2. So far, 20 projects have been approved and are soon to be announced. MOI, with support from Infrastructure Ontario, is currently undertaking a sector review and market sounding, they're calling it, to help drive stronger outcomes, including more private sector participation and investment in broadband deployment.

The spring 2020 budget announced \$2.8 billion for broadband infrastructure, bringing the province's total investment to nearly \$4 billion over six years, beginning in 2019-20. The budget announced will be pivotal to Ontario's long-term economic growth.

With that, I will hand it to my colleague Randy Jackiw to provide more detail.

Mr. Randy Jackiw: Thanks for that, David.

Randy Jackiw, assistant deputy minister, economic development, with OMAFRA. I'll drill in a little bit to the member's question, relative to what we have been focused on.

Shortly after the minister was appointed into the position, he actually chaired a meeting with the southwestern wardens. The wardens were initially the group that came

together to make a pitch to the province around delivering on the mandate of improving broadband Internet. The thinking was, being the closest to the issue and familiar, they could create an agency, which ended up being SWIFT, and oversee that, and that's where some of the best decisions and advice to the government would be made. I don't want to speak for the minister, but what the minister found out was that there were some start-up issues, and I think that meeting and follow-up really clarified the expectations, the governance, the accountability and the expectations of SWIFT.

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In fairness, it was a very challenging project from the get-go. There was not a lot of information around who had what infrastructure where, how much the major telecoms had and where that was, and therefore where was best and most important for the provincial dollars to focus on, making sure you got the most value for money. As a result of that, there were some significant improvements in the governance, some changes in staff as well, and a refocusing on getting to that ultimate goal of where best to focus the resources and how to go about that. They came up with metrics and maps and made some decisions about where to focus first, and I think we're all pretty proud of the progress that it has made and continues to make in those areas. The minister has continued to be involved in the monitoring and communications efforts around that as well.

The last point that I would make is that it has also, through all of this, become very apparent that it isn't just about fibre; it's also about the cellular technologies etc. You really do need a mix of all the emerging technologies to hit the critical areas in the most efficient way possible, because we have such vast lands, and farmers really do rely on that. Both getting information and communicating with their cellular devices remains, at least at this point, one of their top priorities and preferred manners of doing so.

It brings us up to how that accountability was then moved from the ministry back over to the Ministry of Infrastructure. We had, previous to that, delivered programs on behalf of the Ministry of Infrastructure, similar to other infrastructure with MTO and other ministries, but with this significant increase in resources and focus, the strategy was to refocus those efforts in the Ministry of Infrastructure so that they would have the capacity and the boots on the ground to be able to effectively move that forward.

I think with that I'll stop there, unless there are some further questions.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: How much time left, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have about four minutes.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Okay. It's interesting; we were talking about this with some of the ministries, mostly with the Minister of Infrastructure, Minister Scott. I related a story to her about a beef farmer in Mitchell—which is a town just west of Stratford—who finishes, I don't know, 700 or 800 head of cattle, usually, at a time. He's quite an operator. They go into their barn where most of the beef cattle are—they have two barns—and they take records of

these cattle. They have to record their dates of birth and where they came from, and also any medications they have to give them and all these things. They put that into a program—they had a name for it and I just forget what it is now—but then they have to drive down the road to where they can get connectivity in order to put it in the computer system. I guess that doesn't seem like a lot, but when you're busy looking after that many cattle, and especially this year when the spring planting pretty much is completed now, you have all these different things you have to do, and now you have to take the time and drive down the road. I've heard that from combine operators. When these combines tell the operator what the crop's doing as far as yield goes, how much they have in the bin and all these types of things—the combines are talking to the operator, but he can't take that information and just transfer it to where his computer system is and put it into those programs. So they have to go and do it. They have to physically take it over to where their programs are in order to download it.

Farming is that sophisticated now, and farmers, like any business, will use technology if you give it to them to use. They're very adaptable.

I think that's something that I want to thank the minister for—his commitment to getting broadband into rural Ontario and continuing on with that effort.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Minister, I wonder if you have anything else to say on how important it is that we have it in rural Ontario.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for the comment.

Mr. Pettapiece, you're totally right; the technology on the farm is second to none. Sometimes people in urban centres still have this ideology or this thought that agriculture is a pitchfork and bib overalls, but there's a lot of technology that's there. In fact, we have an autonomous tractor. It doesn't look like a tractor; it's just a machine. It doesn't have a cab on it because there's no driver in it, but when it needs repairs, if you have the connectivity, the repairs can be made or the need can be identified by putting the cord into the tractor and sending that message to the repair shop, and the repair shop can tell the farmer what needs doing.

One of the announcements that we made for SWIFT program was in a large dairy operation, and the technology there that deals with cattle, the robotic milker and the whole bit is just amazing. It can't operate without connection. In that case, they had some connection. It wasn't at the high level they wanted, but they were getting by. But the whole industry is getting so dependent on that connection that we can't afford not to move forward with it.

I did want to, I think, in the first part of the—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry; we're out of time on this rotation.

We go to the opposition. I'll just note, we will not go all the way to 6 o'clock on questions because there are some issues we have to resolve in terms of the schedule.

But at least for the next seven minutes or so, the official opposition—MPP Monteith-Farrell, the floor is yours.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I've been booking a plane flight while I was talking, to try to get to Toronto, so it's very interesting.

I have been able to witness technology and the technological advances, and the discussion about broadband and the support for broadband in northern Ontario, as the minister had stated, has been very challenging. There are a couple of aspects that really encourage that we are having these announcements of investment across northern Ontario, but the affordability piece is something that I'm always mindful of because, in some cases, you're paying large amounts of money for very bad connectivity. So I'm hopeful that with more competition, there would be a decrease in the cost and that it will be affordable.

When we talk about technology—I've also been able to watch the evolution of a dairy farm. That was the most exciting thing I've ever seen. I saw the old single-stall method, then they had the milking machines—but you had to walk the cows there and do that. We now have the open barn, and the machine just comes and cleans. Rather than all that manual labour of cleaning up, it's all just done in a fell swoop. The cows are very happy. They're dancing around there. Actually, with the robotic milking, they have a lot happier cows. It's noticeable. It's intriguing to watch that technology.

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Along with technology, I'd like to explore the investment that we're making in the science around agriculture—the numbers, what are we doing, and what areas are we emphasizing for the future?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for the question.

I think it's important to start from the beginning, shall we say, where we have ARIO, the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario. It's an arm's-length organization from the government, but it's the owner and operates all of our research stations across the province. They own and operate them, but they don't do the research. The research is under the auspices of the University of Guelph. Primarily, they do all our research that we—I shouldn't say all the research we do. We do research in other areas too. But we have a contract with them, a partnership. In fact, we're in the process of renegotiating it now. But they do all the research. Every year, they put forward that which they believe they would like to research, projects that they would like to work on. We as the government get to approve those and send them back, and then they do that research for us. One of the things we've worked very hard on is to make sure that we are getting the projects that the agriculture community wants or needs. They know far better where they want to go, where they're having problems and what they need solved than we do at the ministry. We look forward to them putting forward proposals of what they want done, and then we encourage that to come through.

I did make the decision three years ago, when I started the job, that the previous government was—and I don't

say this in a negative way, but a lot of the research was focused more on rural issues rather than on agricultural issues. I believed that we needed to make sure that we have a very high standard of agriculture industries in Ontario. We're world leaders in innovation and research and so forth, and we want to stay that way. So we put it in a request to the university that when they were putting forward applications of what research we needed to do, make sure it looks at our agricultural future, and also leave the individual research as to which is the better seed to the seed companies; they can figure that out. I want the research to be that which benefits the industry.

It has been amazing each year, as I look over them. Each year, they're getting better, with researchers coming forward—through the university, they tend to be people who want to do the research, they make an application, and then they look for some way to get it funded, and that's how it goes through there. Of all the applications that came in this year, I reviewed them all, and there wasn't one that I sent back and said, "I don't think that's worth doing." Every one had a purpose and was looking for a result. That's really what we're doing. That's our research arm.

The partnership with the university has been going on for quite a number of years—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Minister, thank you very much. I'm going to end the questioning at this point.

Members of the committee, as you're well aware, the House is coming back into session tomorrow afternoon at 3 p.m. We have the authority to meet. My suggestion to you is that we meet tomorrow morning from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.—we stop meeting when the House comes into session at 3—and that tomorrow we discuss what we do with the already scheduled Friday session in case the House is meeting on Friday as well.

Does anyone have any objections to that approach?

MPP Skelly, please go ahead.

Ms. Donna Skelly: I just wanted to confirm: You're suggesting we meet 9 to 3 tomorrow?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Yes, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Ms. Donna Skelly: And we'll break at 1?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): We'll break at noon, come back at 1. Sorry; I should have said that—so, 9 to 12; 1 to 3.

Ms. Donna Skelly: I understand I'm going to be chairing tomorrow. I just wanted to confirm at what time I will be in the chair.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You would be in the chair at 1 p.m.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Parsa.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Chair, once the House sits, and we already have—we've passed a motion for us to sit; I recommend for us to sit. If there are votes, then I'm sure that we can get to the House and vote, but I would hope that we can continue so that we stay on schedule, as per our schedule—the motion that was moved already earlier. That's my suggestion to our colleagues.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I am very happy to keep sitting. I will just say to all of you, should our respective House leaders ask that we suspend at 3 p.m., I assume that we will suspend at 3 p.m. But if all of you are willing to continue sitting, I am quite happy to have that continue forward. I just wanted to make sure we respected the House, but if you're good with the regular hours, let's proceed.

Okay, that's great. We will continue. Since we've resolved that issue and we still have a few more minutes on the end of the day, why don't we go back to questions? I know, Minister, you'll be very pleased to hear that. You've got an enthusiastic committee, sitting and listening to every word, quite literally.

MPP Monteith-Farrell, you still have 13 minutes on the clock. Please proceed.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Further on the science aspect of agriculture: You, in your opening remarks, and MPP Vanthof in his, were talking about the impact of climate change and the impact on agriculture, and the idea—I don't know if it was you; I think it was you, Minister, who mentioned that you have a collaboration with MECP, that there are areas that fall between both your ministries. So I was wondering if you could talk about what kind of investment is being made in determining the impacts of climate change on agriculture. How does that relationship work with MECP?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for that question. I think the connection would be better answered by my ministry staff, as to where it's going.

I think it's very important to mention, from the big picture, all the things we're doing. Particularly, I mentioned it in the part about the LEADS program—the Lake Erie, Lake St. Clair phosphorus program—and all the investments we're making through the CAP program to make sure that we're reducing the phosphorus in the lake. Improving our environment is improving our ability to reduce climate change. I think all those things together are part of it.

I will ask the deputy if he has anything he'd like to add to this, or one of the other staff. I'm sure there's someone who is very knowledgeable about the whole thing.

Mr. John Kelly: Thank you, Minister.

MPP Monteith-Farrell, first, I want to thank you for your question regarding the dairy side of things. I'll come to your question in just a second.

We've certainly moved from buckets to tie-stall and pipelines, which you were referring to, to free stalls and parlours, and now to robotic milking. So you're quite right that the technology development and the science that we see in agriculture is outstanding. The University of Guelph has been involved with many of those programs, as have other areas that the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs has supported and worked with.

1750

Science is near and dear to my heart. We look forward to things like climate change mitigation, but we also like to look forward to taking advantage of what climate change might bring for agriculture. I know MPP Vanthof talked a little bit about being able to grow soybeans in his area, whereas 20 years ago he probably couldn't.

When I was on the agricultural business side, I worked with some of those northern dairies in the New Liskeard area and, frankly, up towards your area as well. They were feeding, really, western Canadian diets. They would be feeding canola; they would be feeding barley. Those were the major sources that were in those rations. They feed corn and soybeans like we do in southern Ontario because of two things: One is that we're in a slightly warmer climate. The second is that we've been able to, through research and science, develop varieties that can mature much faster than the southern varieties. Many of those varieties have actually been developed at the University of Guelph. The University of Guelph has a tremendous breeding program for soybeans, in particular, and for other things.

In terms of climate change mitigation and adaptation, I'm going to ask, first, ADM David Hagarty to provide some comments. But I know that ADM Kelly McAslan, who is with our food safety and environmental division, really wants to get into this as well.

David, I'm going to pass it over to you, and then maybe you can pass it to Kelly so she can tell us about what they're doing.

Mr. David Hagarty: Thank you for the question.

In terms of actions around climate change mitigation and adaptation, our ministry supports environmental stewardship practices that help Ontario's rural communities, farmers and agri-food business reduce greenhouse gas emissions, sequester carbon, and adapt to a changing climate. For example, actions that support healthy soil such as cover crops and reduced tillage can help sequester carbon, manage water, and buffer against drought or flood events, which reduces risk for farmers.

In July 2020, we did award \$3.6 million as part of a phase 2 intake of the Greenhouse Competitiveness and Innovation Initiative to approve projects, several of which supported sector investments in sustainability and innovation to optimize inputs and increase resource use efficiencies like, for example, energy and heat.

We work to advance the adoption of the 4R nutrient management program to help reduce on-farm fertilization emissions and support Ontario in responding to a new fertilizer emission-reduction target, which is 30% below 2020 levels from on-farm fertilizer emissions by 2030.

Our plant health data solutions projects are helping farmers respond to current and future impacts by improving soil availability and access to real-time data monitoring, predictive modelling and forecasting related to plant health risks, such as pests.

The last thing I'll mention before I hand it to my colleague is, in the middle of August 2020, we launched the provincial climate change impact assessment. That will use the best available science and information to identify where and how climate change is likely.

With that, I'll hand it to my counterpart Kelly McAslan to add some additional detail.

Ms. Kelly McAslan: I'm Kelly McAslan, assistant deputy minister of the food safety and environment division.

Thanks for the question; it's a really important one. I'll just elaborate a little bit on what the minister, deputy and David have said.

Certainly, driving meaningful environmental change and sustainability requires joint leadership and action from a large group of players, including our colleagues at the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks as sort of the overall lead on climate change and the environment. But across government and within farmers and industry, we really all play a role in taking action to ensure sustainability, to manage our province's resources and make sure that we've got that long-term economic viability, competitiveness and resiliency in the sector. We want to make sure that the land is sustainable and managed for the future.

We have supported the sector in a number of ways around stewardship to encourage, enable and influence farmers in making sustainable choices all across areas of their operations. We really see ourselves as a trusted source for information around environmental stewardship in the agricultural sector, and we take a multi-faceted approach. Building sector leaderships and partnerships across the agricultural sector has been really important, and this really helps to foster accountability, transparency and coordinated action.

One good example of this is with the New Horizons soil health strategy, which is a great example of the strong partnership that the ministry has fostered to achieve progress on soil health and on conservation within the province. The strategy included a diverse working group of representatives from across the whole agricultural sector, 24 different groups of sector organizations. The strategy itself has 84 actions across four themes, which are around soil management, soil data and mapping, soil evaluation and monitoring, and soil knowledge and innovation. We know that soil plays a key role in climate change, and so that's a really key piece.

Another really great example of a partnership, as David mentioned, is working with Fertilizer Canada and the Ontario Agri Business Association on the 4R nutrient stewardship systems project. This is a really key project in terms of nutrient stewardship. It's an internationally recognized management practice, with four key pillars: right source, right rate, right time, right place. We know that there are almost 600,000 acres of farmland covered by 4R nutrient stewardship in the province.

Our minister actually recently signed the 2021 Canada-Ontario Agreement on Great Lakes Water Quality and Ecosystem Health, and is very committed to supporting actions for agriculture. OMAFRA was allocated over \$1 million a year towards funding Great Lake projects, so that

has been extremely significant, and there are numerous projects under way on that.

We also engage with partners on actions to reduce sources of phosphorus, as the minister mentioned, through funding under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership and through collaboration with industry and partners in the agricultural sector, a working group, and the Lake Erie action plan implementation team—so again, numerous partnerships.

We've got, as well, legislation that we have in place as part of our multi-pronged approach to dealing with stewardship activities, and this really supports environmentally sustainable outcomes. The Nutrient Management Act, which I'm sure many are familiar with, aims to ensure that nutrients are applied in a manner that balances nutrients applied with the uptake of the crop. Just last year alone, there were 516 nutrient management strategies approved, and so that has been a really important piece.

The other component we have is the Drainage Act. We know that municipal drains deliver critical economic and environmental benefits such as improved crop productivity, nutrient loss reduction, reduced soil erosion, flood control, habitat protection and stormwater management, so it's a very, very important piece of legislation. Under the Drainage Act—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say that there are two minutes left and we're now just about at 6 p.m.

I want to note, as MPP Parsa would know because he moved the initial motion, that we had set a schedule of hearings for the estimates committee that was varied by the committee, noting that if there was a situation of regular business, we would modify our schedule, but it appears that we are ready as a committee to continue meeting tomorrow from 9 until 6. I just wanted to note that to all of you before we adjourn.

The committee is now adjourned—

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Chair? Sorry.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Yes, MPP Monteith-Farrell?

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I had, I think, two minutes on the clock for—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Yes, you do.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Because I will probably be flying at that time, I think that it would probably be best that people who could actually be there at 9 o'clock will be—I'd say I forfeit my two minutes.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Fair enough. That's done.

The committee is now adjourned until June 10, 2021, at 9 a.m.

The committee adjourned at 1802.

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