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E-42

**Standing Committee on
Estimates**

Ministry of Energy,
Northern Development
and Mines

1st Session
42nd Parliament

Wednesday 16 June 2021

**Comité permanent des
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère de l'Énergie,
du Développement du Nord
et des Mines

1^{re} session
42^e législature

Mercredi 16 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 ESTIMATES

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Wednesday 16 June 2021

Mercredi 16 juin 2021

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

MINISTRY OF ENERGY, NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT AND MINES

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Good morning, honourable members. In the absence of the Chair and Vice-Chair, it is my duty to call upon you to elect an Acting Chair. Are there any nominations?

I have MPP Parsa in the room. Are there any nominations? MPP Skelly.

Ms. Donna Skelly: I nominate MPP Parsa.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Thank you. Does the member accept the nomination?

Mr. Michael Parsa: I do.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Okay. Are there any further nominations? There being no further nominations, I declare the nominations closed and MPP Parsa elected Acting Chair of the committee. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Good morning, everyone. I hope you're doing well and everyone is staying safe and healthy. This is the pre-meeting for the Standing Committee on Estimates. I will do an attendance check and go over some of the guidelines for our new format of committee meetings that include more remote participation and physical distancing. I will start with the attendance check, and we'll check for attendance again at the end of the pre-meeting in case anyone else has joined us.

So that everyone is aware, the following members are present in the room: just myself.

To confirm members' attendance on Zoom, I will ask the following questions: if they are present and to confirm that they are, in fact, the honourable member and also to confirm that they are in the province of Ontario.

We will begin with MPP Monteith-Farrell.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Good morning, Chair, and good morning, everyone. It's MPP Judith Monteith-Farrell. I am in Toronto, Ontario.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you very much, MPP Monteith-Farrell.

Minister Rickford?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I just want to remind the committee, please: I had to scurry to get here for 8 a.m. Yesterday when the meeting ended, the Chair said 9 a.m. Of course, we have two time zones in the province, and so I was expecting to come here at 9 a.m. I want to thank my staff for scurrying me from across the lake to get here in time and answer these important questions. But let's remember that in this vast province—and in fairness to the Chair, I never, from the Speaker of the House, any enunciations of events or times, especially in this virtual world we're living in, acknowledge that we have two time zones in this province. So that's not on you, Chair, from yesterday, Peter. I left saying 9 a.m., and I was trying to clarify, because there's no "CST" or "EST." So thank you for, in the future, just letting me know that. I was trying to get my kids to school, and I was like, "Oh, my God. I don't have an hour."

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you very much, Minister Rickford. That's a valid point and the Clerk has made a note of it.

We will move on to MPP Randy Pettapiece.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Hi. Randy Pettapiece. I'm in Ontario.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you, sir.

MPP Donna Skelly?

Ms. Donna Skelly: Good morning, Chair, and good morning, colleagues. It is MPP Skelly. I'm in Hamilton.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Good morning, MPP Skelly.

MPP Peter Tabuns?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Good morning, Chair. This is Peter Tabuns. I'm here in Toronto, Ontario.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you very much, Mr. Tabuns. Welcome.

MPP Michael Mantha?

Mr. Michael Mantha: Good morning. Although I was silent and off camera yesterday, I listened to every single word the minister and the associate minister had to bring. Unfortunately, today I have a bunch of contractors, which is why I'm home, so I'm going to have to stay off mute and work from my desk.

I'm still going to come up to your area, Minister, for some bear, and I hope you have a roast, because it goes really well with a little bit of pork.

I'm MPP Michael Mantha, and I'm in Elliot Lake.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you very much, MPP Mantha. We knew you wouldn't be that silent today.

MPP Bob Bailey, please,

Mr. Robert Bailey: Thank you for the introduction today. I'm Bob Bailey, in the hard oil town of Petrolia, Ontario.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you very much, Mr. Bailey.

Finally, MPP Billy Pang.

Mr. Billy Pang: Good morning, Mr. Chair. MPP Billy Pang here. I'm in my riding of Markham—Unionville.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): And I've got MPP Toby Barrett.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Good morning, everybody and Chair. I'm Toby Barrett, in Port Dover, Ontario.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you very much, Mr. Barrett.

I see MPP Dave Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: I'm MPP Dave Smith. I'm in beautiful God's country, Peterborough.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you very much, MPP Smith.

And that is everyone? We're not missing anyone? No.

Good morning, once again. We're going to resume consideration of vote 2201 of the estimates of the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines. There's now a total of eight hours and four minutes remaining for the review of these estimates.

When the committee adjourned on June 15, the government had 12 minutes and 40 seconds remaining. We will now move on. Who will be starting the questions for the government side? MPP Barrett?

Mr. Toby Barrett: I completed my question yesterday, Chair, and the minister was just commencing the answer.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Okay. Minister?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I don't have a transcript of the question. As concise as Toby is in these forums, it just slips my mind. How do I recover?

Mr. Toby Barrett: Just to cut to the chase, I wish to commence the government questions—and I know we'll be hearing from the parliamentary assistant as well. My question, really, was to get just a fairly detailed description of what the ministry does, the various roles of the ministry. I know there are various field offices across the north. That was the essence of the question—how northern development and mines serves the economy in northern Ontario, the mineral economy, and by extension, support for the provincial economy.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question. It allows me to talk and boast, if I might, about the extraordinary folks who work in northern development and mines—and no offence to my associate minister on here, to the great team he led in energy, and then we corporately combined them, which made a lot of sense.

To your question, Toby: I remember that MPP Bartolucci, at the time that decision was made, said what a great opportunity for energy, particularly in the north—to

understand a little bit more about what makes northern Ontario energized, the challenges, the issues, as people like to call them, but I like to think of them as opportunities.

We're at a critical juncture. Northern Ontario mining was flat. There were companies looking at options and opportunities to pursue for development or for continuing their operations. I think the pairing of energy with northern development and mines as one entity was really good for us folk up in the north. It's not to suggest that it would then underserve southern Ontario—to the contrary.

I'm sure there will be questions on energy later.

Northern development and mines has its finger on the pulse of the major sectors.

In a moment, I'll talk a little bit more about the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund for the smaller businesses and economic activity.

0910

Our folks in northern development and mines understand what challenges and what opportunities northern development and mining entail. First and foremost, they drive a lot of policy borne out of what they're experiencing on the ground. The northern development and mining offices spread across northern Ontario are there to address various mining permitting elements that are squarely with our ministry. They also find themselves fairly regularly dealing with challenges that, in the mining sector and in the exploration sector, have to do with other ministries. So they're very much a cross-ministry kind of place where people who are in the prospecting business and in the mining business come. We often take them to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, who are equally represented across our small towns and cities—in fact, far more so because they have conservation officers. Those offices also serve, importantly, in our case, out here in Kenora, as outposts for contact for small businesses, individuals and entrepreneurs—businesses of various sizes to report into for how our Northern Ontario Heritage Fund works. Of course, yesterday I walked you through, very briefly, some of the things that are new and exciting about the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. I hope I get an opportunity to talk at length about that today. Needless to say, Toby, from a service perspective, we have a great team—principal residence in Sudbury, but very present across the region.

I think the other important function that they perform is helping us, out of our minister's office, identify key opportunities with mining companies to deploy what I like to call SWAT teams. These SWAT teams have been particularly effective, out of my ministry, to go in and help a mining company, help an Indigenous community cross the starting line or the finishing line, depending on where they are in a given process—a mining company, for example, moving across a major milestone onto the next chapter of development, if you will, or opening, so crossing that important starting line.

Boy, it was fortuitous and timely that when we were elected in 2018, there were a number of mines potentially opening or thinking about opening or thinking about

converting to full electricity, but they were bogged down in regulatory red tape. These SWAT teams that I'm talking to you about—they come in, Toby, and they address those regulatory matters, often involving other ministries, and we help them move to the next stage of development or opening. What does that look like on the ground, as I like to say? Well, if you're the Sugar Zone just north of White River there—and when we came to power, there was a bunch of regulations they needed to open. In other words, they were ready to open, so in our SWAT team went. We deployed this delta force, and they were able to help them get open. No sooner had we tackled that issue than IAMGOLD walked in and said, "Jeez, we've been at this project in Gogama forever. Is it worth leaving to construct? We've had it on the shelf. The price of gold is there, but it has just been so difficult over the past decade and a half to get this open." SWAT team landed. It was a hot LZ. They went in and dealt with a myriad of regulatory matters.

The next thing you know—and you know how we politicians are. There was the Prime Minister of Canada, four or five of his MPs and the opposition caucus, the Premier and I and some of my colleagues. We were all there. Of course, you know politicians would never want to miss an opportunity to proclaim that they might have had something to do with opening this mine. It was crazy. There were about 14 or 15 politicians, including the Prime Minister of Canada. But we all know, Toby, how that mine got open. This SWAT team moved in—and IAMGOLD told us in the green room when we met at the beginning of our mandate that this simply would have not occurred had we not put this delta force in place, knocked down those barriers, worked with Flying Post and Gogama and the First Nations communities as partners, dotted some i's and crossed some t's, broke through some major regulatory challenges that they were having with the government. And there we were, shamelessly putting our shovels in the ground.

Time and time again that we've been working with Greenstone Gold up there in beautiful Thunder Bay—Superior North—they're looking at another open-pit gold mine similar to Gogama, helping them with economic opportunities, building out their hospital. This is a little town that used to be called Geraldton, and now it is called Greenstone. With the announcement of a leave to construct within two years, their town is going to triple in size, Toby. That's where northern development and mines comes in. We sit down with their municipal officials and local Indigenous communities and make sure we're looking at the right opportunities in their community to help support this exponential growth.

Those are just some examples.

One more technical that brings my whole team in was the Borden site—of course, very exciting opportunities there, and well established. Again, they're ready to convert to electrification. They've got challenges with electricity price. The previous decade and a half had made it way too costly for them to contemplate this—and some other regulatory challenges. And bam, a bunch of my ministry staff

landed in another hot LZ, took up the fight, and just a couple of months later, the next thing you know, I was up there with one of my colleagues and we were able to officially flip the switch and ensure that Borden mine is completely electrified.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Minister, you have two minutes.

Hon. Greg Rickford: On the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, Toby: Two minutes or 20 minutes can't really do it justice; I hope somebody will give me an opportunity to talk through it. The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund is an extraordinary organization that is aimed at—the new improved one, in particular—ensuring the communities have access, businesses in particular, and mostly interns and young people from northern Ontario to take advantage of all of the economic potential that a town, a community, a city or First Nations community offers. A lot of things are going on there that I'm sure I'll get an opportunity to talk about later. We punch well above our weight, given the size of the ministry and the team on my minister's political staff.

Thank you for asking that question. There are other things, but those are the highlights.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): MPP Barrett, you still have about a minute left.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Just a quick question: What is a "hot LZ," and where is the Sugar Zone?

Hon. Greg Rickford: The Sugar Zone is an area that's actually in MPP Mantha's riding. He was there—a big, Texas-wide smile on his face that this government moved mountains to get them open. The Premier and I went up there to see the Sugar Zone, and how sweet it was, Toby, as I've said before, to see a mining operation going in full swing. It was extraordinary.

A "hot LZ" is just a military term I use for a hot landing zone. That's where—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you very much, Minister.

We will now move to the opposition for their 20-minute round. MPP Tabuns.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Thank you very much, Chair. I appreciate the opportunity. I very much thank you for taking the Chair this morning and giving me an opportunity to pose questions to the minister.

0920

Minister, thank you for your commentary about the time zones. You're entirely right; everyone needs to be made aware of exactly when things are happening in a way that makes sense for them and the time zone they're in.

I'm going to start off with a question about the reduction in electricity rates by 12% that was promised in the last election. I went through the estimates book. I didn't see any allocation of funds that were identified to further reduce rates by 12%. I didn't see any programs being discussed to reduce rates by a further 12%. The government has been in power for three years. It has roughly a year left to go. Can you tell me what's happening with that commitment to reduce electricity rates by 12%?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question, Peter, and I'm happy to respond.

There were significant challenges, as you well know. We were staring down the onboarding of almost \$800 million worth of projects in wind and solar which were going to put additional costs to our system. We were already facing an energy mix that, from a cost perspective, wasn't making a whole lot of sense when you looked at it. For example, wind and solar provide about 7% of Ontario's electricity, but it was 25% of its cost. Our natural gas assets, the gas-fired plants, were underutilized because they generally sat idle—in case the sun didn't shine and/or the wind didn't blow. As you know, those contracts were sweet deals. If the wind was blowing and/or the sun was shining, they got first uptake in the energy mix. "Old faithful," I like to call it, the nuclear generation—it, of course, admittedly has a cost feature to it that's built into the global adjustment. But we had this massive, swelling global adjustment, so—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Minister, I'm sorry to interrupt you. MPP Tabuns wants the floor.

Go ahead, MPP Tabuns.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Minister, I understand the analysis that you're making and everything you are saying. I would have a different analysis. But I don't think anything has fundamentally changed since May 2018. You knew all of these things when you were going in. We all read the estimates books. We went through the electrical analysis.

Essentially, what you're saying to me is, "We got here, it was a mess, and we couldn't deliver a 12% reduction as we had promised." Is that correct?

Are you going to be reducing prices by 12% as you had promised in the last election?

Hon. Greg Rickford: To the contrary, Peter, and respectfully, there isn't anything in the estimate books that could take you to a place to describe the process which began with a cleaning out and an understanding from a fiscal perspective how to deal with the global adjustments and its costs—making decisions about whether it should stay on the ratepayer base, as had been done by the previous government. The extent that you may or may not have been involved with that is not important for the purposes of today's conversation. But respectfully, these are the very important beginnings of understanding how our cost structure in the electricity system would create a serious challenge for us to get to an answer to your question. I think you probably know that as well as anybody here at this committee and in the Legislature.

So if you'll permit me to give—I'm certainly happy to try to tighten it up a little bit, but these are important beginnings. The fact is that the fundamentals were actually not there, respectfully; to the contrary. Important decisions had to be made between whether that money should sit out in what was being described as a trust fund—a rather odd, counterintuitive sense of a trust fund that the Auditor General had identified as debt—and moving it out into the taxpayer base, which would significantly lighten the load or the burden on the electricity system and give us an opportunity to scope out how we could, in an electricity system, create a delta, if you will, between the Fair Hydro Plan as it was structured under the previous government,

and in dismantling that through our fiscal moves that were approved by the Auditor General; in fact, endorsed—how we could at some point get to a delta of 12% difference in the price of electricity as between the Fair Hydro Plan and how we have overhauled the system now. Over the past couple of years that has, in fact, gone down, and we believe that in the not-too-distant future every indication is that we will, in fact, have a 12% difference between the bare cost of electricity now and what it would have cost under the Fair Hydro Plan had it been able to continue.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: So you're saying to me, Minister, that between now and June of next year, hydro prices that people are paying are going to be reduced by 12%. Do I understand you correctly?

Hon. Greg Rickford: The difference in the price of electricity to the ordinary consumer will be 12% less from what they would have had to have paid under the Fair Hydro Plan. That, of course, doesn't account for the hundreds of millions of dollars that were taken off the books as a result of cancelling the contracts that had not reached an appropriate milestone. That's a well-documented story, as you know. It doesn't account for the resources that we invested for electricity-rate mitigation during COVID-19, which is another variable, I think, that folks appreciated over the past year and three months. And it doesn't account for the fact that the global adjustment was dealt with in accordance with the Auditor General's recommendations as they were before we were elected.

During the time that we were elected, we were able to make the responsible fiscal changes, remove the pressures from the electricity system and over the course of time, we would see a 12% difference, at least—it will continue to grow beyond then, but it will take at least until this year or next to reach that bare difference.

It will actually go much farther, Peter. In fairness, over the course of the next decade and a half, as the front-end costs of solar and wind are less of a burden on the system, we'll be in a situation where the electricity pricing can be even lower—not just in a bald comparison between the Fair Hydro Plan and the renovations that we've made, but in the actual cost of electricity on a price-per-kilowatt-hour basis, which all provinces, as you know, do arrive at in different ways to make it more attractive for the market and attract small to large businesses.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: So are you saying that before June of next year, people's hydro prices are going to drop by 12%, as was promised before June 2018?

Hon. Greg Rickford: We will be doing everything in our powers to reach that delta, and I'm fairly confident that in and around that time we'll be able to show a 12% difference between what it would have cost for electricity under the Fair Hydro Plan and the renovations that we have made.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Sorry, Minister; does that mean that on people's hydro bills that they get in their hand they will see the price of hydro—take out the transmission, take out the distribution—what they're paying for hydro is going to go down 12% in the next 12 months? If that's the case, can you tell me whether that shows up in estimates

as an increase in subsidy, or if there are other programs that you are promising to put in place?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Sure, Peter. As I said before, the estimates binder, which I can appreciate, will not necessarily take you through those structural changes. Those are responses to the Auditor General. There are structural changes to the price of electricity. The cost difference between the Fair Hydro Plan, as I said before, had pockets of debt that were not known either to the ratepayer now or they would be to the ratepayer in the future. The former Premier, you'll remember, acknowledged that, and I remember you not being very happy about that because you, like me, have young family you don't want burdened with the future price of energy and a trust fund of debt sitting there for them to have to pay, which they would then add on to the price of electricity. That would come on to the price of electricity as that debt became ripe for payment. That no longer exists. The shift, as the Auditor General had recommended, out into the taxpayer base certainly didn't help our provincial fiscal position, but it made the price of electricity, the real price of electricity, more easy to understand—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you, Minister.

0930

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I'm actually going to explore the Fair Hydro Plan and your financing of the hydro subsidies in subsequent questions, but I just want to know—you're telling us now that people will see a reduction in the price they're paying for electricity of 12% between now and June of next year. Is that correct?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'm saying that the difference in the cost of electricity, notwithstanding the mitigation efforts through COVID-19, in the actual price of electricity, between the Fair Hydro Plan and the renovations that we made, will be 12%.

Of course, you know, Peter, that that depends as well on a host of other factors, not just the operational realities of local distribution companies, of which there are 66 in this province. It also depends on utilization. That's why we created options for customers to move not just from the tiered rates, but understanding that flat rates were an option.

The ability to pinpoint, on a given day, at a given minute, in a given billing cycle, a flat 12% has so many variables depending on it that it's not necessarily an option for us to say, on your bill, "It is 12% less." But we could show that delta, now that you've got me thinking about it, of what it would cost under the Fair Hydro Plan.

Of course, that was something that the previous government had brought in. I dealt with its erratic annual increases in pricing and what it's costing under the renovations that we have made.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I'll just say, Minister, that most people don't delve into the deep policy behind their bill. They look at the bill and they say, "I'm paying this much, and I know what I was paying in June 2018." Your government, your party, promised to reduce hydro costs by 12%. I haven't seen it. There was a reduction during

COVID-19. That was a good move. I'm glad that you did that. I think, however, that people's bills post-COVID-19 show that there has not been a 12% reduction since 2018.

You're now committing, over the next 12 months, to reduce people's hydro costs by a further 12%. I look forward to seeing how that's done. I'm assuming that if you were going to do it in subsidies, it would show up in estimates. But what you have just said to me is that it isn't in the estimates books, that there is some other methodology that you're going to use. So there's—

Hon. Greg Rickford: It's not a secret. It's profound structural changes to how the electricity pricing model works, and the fact that my little kids, Peter, as you can appreciate, little six-year-old Poppy Kate and eight-year-old Abigail Mae, are not going to have to pay two things: (1) a higher electricity cost under the Fair Hydro Plan—and we saw that in its history; and (2) the debt that was used to subsidize and suppress those rates.

Obviously, during COVID-19—and you brought that up and I appreciate that; I appreciate the fact that you thought it was a good idea—we literally had to pay for the costs associated with keeping those rates artificially low to help millions of families who were migrating from their workplaces to their homes, kids not at school, businesses changing their hours of operation and how they did things. That cost real money. What our hope was, Peter, and what our hope is, through the policy changes that we made, in respecting what the Auditor General was saying all along—because don't forget, she came from Manitoba Hydro, so she knows and understands how government's fiscal policies can bear down, positively or negatively, on the actual price of electricity.

I know you, Peter; you're way too smart to not understand that there can be a difference between the market price of electricity offering that we make and how that translates onto one's bill. I appreciate your efforts to simplify it, and I share your view that the ordinary, average person would want to see how much that electricity costs. But we believe our narrative so far has given them great comfort not just in COVID-19, but that overall we're straightening out this electricity system. There's no debt bomb down the road for my little girls to have to pay, and there's not the erratic price structure of the fair hydro plan feeding that dragon—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Greg Rickford: —moving forward to make electricity more—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you, Minister. Mr. Tabuns has the floor.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Minister, I'll go back to the Fair Hydro Plan and the debt that we're incurring to keep rates down in further questions.

I think the reality is that since June 2018, people have not seen their bills drop by 12%, except for a brief period while we're going through COVID-19, and I don't see a plan from you to reduce prices by a further 12% by the end of this next 12 months. I'm going to move on, because I don't see that 12% happening. When you announce that,

in fact, people's hydro bills will be dropping by 12%, I look forward to being there for that.

I need to ask you—

Hon. Greg Rickford: You won't have to. If you want, we can put it on your customers' bills and show them under the previous plan, Peter, what it would have cost them versus what it costs now. But if you want to be at that presentation and celebrate it with your constituents, we'd be happy to do that.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Fair enough.

The total annual electricity rate subsidies—page 23, item 2206—are \$6.49 billion. Subsidies have risen by 15.9% from last year. What caused such a sharp jump from the last budget?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question.

We've had some challenges, obviously, Peter. We find ourselves, with COVID-19, in an effort to create better positions for businesses, families and small businesses and farmers—and in addition to that, the renovations we made to the ICI program. Obviously, rate mitigation became an opportunity for us in the context of—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Mr. Tabuns, you have two minutes in this round.

Hon. Greg Rickford:—of an economic recovery. But we had to stay the course in making sure that we were not—to the previous question you asked—unsettling the entire system. So there were obviously outlays of cash that would ensure that the prices of electricity, the global adjustment shifts for the industrial and the commercial classes, had a fair chance to operate.

I mentioned yesterday in a question from Judith—we talked about getting rid of the chasing-the-peak hiatus phenomenon, so that businesses wouldn't have to shut down. Dofasco—I know that's very important to one of your colleagues, Peter, down there out Hamilton way—as a result of our deferrals and the adjustments we made in the global adjustment, wouldn't have to shut down for 40 days of this hot summer.

There's no question about the fact that the opportunity—but certainly the challenge, from your perspective—of costs related to price mitigation and the like was different this year than it may have been in other years. We'll continue to—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Minister, the increase in the subsidy is primarily the funding for ICI? Is that correct?

Hon. Greg Rickford: The increase in the funding is for a variety of pieces, but certainly moving the global adjustment piece out for industrial and commercial class users, out to the taxpaying base, and ensuring that they got up to a 20% reduction in their costs of electricity are examples of where—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you, Minister.

We will now go back to the government side for another 20-minute round. I see Mr. Pettapiece's hand up. Mr. Pettapiece, you may begin.

0940

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Through you, I would like to direct this question to the associate minister. It has to do with the Natural Gas Expansion Support Program. I've been listening to Minister Rickford's comments on questions asked by the opposition. I think, Minister Walker, you and I go back to 2011. We were put into the middle of some, how can we put it, things that the previous government had done and some of the scandals that were involved, certainly, with the gas plant business. That charge was led by former MPP Leone. Minister Fedeli and also members of the opposition were involved in that business where we had found out the former Liberal government had spent more money than they claimed. Also, we exposed the shambles that the wind business was in, how much money they were getting and overpriced electricity from them. As Minister Rickford explained, it just doesn't make any sense. It never did make any sense right from the start.

I'll get back to the Natural Gas Expansion Support Program. I want to thank you for the announcement we just made in my riding, a little hamlet called Brunner where natural gas is coming to that town. They're very excited about that, and certainly it will help them reduce their energy costs in the future.

Minister Walker, providing natural gas access to rural, northern and Indigenous communities is important in growing our economy. I can't think of many steps we can take that will do more to make Ontario communities more attractive for job creation and send a clear message that Ontario is open for business. I know this government has been working hard to work with communities across the province to provide access to this important economic tool. Can you outline for me the steps you've already taken and give us an idea of where things go from here?

Hon. Bill Walker: Thank you very much, MPP Pettapiece. It's truly a pleasure to have come in in 2011 and have served 10 years with you, and our government is now making those changes. As you say, we watched from the opposition benches the horrendous mess the Liberals made of the energy file.

Good morning, Mr. Chair, my colleague Minister Rickford, PA Smith and all committee members. It's truly a pleasure to be here. If Peter or Michael—I don't think MPP Monteith-Farrell is on the line, but yesterday she was referencing how fast I talk. I did share with her that they call me "Energizer Billy," but I also should have told her that I am a practising amateur auctioneer; perhaps that's why I go so fast. I might suggest to you that my word count when I was in the House all the time was near the top because I was able to get so many of those words in.

A special little shout-out to MPP Tabuns: Without a shadow of a doubt, he has been our critic, Greg's and my critic. It's a pleasure to work with you all the time, Peter. I truly hope that if your mom is watching, and I know she follows you very closely, that she liked that little token I gave her from Warton Willie. I hope all is well.

Randy, you've asked a very pertinent question and something that absolutely is going to impact, and is impacting, people across this province very positively. I'm

just going to go back a little bit and share with you that in phase 1, we actually had a number of projects, and we have completed projects of that phase 1 in the Chatham-Kent rural pipeline expansion. That was energized in 2019 and that has allowed a number of businesses, particularly the greenhouse industry down there, to thrive and to grow and to make sure that we had opportunity down there that is going to create jobs and economic stability.

The Chippewas of the Thames First Nation: construction completed and energized in 2019. In my backyard, the Saugeen First Nation: construction completed and energized in 2020. And currently under way, construction had begun in 2019 and it continues to connect customers in southern Bruce. Scugog Island: Construction began in February 2020 and continues to connect new customers. And the Northshore and Peninsula roads in North Bay: Construction again began in September 2020 and continues to connect new customers. So I am just delighted with that.

Then, of course, just a week ago, Premier Ford and I were pleased to announce that the second phase of the natural gas expansion program was launched. MPP Pettapiece, 28 successful projects were announced. That's going to impact 43 communities, like your little community of Brunner. That is going to change people's lives there. That's going to allow them between \$250 to \$1,500 in savings annually. It's going to provide up to a 30% reduction in costs for businesses, which again is going to make them more competitive and more sustainable. It's just fabulous, fabulous news—28 projects across five areas of the province: southeast, southwest, central, northeast and northwest Ontario. These projects are absolutely going to be giving lifeblood to a lot of those communities.

Many people in urban areas, I think, just make the assumption, because they have always had natural gas, that that's just something that everybody has. But as you will know, and many people on this line—including our friends, certainly, from the north and our First Nations—there are two First Nations communities that were also part of that, and there are a number of other people that will benefit as well.

We have certainly, in this phase—the last one was about 9,000 hookups; in this phase, we're going to be forecasting to connect 8,750 Ontarians. We are going to have two phases, as I said, in Indigenous communities. We are going to have two that are going to increase economic development in the areas of Niagara and Hamilton. These are going to provide 7,000 direct and 5,750 indirect jobs, with about \$1.5 billion in local investment. That's going to be huge.

And because you are a person who comes from the agricultural sector, MPP Pettapiece, and you are the proud PA in agriculture—I know your heart is always still on the farm—we are actually going to have, as a result of the announcement, two projects, the Brockton project in Bruce county and the Grimsby-Lincoln project in Niagara, that will connect a substantial proportion of agricultural customers. Again, we have had significant, significant opportunity to impact people and to ensure that we are making a difference in communities across Ontario.

I have lots more that I can say, but I'm going to just stop there and allow you, in case you have other supplementals that you want to share with me, and we'll go back on again.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Thanks, Minister, for that answer. Yes, Perth–Wellington, the riding I represent, is right in the heart of midwestern Ontario, and you represent a riding just north of me. We know the importance of agriculture to our communities.

Grain-drying businesses have been crying for years, asking for natural gas to be put close to them so they can hook onto them. Most of the grain-drying business is done with propane, a great deal of it, which is at least twice as expensive as natural gas is. It puts pressure on farmers and agri-businesses, because they have to build that cost into what they sell their grains for. Hopefully they get that cost out of it, because as you might know, in the agriculture business, you are a price-taker. You don't dictate the price, so you pretty much have to take what you can get on the open market.

It has been difficult for some of these grain-drying facilities that are located away from some of the towns that have natural gas to compete. These lines that we're putting up—Brunner is north of Stratford, in case anybody doesn't know, but it's right in the middle of an intense farming part of the riding: livestock farms, grain-drying businesses and that type of thing—along with a little community there of a number of homes, actually; people do like to retire to that part of the riding. It's a beautiful little community.

These natural gas announcements are very important to our agriculture community. I think of the subdivision that was planned for Milverton, which is just north of Brunner, along Highway 19—or Highway 119, as they call it now. A couple of years ago, that almost didn't happen. The developers were going to leave the community, because they couldn't get gas into that community. That's what was going to make or break that little subdivision, in fact. Fortunately, the gas was put up to the community, and if you look at where this building took place, it's quite a little subdivision they've built in Milverton. In fact, my son's in-laws have moved into a little place in there and are quite enjoying that. So this is what happens when a government focuses on economic development, which certainly natural gas is a part of. Minister, I wonder if in your riding, maybe—you mentioned a couple of projects in Bruce county. I wonder if you could maybe expand on the importance of what that has done to some of those communities.

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Hon. Bill Walker: I would welcome the opportunity. Thanks for another outstanding question. Again, you're a proud, proud farmer—you always have been; you always will be—and I think it's significant, the difference that we're making.

I just want to make a couple of references, before I forget. When you talk about Brunner and Milverton—and I hope the people of Stratford know as well. It's more of the urban, like my riding. I have a couple of fairly large areas and a lot of small rural hamlets, communities and villages. I hope all of those people know how hard you've

been working and all the great things you have brought back in your 10 years to your community. Thank you for your service and especially always having that angle on agriculture.

We have two projects that I'm certainly very proud of, one very close to me in Brockton. Minister Thompson and I were there last week to do an echo announcement for young farms, and it's a large, large facility. What they were saying to me is that this is going to really be a game-changer for them and, more importantly, for their customers as well. As you alluded to, there are a lot of input costs and a lot of things, and that is going to have an impact on those small farmers that are feeding them, whatever the product may be. I think it's a great news story for them. They had approached Minister Thompson and I a few years ago, when we were still in opposition, and we said that if we were able to get to government, we would do everything we could, because we knew how sustainable this was going to make their operations.

There was one in eastern Ontario a number of years ago, which MPP McDonell was sharing with me. He relayed that the person then didn't take advantage of the program, because he thought the costs and the investment were going to be too much, and he didn't. Ten years later he finally bought in and said, "I wish I'd have done that 10 years ago," because he virtually in two years paid back what his investment was. I'm not suggesting that every system is that way, but that's the type of difference that we're talking about. I'd say even for small businesses: Up to a 30% difference for what they can do.

In my little backyard, a little village called Neustadt is actually receiving funding. Again, it's a small, rural agricultural community, and you might recognize the name of someone who was born there: Prime Minister John Diefenbaker. Again, it's just a proud moment for me, and there are a number of these across 43 different communities, five different districts of the province that we're going to be able to help and make them more affordable.

I want to share with you, MPP Pettapiece, that not only is this impactful for the actual cost savings, that \$250 to \$1,500 that each family is going to be able to save and the up to 30% savings for a business, but then they can take that \$250 to \$1,500 and they can do things like buying more energy-efficient appliances. They can put in new windows or doors. They can do things so that they have choice, again, to make their home more affordable and less costly to run.

I think this is great news. I'm certainly hoping that all members of the Legislature, including some of our NDP colleagues—I know that a couple of the NDP colleagues, for sure, received projects. MPP Vanthof received one in the north, which, again, is fabulous for northern Ontario, and I know he was just ecstatic about it.

You raised a couple of good points. When we first got there, that gas plant scandal—Minister Rickford was, I think, getting into some of the detail of the absolute mess we inherited. You don't take 15 years of a train wreck, put it right back on track the next day and just pretend that it's not there. I respectfully suggest again to particularly Critic

Tabuns that we sat there and saw the NDP support the Liberals for some of those budgets and those things, to allow them to stay in power and frankly do more damage to us. I'm not being critical of Peter—he's a great guy; we get along very well. In fact, we were Political Blind Date guys. So there's nothing there other than Peter doing his job, but I just want to say that, again, there are a lot of challenges there.

I think this is a prime opportunity to give kudos to Minister Lecce, who is actually reforming and changing the math curriculum so that children in school are going to start learning about things like interest rates. That's going to have a huge bearing on what the Auditor General was saying, that the billions of dollars that were invested and, again, have to be financed over the next number of years; that Minister Rickford's daughters and my sons are going to have to pay—we're trying to educate people, because that interest rate—right now we have extremely low interest rates, thank goodness, but when they start to pop up, that green energy experiment is going to continue to have an impact. That could be money going back, whether it would be to the environment, long-term care, health care or certainly agriculture.

So I can't say enough about how this is going to impact small, little communities like Brunner and Milverton, Brockton in my area and Neustadt. We've got a ton of great, great opportunities across the province, and at some point I'll try to get all of the names on, so we can see who all is going to benefit from these investments.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Thank you for that answer. You mentioned the town of Stratford. Stratford is mostly known for the Festival Theatre there and the entertainment business, but I listened intently to the mayor one time a year or so ago—actually more than that now, because we haven't been able to get together. But he was certainly appreciative of how the agriculture community supported the whole county of Perth and also helped support Stratford. It's well known around here: If the agriculture community isn't doing well, then nobody is doing well. Certainly the more natural gas we get into the riding is very important, not only to farmers in our area, but certainly important to the urban areas in the riding, to help them be successful.

Chair, with your permission, I'd like to turn this over to MPP Bob Bailey.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): By all means. MPP Bailey, you have over three minutes left.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to both Minister Rickford and Associate Minister Walker for being here today. I've enjoyed the discussions for the last two days, and I've finally got a chance to jump in here for a minute.

There has been so much discussion about natural gas this morning. I want to remind everyone on the call—I'm sure I don't have to, on this committee—that the largest natural gas storage area is in the south part of my riding, which I share with MPP McNaughton: the Dawn Hub, formerly Union Gas; now Enbridge. It's a great facility. I offer to anyone who would like to come down to see where

the natural gas that could end up in Toronto to heat your homes, or east of my riding, comes from. It's stored there: a great facility, doing a great job.

In that vein, I want ask whoever has got the floor, whichever minister, about line 5. We had a great take-note debate in the Legislature weeks ago and had a great debate there. Minister Rickford put his hand up, so maybe you could expand upon your discussions, Minister Rickford, with the feds, with Michigan etc. Thank you.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that, Bob, and thank you for your work—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Minister Rickford, before you start, you have just two minutes left.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you. Just a shout-out to you, Bob, and the extraordinary work that you've done. The fact of the matter is that Ontario understands the importance of this piece of energy infrastructure. We've obviously publicly expressed our frustrations, but true to the way Premier Ford operates with provincial and state leaders, he likes to sit down and have a chat about it and iron out some of the details. I think, frankly, that so far he has been able to do that effectively, especially with the Governor of Michigan. We went down there in the first instance of this challenge at the front end of our mandate, Bob, and you were a leader then, and obviously that was revisited. That challenge at the time was from the state attorney, but this is something that the Governor has driven.

In the background, obviously it's a little difficult to operate with the federal government in the sense that this is an international pipeline. They have also been a partner in helping us and certainly don't miss an opportunity to tell folks about that, but that's okay, because all we want to do is protect the integrity of what has been a safe pipeline for a very long time and what is a more-than-credible—in fact, world-class, in terms of safety—proposal to renew that.

We know—we've been in this place before; certainly I have, as a federal minister—what happens when people get closer to the reality of one of these existing pipelines—so not new ones—actually shutting down, and what the impact will be. And boy, oh boy, is it something else. Imagine no planes flying out of Detroit or out of Toronto. Imagine millions of homes across Michigan, Ohio and New York being without various sources of propane and fuels that the pipeline brings. So thank you for your work on it, Bob.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you very much, Minister. That wraps up that round.

We will move back to the opposition for another 20-minute round. Who will be starting? Mr. Tabuns.

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Mr. Peter Tabuns: Minister, moving on: The Auditor General commented on the Liberal Fair Hydro Plan as follows: "The total borrowings to be repaid will be an estimated \$39.4 billion, made up of \$18.4 billion borrowed to cover the current rate reduction shortfall and \$21 billion in accumulated interest over the term of the borrowings."

I did a quick calculation, looking at estimates. You've already borrowed about \$20 billion to reduce rates, so you

borrowed more than the Liberals planned to borrow under their Fair Hydro Plan. I don't know what the accumulated interest is on that, but I know the FAO looked at what the cost of interest would be if the borrowing took place in a deficit situation. He calculated that you'd be looking in the \$60-billion-to-\$90-billion range to pay the cost of the subsidies, all told. So you've exceeded the planned Liberal-borrowing subsidized hydro rate. Have you calculated the cost of the accumulated interest that this subsidy will incur?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Again, some of what you're highlighting, Peter, in this particular year deals with the extraordinary, unanticipated costs associated with COVID-19. It will be very difficult for any of us, including you, to suggest that this year is anything but an anomaly—hopefully—and part of another fiscal year. I appreciate the extent to which you studied this and that you understand it. But you have to understand, as well, and I think you did in an earlier remark, about the efforts that the province of Ontario has made in providing electricity rate relief for families, small businesses and farmers in the first instance, and then pivoting, obviously in the context of an economic recovery, for the other major subsidy programs that we engaged in—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you, Minister; sorry. Mr. Tabuns has his hand up.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Minister, have you calculated the value of the interest that you'll have to pay on this debt?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'm sorry; I didn't hear the question. I was just clarifying with the Chair.

I want to be respectful. If he puts his hand up instantly, do I just stop?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): That's correct, Minister.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Okay.

I'm sorry, Peter. I wasn't aware of that.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: No problem.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I thought you wanted me to finish my answer.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I understand.

My question was, have you calculated the cost of the interest for borrowing more than the Liberals had planned to borrow for the subsidy of hydro rates?

Hon. Greg Rickford: We certainly know what our rate mitigation programs cost us in those subsidies, Peter; there's no question. Ontario gets favourable rates on the market, but there's no question that one of the fundamental innovations here is to take the burden of much of this rate mitigation, including the global adjustments, off the rate-payer base, which accumulates—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you. Minister, sorry; MPP Tabuns has his hand up again.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I understand all the arguments that you're making, Minister. I asked a question, though. Have you calculated the cost of the interest that arises from this borrowing for subsidies? We looked at how much the Liberals were going to incur. Their total cost, capital and interest, was around \$40 billion. You've already borrowed more than they planned to borrow for reducing rates, by

about \$2 billion. Have you calculated the cost of interest? If you haven't, tell me you haven't. Then I'll know.

Hon. Greg Rickford: What we do, Peter, is track carefully the resources that we're putting in to make sure that small businesses, families and farmers had appropriate relief during COVID-19. That accounts for that additional money. It moves out on to the fiscal profile as opposed to sitting in the famous debt trust fund of the previous government and forms a far more responsible—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you, Minister. MPP Tabuns.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I'll assume that, since you're not giving me a number, you haven't calculated the number, so you don't know the total value of that. I can look at the amounts that were allocated for subsidy, really, for the years 2019-20, 2020-21, and I'm sure that you can as well, Minister. So we know the gross costs. I understand all of your rationale that you're making, but you haven't calculated the interest. That's the reality.

One of the big questions, then, is: What is your plan to eliminate the need for the subsidies, and over what time are we talking? Because at \$6.5 billion a year, C.D. Howe Institute came out with a report in the last few days saying that this was about as much as we're going to be spending on long-term care. I'm sure, given your proclivities, the idea of constantly borrowing for subsidized rates is not something that makes you happy. What is your plan to move away from the need for subsidies, and over what period of time? I guess I should ask first: Do you have a plan?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Of course we have a plan, Peter, and it will occur in a couple of important ways. First of all, the changes that we've made to the global adjustment, as I have referred to in a number of instances, and the cost that's associated with wind and solar will begin to come down over the next decade and a half. That's a long way away, but in fairness, the cost of electricity in that important regard will continue. As well, some of our major refurbishments and decommissioning program costs that are built into electricity pricing will begin to decrease, so we feel very confident that the combination of a number of important changes that will occur over the course of time will require, obviously, less borrowing for the cost of electricity.

But I remind you—and I'm sure to get the hand here, Peter, and I respect that; it limits my ability to answer your question fully and completely, but that notwithstanding—the fundamental difference, as I've said, is that those costs are no longer associated with expensive electricity and rate-paying. We now have a pure sense and a much clearer pathway to a competitive price. Just in moving wind and solar alone out of the global adjustment costs for industrial and consumer classes, we were able to offer a 15% reduction in electricity. The ability for those companies to not shut their operations down—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you very much, Minister. Sorry. MPP Tabuns has his hand up.

Hon. Greg Rickford: That's okay.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Minister, I hear what you're saying: You've increased the subsidy and put it into another

area. My interest in the total range of subsidies. What is the plan to reduce it? You've just indicated a number of things that you believe will reduce the actual cost of electricity production over some period of time. Do you actually have a plan that has been developed, that has been reviewed by the IESO, maybe by the OEB, and will be presented to the people of Ontario showing how you are going to contain and eliminate the need for those subsidies? If so, over what period? Does a written plan exist, or is this something that is simply a series of discussions that are going on between you and your staff?

Hon. Greg Rickford: No, it's not a series of discussions; it's a plan that we had developed that is staged in accordance to the responses and the findings of the Auditor General. That's well documented. Much of the plan derives from her findings, which I think are well documented and sat out as a ballot question on the last election. I think we understand now who had the confidence of the people to try and make these kinds of changes that people are looking for.

We do know that electricity and the cost of electricity have moved off of the tops of the minds of many Ontarians, especially given the significant changes that we've made. There is, without question, an additional cost in the context of COVID, trying to ensure that our rates reflected the fairness and respected people who were migrating to their homes to do much of their work and interacting with their families in a more home-based way, which would ultimately mean more electricity costs. That was similar to our plan for the economic recovery—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Minister, sorry to interrupt you. MPP Tabuns has the floor.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Minister, would you please table that plan for review by the committee and review by the public?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'm happy to tell the public all day long about the plan that we've been operating from, starting from the Auditor General's report, which was effectively our plan to clean up and clean out the electricity system, the responses that we've made to COVID.

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That document can be produced very quickly, and the structural changes that we've made to the system obviously form what has widely become accepted, Peter, especially in Toronto—I think you have Toronto Hydro in your riding: how pleased they are, not just with how we've changed this system under our plan to provide more certainty and transparency for people who pay their bills on the Danforth, countless businesses and restaurants, and as well for the larger manufacturers in and around Toronto and across southern Ontario and for mining and forestry up here, the significant savings that they've had. Ultimately, their increased product—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Minister, I understand, following the recommendations of the Auditor General—her critique of the Liberal Fair Hydro Plan was actually an excellent critique. I was very happy with it, and I think Associate

Minister Walker and I tag-teamed from time to time going after the Liberals in the House on this.

That being said, if you have a plan to eliminate the subsidies over time and release those funds so they can be used for other purposes and at the same time contain hydro rates, are you going to release that plan? Is there actually a comprehensive plan, or are there just a series of things that you've referred to? And if there is an actual plan, are you going to put it forward for the public to see?

Hon. Greg Rickford: It's a combination of both, Peter. That's how it works when you're in government. You understand you've got an Auditor General's report that you have to act on—and I want to thank you and Minister Walker for the important work you did in opposing it. I hope that there's no record of you or any of your colleagues in the NDP ever having supported any of those elements. It sounds to me like you strenuously opposed putting a debt profile on the future generations of rate-payers as opposed to more appropriately dealing with it, as the Auditor General had set out, onto the tax base in an effort to identify more appropriately, more fairly and with more transparency what the actual cost of electricity is, under either the rate protection program or the ICI.

In those respects, if you're suggesting any time soon that those rebates should be taken off the table, of course they would impact the cost of electricity and raise it. We don't want that, and I think you don't want it. But I have to answer the questions, not ask them. I can only assume that you don't want your constituents to pay a higher electricity bill. But as the saying goes, you can't really have it both ways. Until the cost of electricity is reduced through the structural changes that we've made under our plan—and they are still very much a work in progress—there will continue to be important subsidies.

If you would like, I can approach your northern Ontario colleagues about—

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Fair enough, Minister. I've asked if you will table a plan. What it sounds like is there are disparate pieces. There is no comprehensive plan that is available for a public review.

I'm going to move on from that—

Hon. Greg Rickford: There is, but—

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Then table it. If there's a secret plan, make it public—

Hon. Greg Rickford: There's no secret plan.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: If there's not a secret plan, tell us you have one overall plan that comprehensively looks at how we can keep prices down while we phase out the subsidies, because you and everyone else in this room today wants to be able to spend those \$6.5 billion on other public priorities, frankly. If we can reduce the cost of electricity through a practical and time-limited plan, then I think all of us would be very happy. But I gather you're not in a position to table a plan right now, so I'm going to go on to another question—

Hon. Greg Rickford: I've been describing the plan, but anyways.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Describing a plan and tabling a plan are two very different things. I've seen them both. I'd prefer to see a plan that I can take apart if I need to.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Peter, did you not read the budget? It's in the 2020 budget. You voted against it.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Minister, if you, in that 2020 budget, show a path to eliminate \$6.5 billion a year in subsidies by restructuring or reshaping the electricity system, I think many missed it. But you're telling me now it's in the budget. I'll go check the budget. I appreciate the clue.

I'm going to go now to the question of the impact of the under-lake transmission line at Lake Erie from Ontario to the United States. MPP Barrett, I'm sure, is more familiar with it than most of us in this room today. Can you tell us, have you done an assessment of the impact of that line on electricity rates and sales volumes in Ontario?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'm going to turn that over to my deputy minister here for a response. Stephen?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: That would be great.

Mr. Stephen Rhodes: Good morning, everybody. I hope you can hear me now.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Bad echo.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Deputy, if someone else is in the room with you, could you please get them to turn off their speaker?

Mr. Stephen Rhodes: Just one second.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): It's still the same.

Mr. Stephen Rhodes: Is that clear?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): No, Deputy. Apparently, there's someone else in the room who, whether it's their laptop or their speaker—

Interjection.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Yes, it's on speaker. If you can get them to turn that off, please.

Sorry, Deputy, we're going to try to turn yours off and leave your colleague's microphone on and see if that will work better. Deputy, would you try speaking now, please.

Mr. Stephen Rhodes: Okay. Hopefully it's a little better this time.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): We can hear you. Thank you, Deputy.

Mr. Stephen Rhodes: Apologies for the technical challenges on our end.

I believe MPP Tabuns was asking about a proposal that is—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Before you start, would you please identify yourself for Hansard, please.

Mr. Stephen Rhodes: Stephen Rhodes, Deputy Minister of Energy, Northern Development and Mines.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Two minutes left, Deputy.

Mr. Stephen Rhodes: I believe MPP Tabuns is referring to an intertie that has been long discussed that would be running under Lake Erie—it's a proposal at this point—and would run down to another location in the States. It would be a different area, in PJM, a particular energy-producing area, that could potentially provide electricity to Ontario. That is a proposal. That proposal is currently being reviewed by the Independent Electricity System Operator, IESO, and that process continues.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I appreciate the answer from the deputy minister. I hadn't realized that it had not been finalized. The Canada Infrastructure Bank, I gather, is going to be part of the funding for this. In the course of assessing this intertie between Ontario and PJM, have you assessed whether or not the intertie, when it goes into action, will have an impact on electricity rates and sales volumes in Ontario?

Mr. Stephen Rhodes: I believe IESO has factored that into their analysis as they look at it. I could possibly ask my ADM, Steen Hume, to add any further information that might be helpful at this time, if that's amenable.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Yes, if I could hear from Steen, that would be great.

Mr. Steen Hume: Good morning, everyone. My name is Steen Hume. I'll just turn my video on. I'm the assistant deputy minister of energy supply policy. To the question from MPP Tabuns, and just following up on the comments made by Deputy Rhodes, yes, the IESO is doing a review of the proposal. Obviously, the impacts on ratepayers are part of that review, as well as what the potential impacts are from greenhouse gas emissions—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Sorry, Mr. Hume. That time is up.

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We will now go back to the government for another 20-minute round. Who will be asking the questions? MPP Skelly.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Good morning, Chair. It's nice to see you in the chair. You're doing a phenomenal job—not quite as good as MPP Tabuns—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Never. He sets the bar way too high.

Ms. Donna Skelly:—but you're doing a pretty good job in the chair today.

Good morning, Ministers. It's lovely to see you. It's the first time I've been on committee with both of you here, so it's nice to be able to talk to you about some of the big issues that I know Minister Walker and I have talked about many times—and that is the Green Energy Act, but we're not going to get into that just yet.

I would like to, however, talk to you about something that is near and dear to my heart, as I've said many, many times in this committee. We've heard this story almost as much as we've heard the “wild pigs attacking one of our colleagues in Italy” story, and that is that I grew up in northern Ontario. My father was a railroad engineer. My mother actually worked at Moose Mountain Lines.

When I left northern Ontario and moved and settled in southern Ontario, it surprised me how few people who have grown up in this area really understand the opportunities that are available in our province—especially in the mining industry—and how fortunate Ontario is to have such an incredible plethora of critical minerals. That's what I want to focus on this morning.

As I've said, Ontario's minerals are already used in products worldwide, and they really do form part of a globally integrated supply chain. For example, in Ontario, Ford is retooling the Oakville assembly complex, transforming the province into a global powerhouse in the

electric vehicle manufacturing hub. In 2019 alone, Ontario produced over \$10 billion worth of minerals, and this accounts for more than 20% of Canada's mineral production.

People may say, “What are critical minerals?” They aren't just rocks, even though they are rocks. They're special rocks. They're a type of raw material that we all need to make so many products, specialized technology, that they have become essential to our daily lives and to our economy. The unique geology of a region, along with the specific economic priorities of that particular region, help shape what minerals are deemed critical. These are those special rocks that are specifically needed in certain strategic technological or industrial applications, and they are often minerals which have no or few viable replacements.

If a critical mineral is in short supply for technical or sometimes economic reasons, there just aren't that many other minerals that can be used instead. That means that the supply chain for these special minerals can sometimes be at a higher risk if another part of the world reduces its supply for some reason or if there is an increased demand for it in the global marketplace. For these reasons and many others, some countries are speeding up their efforts to obtain a larger supply of critical minerals, especially focused on raw minerals that can be sustainably and responsibly acquired.

Given the demand for these minerals in Canada and right across the globe, our province, as I've said, is in a unique position to be a global supplier, courtesy of our unique geology, our world-class mining supply and services sector and, of course, our processing capacity. Minister, can you provide further detail about the importance of critical minerals and how the Critical Minerals Strategy proposes to support our economy and to foster a sustainable environment for generations to come?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question and thank you for your passion for northern Ontario. I look forward to visiting up in the Sudbury region, as I do often—

Ms. Donna Skelly: Capreol. You've got to come to Capreol and see the—

Hon. Greg Rickford: Oh, Capreol is a beautiful little town. I've been there, and I know you were born there.

Listen, we talked yesterday about the Critical Minerals Strategy and the level of interest flowing from PDAC over a year ago, Donna. We've got to move quickly on this. There are obviously jurisdictions that are taking a look at some critical minerals—a capacity, for example in Quebec, to mine it and process it. This is something that they're looking at with respect to lithium and have made announcements and garnered the support of the federal government. We have moved quickly, obviously, with cobalt. We now have the first processing facility in—wait for it—Cobalt, Ontario.

But there are a number of other critical minerals that jurisdictions around the world are coming to Ontario for. Why? Our excellent labour standards; our very competitive electricity price, as Mr. Tabuns generously allowed me to expound upon; the programs that we have brought

to bear through responsible subsidies, with a clear plan to reduce those costs over time, but in the context of an economic recovery and to meet the opportunity associated with critical minerals for us to be part of a full supply chain. In other words, northern Ontario isn't just going to be the place where you mine it; you can actually start to process it. Then, of course, given the signals the automotive sector has made, we see an opportunity there and in other pieces of innovation in manufacturing capacity in southern Ontario to similarly do that.

This is all in an effort to increase Ontario's global competitiveness while supporting the transition to a cleaner, sustainable global economy. I think it's pretty safe to say, Donna, that much of the critical minerals goes towards the kinds of technologies that help us move towards a cleaner, greener environment, and that's a top priority for this government.

We're proposing that our strategy focus on four objectives. I'll walk you through them:

(1) enhancing economic development and job creation in Ontario;

(2) supporting new partnership opportunities for Indigenous communities. We've seen a keen desire by a number of Indigenous communities to be involved with actual mining operations. We know that many operations across the province are doing a great job of increasing their thresholds for Indigenous employment. Now we're seeing them move beyond IBAs—impact benefit agreements—and moving into full partnerships. We saw that with Noront and the partnerships there with Webequie First Nation and Marten Falls;

(3) reducing regulatory barriers while maintaining world-class standards in public health and safety; and

(4) as I said earlier, respecting the environment, developing those minerals responsibly and protecting Indigenous rights.

The other piece is obvious: advancing Ontario's potential as a top supplier. You know me, Donna; I like to lead when we do these things. It's entirely consistent with the way the Premier thinks about this. If you're going to do it, do it in a manner that leads the country, leads the sector, leads the continent. We believe that we have a chance to be a global leader.

We've seen a disinterest by some countries and some companies in continuing to do business with China, given some of the labour standards and the environmental standards that are not up to snuff. It's well documented that some of these countries overwhelmingly contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. Ontario's—Canada's, actually—are, by comparison, minuscule, but we will continue to do better. So supporting efforts to a low-carbon economy is the fourth feature of this. We believe that our technologies, through the supply chain, starting from mining or extraction of critical minerals, can serve not only Ontario's economy but be in the storefront for the benefit of countries around the world.

And it's working: As I said yesterday, we had the US undersecretary say, "What's going on in that friendly province just to the north of us? We know we made cars

together. We know that Ontario is the largest trading partner for almost half the United States's states. What are you doing in this area? We're hearing that international companies are coming here because you're doing a great job working with Indigenous communities, a refreshing change." Projects are moving forward. Major pieces of legacy infrastructure are being developed in our north. We're in a far better position now, and will be in the future, to ensure that we can access those mineral sites, providing that they are subject to rigorous environmental assessments—in the case of the Ring of Fire, the impact assessment, co-led with the federal government—all in an effort to bring Ontario to a place where we are a leader. We're already an important global supplier of critical minerals, and there's immense exploration of mineral development potential within the province for responsible, critical mineral development.

1030

Frankly, I haven't heard this from the opposition yet, but I'm hoping they'll stress-test it—there's more that we can do. I'm hopeful that the opposition, especially the NDP, with all their northern Ontario colleagues, aren't suggesting that the important investments we put into the Northern Industrial Electricity Rate Program—which goes to our overall costs and, yes, does cost us some interest—doesn't want to be pulled off the table. I don't know if I can pivot to another member; I don't know all the rules of this committee, but I'm sure, Judith, that you wouldn't want NIER pulled off the table, for some of those mining and forestry operations' economic vitality. Those are fundamental to ensuring that they have an operating cost, when it comes to energy—to get out there and produce these critical minerals. And then beyond that, our processing capabilities, the proximity to Canadian demand and American manufacturing hubs, make mineral exploration and investment—particularly critical minerals—a no-brainer.

Globally, governments and the private sector are using the kind of innovative technology—that batteries and electric vehicles require critical minerals that we have in an exquisite quality and quantity. So as the province looks to build out a supply chain, critical minerals play an important part in key national and international markets, as well as Ontario-based industries.

I'm just pleased to have Minister Fedeli as the Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade and to work in tandem with him so that we can bring much of what's happening in northern Ontario to a more meaningful relationship with the processing and manufacturing capacity that we see in other parts of the province and beat some of our other jurisdictions here in Canada to the punch, because we have a far greater value proposition for them when you look at the entire supply chain as it relates to critical minerals than other provinces have to offer.

For example, in Quebec, with the automotive sector largely moving out of there, save and except for large commercial bus production—and there's some really good work being done in there—they're keen to be involved in the production of lithium, which has an opportunity to play a role in Ontario's manufacturing.

But if I'm thinking about this the right way, I'm pretty sure that Michael Gravelle and Judith, and certainly the MPPs in the Sudbury area, wanted this government to remain committed and keep a laser focus on moving beyond just getting lithium mining up and running. But because they're characterized by smaller, high-concentration sites across northern Ontario and particularly in northwestern Ontario—to be able to develop some processing capacity, quite potentially in Thunder Bay, that beautiful city that sits atop Lake Superior, and get them more meaningfully involved in processing, and given the chance supply channels that are available to them, move product into other parts of the province where robust efforts are under way for conversions and things like electric vehicles, electric battery storage and the like.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Minister—

Hon. Greg Rickford: The only time where your hand can stop me from talking more about this—

Ms. Donna Skelly: I just wanted to ask you—I was going to pull you more into the human component. As I mentioned, I know that you live in northern Ontario by choice. You're there, you work there, you fell in love with northern Ontario, and you built a career and a life in northern Ontario.

As I've mentioned, not only are we fortunate to have the critical minerals that the north is providing the rest of Canada and companies and people around the world, but there are also huge job opportunities. One thing I'm very proud of is that this government is recognizing the value in the trades and recognizing the value in the north and marrying the two just by saying, "We're going to focus on where we believe Ontario can grow and truly become a powerhouse and the economic engine of this country that we once were." I'm taking you into this from a roundabout way, but to do that, we also have to have people who can work in these sectors. We recognized early on that the trades were a critical component in our plan to return to the economic powerhouse we once were.

As a young girl growing up in Capreol, most of the—at that point it was men—either worked for the railroad or they worked for the mine. They had great livelihoods. They made good money, they had great jobs and they provided for their families.

Can you speak to the personal benefits of our investment in mining and other opportunities in the north from that perspective of how it is really creating opportunities for people to remain in Ontario, to remain in the north, which is so beautiful and so different from the rest of the province, and to contribute to our economy while providing a great opportunity for families?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question, Donna. It's too bad that Minister McNaughton isn't here with me today to outline a number of the things that we've done jointly to ensure—because MPP Judith Monteith-Farrell asked this question, or a version of it, yesterday, around the critical shortage of trades that we have. Her question went more to what are we doing for the quality of life in small-town northern Ontario, just like the beautiful place that you grew up in, in Capreol.

This goes far more to a retention strategy, if you will, to inspiring and keeping our young people here, and that's important to me. I tear up when Poppy says to me, "Dad, I'm a Lake of the Woods girl." I often think about her future and what kinds of things she might be interested in moving forward. Her dad has been a nurse and a lawyer—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Sorry, Minister; you have two minutes left.

Hon. Greg Rickford: —and a politician, but certainly we know that there are a lot of opportunities out there and in the skilled trades. Particularly in our traditional resource sector, mining and forestry most notably, important work has been done.

In the short time I have left, Donna, I think it's important to understand that we're focusing a lot of our efforts on tapping into the Indigenous workforce. The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, for the first time ever, has identified a stand-alone internship program to help Indigenous people enter the job market and, frankly, focused as much on the resource sector. There are programs that are linked to businesses and supported by northern development and mines to get Indigenous women who have received various kinds of baseline training and are now finding themselves in welding shops and leading their peers with institutional certificates headed towards Red Seal certification in technical trades.

There's not enough of these yet, but when with you see them on the ground in a factory in Timmins or down there in Sudbury, you really get motivated to do more and ensure that all of our young people and Indigenous peoples have the opportunity. They're from here. Most want to stay here. We have to create those opportunities for them in our region.

There are a number of fronts that we're working on. Many of them come through partnering with businesses and creating the kinds of programs that actually work for them. We know that if we do it right, which we have been over the past couple of years—internship programs, for example, have track records of 80% to 85%, some of them higher in terms of the internship program becoming a real job for that person—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you very much, Minister.

1040

We will now go back to the opposition for another 20-minute round. Mr. Tabuns, you have the floor.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: If we could have Mr. Steen Hume back on, I'd like to hear the rest of his response to my question about the Lake Erie Connector.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): There he is.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Mr. Hume, if you could continue and just finish that response that you were providing to me.

Mr. Steen Hume: Yes, happy to. In response to the question: The government has issued a letter from the minister to the IESO, asking them to do a fairly in-depth review of the proposal—one that takes into account impacts on ratepayers, obviously. Should an arrangement be reached, what kind of off-ramps could be built into such an agreement—again, that's to protect the interests of ratepayers. Also, there are other requirements around

permitting approvals and things like that, so a fair number of details.

In addition, we've asked IESO to consider other cost-competitive alternatives to this type of project. We've also asked them to look at how costs are recovered, and then, as I was saying just before we ran out of time, we've also asked IESO to consider the impact around greenhouse gases. All of this has been documented in a letter that was submitted in early May from the ministry to the IESO, and it is publicly available on IESO's website.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: That's great. I'm glad to know it's publicly available. Just because sometimes I'm not as good at searching things as others might be, if it would be possible to provide the committee with a copy of the link so that we can go to that letter, I'd be very appreciative. I see the deputy minister is nodding. I'll just ask that it be noted in Hansard that the ministry will provide us with a link so we can read that letter. Mr. Hume, I appreciate your answer. That's very useful to me.

Another question then: What was the total cost to date of cancelling renewable energy contracts, and where does that expense show up in estimates? CTV put out a report roughly a year ago saying that the total cost for cancellations was \$230 million, but they noted that the cost of the dismantling of the White Pines Wind Farm was not included in that number. Can you tell me—either minister—the total cost of cancellation of those renewable energy contracts?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question. It's always interesting how you view that as a cost and I view that as an opportunity, but I guess that's what puts us on the other side of the table here.

The FIT program that you're referring to—it's estimated that the wind-down of the 751 feed-in tariff and large renewable procurement contracts that you're talking about, Peter, and the termination of the White Pines Wind Project are expected to avoid a \$790-million cost in long-term electricity system costs set at the standard of 2018 dollars. Neither program imposes a burden on current year expenditures, but costs are provided from an appropriation from the 2018-19 budget.

So ENDM predicts that the final total cost for the termination of the FIT and the LRP contracts, as well as the White Pines Wind Project, will be within the existing allocation of—off the top of my head—\$233.7 million as of March 31, 2021. The amount spent, Peter, is—I think \$117 million has been spent.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Thank you for that answer.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Of course, look at the savings that this represents to our system. These costs, we know, would be tremendous if we were to compare them to the costs that—okay; I thought you wanted me to expound on it.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I know you wanted to expound, Minister. I can tell. Every fibre of your being wants to expound. But you answered my question, and I'm happy to go on to my next one.

With the phase-out of Pickering nuclear generating station, and I'm assuming probably the phase-out of some

NUG contracts, we may well be looking at procuring more generation later this decade. Is the government planning on procuring more generation beyond nuclear? If so, how much, and when? Have you been planning for more procurement in the next eight years?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes, absolutely, Peter. Obviously, our preference in the future is to pivot to an auction market and make the electricity pricing more competitive. You mentioned in previous questions a plan and a runway, if you will, to making sure that Ontario has the opportunity to bring a cost of electricity not just to families, small businesses and farmers under the rate protection program, but also under the two larger classes of electricity-user-intensive models that, as you pointed out, involve some subsidies to make them competitive on the global market. These are important pieces that we think fit into how the IESO ought to think about an auction market moving forward.

We also know, as I mentioned earlier, in fairness, the costs of wind and solar will come down. It's going to take a very long time, and we made a decision that has been very well-received in the marketplace and by our local distribution companies, obviously, to make that pricing model more transparent. We're confident, Peter, that that will expose the opportunities that we have for a new electricity marketplace that's far more competitive, far more transparent, can accommodate for the existing sources of electricity, which include wind and solar, because their costs are titrating down over the course of time. It's the way those contracts were built out. Some of them were fair enough, especially when it comes to cap ex intensive projects like building wind towers.

So there are a whole bunch of pieces coming together here that create a pretty positive landscape, by all accounts. I think the IESO, some of the reforms that we've made there and its new leadership see a cleaner, fresher, more transparent way of explaining how electricity pricing works to people either under the rate protection program or under the industrial initiative.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: What I gather, then, is that future procurement will be based on open auction, and if I'm wrong, you can correct me. Do you have, at this point, a projection of the total amount of capacity that you expect to secure between now and the end of this decade? Has that planning already been done?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Obviously, the IESO works very closely with us in that planning so that we can ensure that we have the right mix. Obviously, on the policy end of it, this government has a particular keenness to continue our investment in nuclear capacity. You can see that there are costs associated with that, not only there in the estimates but also, Peter—as I said, in fairness—with respect to the global adjustment, built-in refurbishment and decommissioning costs.

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Mr. Peter Tabuns: I understand what you're saying, Minister. My question was, have you projected the capacity that you're going to have to purchase through auction in the decade to come? If you haven't done that planning

already, just tell me. But if you have, I'd like to know how much of an increase in capacity you're planning for in Ontario.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Of course, Ontario is a big province, so we have demands that move us. Judith mentioned yesterday, Peter, the need for and the importance that bioenergy brings for us and contributes and complements, to the forest sector, so this is as clean as a response as you could possibly get. Right now, we are not planning on any additional sources other than what we are working with. There is not a requirement, but in some regions, obviously it's helpful that we have other sources.

There is some very preliminary discussion across the country—you probably know—in hydrogen, the two different kinds, blue and green; blue associated with natural gas—

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Yes, I'm fully familiar with the hydrogen technology—

Hon. Greg Rickford: But we don't have any plans to bring hydrogen on, just to be clear. Sorry, I didn't want to interrupt you.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Okay. That's fair enough. So you're not planning to expand our capacity. If we do have more to purchase, it'll be purchased based on an auction system, but you may look at different areas where they may need some bolstering for local needs. I think I've understood your answer.

You've said you plan to build a modular reactor at Darlington. I saw the announcement. What will the cost be per kilowatt hour?

Hon. Greg Rickford: The small modular reactor obviously is a work in progress but very, very much at the front end of it. The small modular reactors aren't just being built for their price per kilowatt hour, but I share your concern, Peter, that we wouldn't want to be adding those additional costs, for example, to the global adjustment. What Ontario is hopeful of is that through Ontario Power Generation and the other companies we'll be able to develop these technologies on a for-profit basis for companies to use, for example, on remote sites to provide a cleaner form of energy in different parts of the country for—

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Sorry—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Sorry, Minister.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Minister, fair enough, but my question is, do you have a cost per kilowatt hour for the power from the small modular reactor at Darlington? Is there one that you're already planning, or is there an upset price beyond which you'd say, "No, the business case isn't there." What price are you planning to spend, frankly, for a new reactor at Darlington per kilowatt hour?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Just to be clear, Peter, it's not our intention to spend, so much, on the building of small modular reactors. That work is being done by private companies and being supported and leveraged through our assets that we have with OPG.

If the modular reactors, which are scalable, can be price competitive—it's the only way they can be used. So that

price would have to be somewhere in the neighbourhood of where nuclear currently sits, which is somewhere in and around 7.6 cents to 7.8 cents per kilowatt hour. However, some of the costs of refurbishment and decommissioning, which we have to account for in electricity generation costs globally, are in the global adjustment.

We believe that price per kilowatt hour to be not just competitive, in comparison to other jurisdictions like Manitoba and Quebec, but the kind of expectation we would have of the price per kilowatt hour of a small modular reactor. But again, in operating those small modular reactors, whether the province of Ontario purchases them for our own use in certain applications, we're obviously about seven to eight years off of a decision point around that, and certainly the cost per kilowatt hour will be an important feature.

I know that the companies that have been selected to move to the brownfield site in Darlington would not be building these if they didn't think that they had not just a scalable product that would be site-specific for various kinds of operations or different sizes of communities, but that it would also have a competitive price per kilowatt hour to operate since some of them would be owned outright. If you take a look at why Alberta signed the MOU, Peter, and I think this is important, is they sent a clear message that on the purchase price, the operationalizing of this and the actual cost of electricity to us from this—if it's not competitive from Ontario, they will go somewhere else for those small modular reactors.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Thank you for that. Just one second, Minister. Okay, climate change plan and policies: We apparently are exporting a lot of gas-fired electrical power to the United States. In 2019, 35% of our gas-fired power was exported. That came from an analysis by Power Advisory. Given our commitment to reducing GHG emissions, why are we running gas power for export?

Hon. Greg Rickford: This goes back to a question you asked just moments ago with respect to capacity auctions, Peter, and what's in the mix. First of all, I don't believe that a natural-gas-powered facility would not be in the best interests of the province to support. The technologies that are in place and the ones on the horizon for the extraction production, refinement and ability to use natural gas are safely within the limits of a responsible plan to combat climate change, especially given the fact that they represent a relatively low portion of our supply mix, currently. As I said, that's underutilized, Peter, because we end up having to use some of that to supplement production when those wind towers and those solar panels are not operational—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Mr. Tabuns, you have two minutes left.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I'm going to go back. My question is this: If you've got gas plants on standby to ramp up when, for instance, a nuclear power plant goes down because algae is clogging the cooling pipes coming in—you know, you're going to ramp them up. But you appear to be running the plants so that they can export power, and we have to deal with the greenhouse gas emissions that

come from that. Why on earth are we running plants for export and increasing the GHG emissions from Ontario? Why is that?

Hon. Greg Rickford: With the greatest of respect, I reject that proposition out of hand. As I said, the gas-fired plants run to supplement the sources of energy that Ontario is currently principally using, or contractually obligated to where it otherwise might not. If you're suggesting that we shut down nuclear and put tens of thousands of highly skilled labourers out of work and compromise our electricity system to the tune of 66%, Peter, that's a conversation you can have with your constituents—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Sorry, Minister. Mr. Tabuns?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'm sorry, I didn't see Peter's—

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Minister, you're going down a rabbit hole there. What I asked you was—and I'll continue to ask you it—why are you running gas-fired power plants to put GHGs in the atmosphere so we can export the power? Why on earth would you do that?

Hon. Greg Rickford: We don't purposefully, Peter. Those plants are fired up to supplement other forms of energy that have to off-board for one reason or another. It's one of the fundamental challenges of the great mess that you alluded to earlier and that you say you strenuously opposed under the previous government. Energy is spilled across the border and it doesn't entirely come from natural gas. In fact, you might want to talk to your friend Mike Mantha over there about how much of that bioenergy electricity that's produced there is spilled over into northern Michigan for cents on the dollar—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you, Minister. Minister, sorry to interrupt you. We've finished that round.

We will go back to the government side for another 20-minute round. MPP Toby Barrett.

1100

Mr. Toby Barrett: Minister, there have certainly been an awful lot of questions this morning about electricity. I wish to raise a question with respect to a priority for several years of the government to modernize the Ontario Energy Board. If there's time in the 20 minutes, I'd like to raise a supplemental question as far as the kinds of energy electricity assistance programs that are available to ratepayers.

Going back to the Ontario Energy Board—a vital, vital service—people have been concerned for quite a while about their mandate and the focus of the board. You, Minister, have taken action. You've brought in a new corporate structure and a new generation of leadership in that corporation, the Ontario Energy Board, again, all for the overall purpose of increasing transparency in our energy sector and improving on the regulatory processes, all for the benefit of our constituents who are using electricity.

My question would be if you could explain the steps the government has taken with respect to changing that governance, and what has been the value of restructuring and bringing in this new governance structure? What is the effect on our fiscal plan in the province of Ontario?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question, Toby. What an honour it was to be named the Minister of Energy for the province of Ontario. In a previous political chapter of my life, I was the minister responsible for natural resources federally, which was a huge portfolio that included, obviously, energy, mining, forestry—all of our resource sectors. One of the first responsibilities that I had was to modernize the National Energy Board.

When I got here to the province of Ontario, we realized that we had serious governance structure problems with the Ontario Energy Board. There were complaints throughout the system, if you will—local distribution companies, especially the large ones. When we did our consultations with stakeholders around electricity pricing for industrial and commercial classes, we learned that the smallest regulatory changes or applications to the OEB would go on for months and months—in some instances years—and require thousands and thousands and thousands of pages of submissions.

We saw the east-west tie—I know an important file to Judith—sit in the Ontario Energy Board for five years. When they got to what we thought was going to be a decision, they actually decided to have the old entrant, who was disqualified, re-enter the competition, which, of course, would have made a longer runway. Well, that wasn't going to work. We had more than 300 well-trained Indigenous people and an Indigenous-owned and -operated company, in partnership with Enbridge, ready to move forward on the east-west tie. I can't speak for Judith, but I think that if she's driving through that part of Thunder Bay and she sees in Fort William those Indigenous peoples heading out to do that important piece of infrastructure, she might agree, partisan politics aside, that serving notice to the Ontario Energy Board, which is a rather extraordinary measure—and I'll get to why it is in a moment—said that there were some serious problems with the OEB. Get those Indigenous people to work. Get that east-west tie going. There's another huge infrastructure project that could potentially start in the not-too-distant future, that that workforce could pivot to when that project is finished. So these were structural challenges with the Ontario Energy Board that we simply could no longer tolerate, and frankly, that was entirely consistent with the way the ecosystem within the energy sector was feeling about the Ontario Energy Board.

So we got to work, Toby, after extensive consultations and advice from the Ontario Energy Board Modernization Review Panel—a report and a panel, by the way, that had been retained by the previous government, bringing in top-notch people to prepare that. I don't know how our current opposition felt about that panel and their report, but by golly, we found ourselves looking at something that the previous government had commissioned that was exactly the kind of thing we should put into place.

So under Bill 87, the Fixing the Hydro Mess Act, 2019, legislative amendments were proclaimed into force last fall and we established a new governance structure for the OEB. They included the following: a new board of directors, led by a chair who is responsible and accountable to

the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines for the OEB's governance and strategic direction. Now, I want to expound on that for a minute, Toby, to make an important point.

That fundamental change in governance made it much more appropriate and far more transparent for a government to transmit to an independent regulator—independent; that's essential to understand—to oversee the Ontario Energy Board. It was just one ring removed—which was not in place under the current government—from a government's ability to direct or impact or put pressure on the Ontario Energy Board directly through its president. When I came on board, and perhaps, frankly, by design—no fault to the president and CEO of the OEB—under that governance model, they were nothing more than a branch of government, or at least a branch of the Ministry of Energy. That's not what the Ontario Energy Board is there to say.

There has to be an intermediary, if you will, and, at the same time, a conduit for us to pass on strategic direction, but to let the Ontario Energy Board do its work. And that was simply not in place under the previous government. It's important to understand why: because then regulations and issues like electricity pricing, and all the different impacts of things like wind and solar contracts, wind their way through the Ontario Energy Board and through the IESO, as government policy directly impacting or influencing how those boards operate. That is not how they should operate, and so that's an important piece.

I've identified that the new chief executive officer is separate from the chair, and provides real executive, independent leadership over the OEB's operations and its policy work. So now, Toby, you see we're in a really good position, because I have a mandate letter that is sent to the chair of the board, and the board then processes that mandate letter to ensure that the president can operationalize elements of it. But it's up to her—emphasis on “her”—to develop their own policies in response to what the governance structure is now.

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A new chief commissioner is accountable to the CEO for the efficient and timely performance of what the OEB's primary function is, and that is its adjudicative function. To that end, the commissioners are responsible for fulfilling the OEB's adjudicative function and are accountable to the chief commissioner.

We expect, Toby, that this new governance structure will allow the OEB and stakeholders to work together to reduce the regulatory burden and make the adjudicative processes more efficient. With strong leadership, we're looking to the provincial regulator—“regulator,” which is why they have to be independent—to operate in a more transparent and effective manner, especially as we emerge from the current pandemic and strive to jump-start our economy.

Again, only time or your hand can put constraints on what I have to say here.

It's my belief, and we're seeing already—we're hearing, Toby, especially from the local distribution companies and

the larger-scale manufacturers who make applications directly to the OEB for various things—that this has already become a lean fighting machine that not only protects the people of Ontario in the very important responsibility of safety and regulatory functions, but strikes that careful balance to giving them greater certainty.

As I've always said, whether I'm presiding over the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund or FedNor, in my previous political career, I've often felt in how I've treated the various boards that I preside over in my ministerial capacity that “certainty” is defined as much by getting to “no” as it is getting to “yes.” In other words, how do those systems or how does that process work to send a clear message as quickly as possible that something can or cannot proceed in the interests of public safety and/or the strategic direction provided by the government to the board of the OEB, and then be stress-tested and litigated through the adjudicative functions of the OEB? We think that's not only more simple but, in being simpler, being far more accountable, far more transparent, far more efficient and far more effective to the users of the Ontario Energy Board.

Mr. Toby Barrett: I mentioned, if there was time, just further to this, a supplementary question translating it down to the users of electricity: our constituents. There have been a number of energy assistance programs brought forward by this government. I'm very thankful for that, on behalf of the people I represent. I say that because our constituency office has been fielding concerns about electricity for years and years—now, not so much. Mr. Tabuns may recall that we fought several elections basically on the ever-increasing cost of electricity. Saying that, I heat with electricity. The buildings on my farm are heated with electricity, which means I have to run four wood stoves in the winter if I'm going to heat all of my buildings.

I wondered, just to follow up, if we could hear a bit more about the energy assistance programs that have been brought in, just something so that I can better explain this to people who may still be concerned about their hydro bill.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question, Toby. Mr. Chair, how much time do I have for this important subject?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Minister, you have just under six minutes left.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Okay, I appreciate that. I have to admit, I give full credit to my critic for his views on subsidy programs. They certainly do represent a cost, but I'm a bit perplexed on the question underpinning it. Our system is designed, in the future, to reduce the amount of subsidies we have to contribute, and there are a number of factors, a myriad in fact, that bear down on that. Most of them, based on the structural changes we've made in the electricity system, will have a positive impact on them. We still have work to do on some of the ones that will continue.

The idea that the opposition party at such a critical juncture would want these subsidy programs removed

from our system now, as they may be suggesting, isn't just dangerous, it would effectively shut down our province because it would make it impossible for families, small businesses, farming operations and large electricity users to operate. So we have, just to enunciate them, the Rural and Remote Rate Protection Program, or RRRP, the Distribution Rate Protection Program, the Ontario Electricity Support Program, the First Nations Delivery Credit, the Ontario Electricity Rebate and the Renewable Cost Shift rebate. Toby, all of these go towards keeping electricity costs under control, reasonable and/or competitive, given the other things that we've done, for example, to the global adjustment, as our economy starts to kick in in a post-COVID economic recovery plan.

I always consider the Ministry of Energy as an important partner to the other ministries' objectives. Our planning is often part of a larger plan to get the costs of electricity or the costs of energy to a place where those manufacturers, those businesses, those farming operations can be more productive and contribute significantly to our economy. That automatically brings in more revenue for the province and enables us to make the kinds of investments we've been making: for example, as Peter Tabuns had said earlier, in things like long-term care, increasing 30,000 beds. That money comes from manufacturers, farmers and small businesses being able to generate more revenue, a portion of which, through taxes, comes to the government and enables us responsibly to make larger investments in these key areas—add another \$50 million to the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, for example.

I can't imagine taking some of these rebate programs off the table, and I want to be absolutely certain that that's not what the critic is suggesting—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Minister, sorry to interrupt. You have two minutes left.

Hon. Greg Rickford: —for a moment, Toby, because they're all funded through the tax base. However, the RRRP was previously funded by the rate base until 2017 and the OESP was funded through the rate base until 2018. So all of these rate mitigation programs go to serve important constituents who need this for the economic vitality or viability of their operations.

The costs of delivering electricity, for example, to our First Nations communities—and this will become critically important after our \$2-billion investment into the Watay Power expansion across northwestern Ontario for 26 isolated and remote Indigenous communities who are currently using diesel. I'm virtually certain that there is consensus at this committee today and broadly across the Legislature that any efforts we can make to do this will be in our collective benefit, not only to provide a more reliable source of electricity, for example, to our remote and isolated Indigenous communities—which I've had the honour of working in as a nurse, back in the day, for more than eight years of my life—not only the environmental benefits of that program, but these cost money.

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The fact of the matter is, the recipients of those infrastructure projects, once they begin, will continue to require

some form of subsidy to make them affordable, frankly, before things like reasonable and competitive. We think it's a—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you very much, Minister. That concludes the 20 minutes.

We'll go back to the opposition for another 20 minutes. Who will be starting? MPP Tabuns.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Chair, thank you for chairing this morning. You've done very well, sir.

I just wanted to make a note about one of the minister's last comments. We think that what's critical is stabilizing prices—bringing them down, if possible—and doing that by restructuring the electricity system, getting rid of private ownership, which has been at the heart of driving up prices for two decades now. Frankly, if we can do that and move out the subsidies, that's to the province's advantage. I would think, as fiscal conservatives, you'd probably like the idea of not subsidizing something, but maybe I misunderstand you. I think the central point is, prices have to be stabilized, and we have to get at the structural elements that are driving prices up. Your strategy seems to simply be to subsidize more and more. It's essentially the Liberal strategy, which was to park a truck full of \$20 bills over top of a problem and dump the \$20 bills on it. That's not a really good strategy.

That said, I'm going to go back to another area of questions. The Auditor General commented, in 2020, about the approach of the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines to Ontario's climate plan. What she had to say was that the ministry does “not yet focus on climate change or reducing greenhouse gas emissions in their decision-making. Given the significance of buildings to Ontario's total emissions, this reduces the likelihood of achieving the 2030 target in areas they can impact.”

She also notes, “The energy and mines ministry does not have an integrated long-term ... plan that aligns natural gas and electricity use in buildings with Ontario's 2030 emission-reduction target. The ministry has also made little to no progress on other environment plan initiatives, including expanding renewable natural gas.”

The question, Minister, is, why are you ignoring Ontario's climate plan, the one that your government brought forward?

Hon. Greg Rickford: First of all, thank you for that, Peter. We'll take the opportunity to note that, over the course of time, you and your cohort have in fact supported subsidized programming, particularly with respect to wind and solar. That notwithstanding, I'm going to turn this over to my associate minister to talk about some of the key conservation and energy-efficiency initiatives. But with the greatest of respect, Ontario's energy system is already 93% GHG emission-free.

I mentioned an interesting element of our cost structure, Peter. You've fleshed out at great lengths the importance—or unimportance, in your case—of natural-gas-fired plants, which, if I'm understanding you correctly, you don't support. That's fair enough. We'll leave that to different governments to understand. But in this case, we need them. They are one of the smaller sources of GHG

emissions, and we need them to support wind and solar when the sun doesn't shine and the wind doesn't blow. I'm not really sure what you expect—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I am quoting the Auditor General, and the Auditor General says that your ministry doesn't focus on reducing greenhouse gas emissions in their decision-making. One of the things that you can do, Minister—maybe the associate minister will speak to this—is issue directives to the OEB to maximize conservation and demand management programs, both in the electricity and the natural gas sector.

One of the things that your Minister of the Environment is focused on is maximizing the reduction of gas consumption in homes by maximizing the energy-efficiency and conservation measures. Recently—I think within the last year—you've sent a letter to the OEB saying, "No, no, you don't have to do that." But that means that your government won't be able to meet its climate targets. Why are you not doing everything you can to help your own government meet its climate targets and maximizing the conservation and demand management that happens in the natural gas home heating, industrial, commercial and institutional sectors?

Hon. Greg Rickford: We believe we will reach our targets, Peter, and as an energy sector, we are already 93% GHG emission-free. We were handed a system that was having a little bit of a hangover, in the sense that any reliance on gas-fired plants—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Sorry, Minister. I apologize to interrupt you, but MPP Tabuns has his hand up.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Minister, I have other questions about the operation of the system itself and the role of gas-fired power plants, but I'm not asking about that, and you don't seem to be addressing the question. Perhaps the associate minister can. I asked: Why is it that you are not actually taking on the climate plan that your own Minister of the Environment brought forward, that your government has adopted? Why are you not having the OEB direct Enbridge to maximize conservation and demand management? I'm not talking about the electricity system; I'm not talking about gas-fired power plants. If you've heard my question, why are you not taking action to maximize the reduction in natural gas consumption so that we can meet our climate targets, the ones that your government set?

Hon. Greg Rickford: We are. Certainly I'm going to turn it over to Bill here very shortly, but one of the key features of our system, of course, is our commitment to and our ongoing investments in nuclear technologies, specifically with respect to energy production. It is a clean, green form of energy. Nobody disputes that, and its value to our system—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Sorry, Minister. I'm sorry to interrupt you. MPP Tabuns has his hand up.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Minister, you're totally ignoring my question. Why are you not maximizing the reduction

of energy consumption, of natural gas consumption that is taking place on the part of Enbridge's customers, something that your Minister of the Environment has in your greenhouse gas reduction plan? The Auditor General says you're not doing it. The Auditor General has a pretty good backup on her rejection of what you have said in the past. So, tell me: Why are not maximizing conservation and demand management, both to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to reduce people's natural gas bills?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I have a good working relationship with the Auditor General, and every once in a while we can agree to disagree. That's very infrequently the case. But I'll turn it over to Bill on those specific items that Peter is asking that you're seized of. Minister Walker, thank you.

Hon. Bill Walker: Thank you very much, Minister, and to MPP Tabuns for a good question. I just want to assure you that we are committed to making electricity bills affordable for families, farms and small businesses. We know that consumers today value conservation and energy efficiency, and have access to a wide range of energy-efficient products and appliances, and we want to make sure we continue to do that.

On January 1, 2021, we introduced a new four-year electricity conservation and demand management framework. The whole intent there is to make sure that we have suites of programs such as the saveONenergy programs, the Energy Affordability Program and the First Nations DC program. We have conservation programs focused on helping consumers—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Sorry, Minister, to interrupt you. MPP Tabuns has his hand up.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Minister Walker, I appreciate your knowledge of that particular issue, but I'm asking about the natural gas system for homes and businesses and the directive that you could send to the Ontario Energy Board saying, "Enbridge, you have to maximize your conservation and demand management." Your whole climate plan counts on maximum reduction in natural gas burning in homes, businesses, institutional buildings, but you're not requiring that. You're not requiring that at all. Why are you not doing that? Why are you ignoring your own government's climate plan?

Hon. Bill Walker: I'll try to address that for you, and I really do appreciate it. What I want to start off with, though, is that it's very interesting: I respectfully suggest that you, as the critic, continually tell us to shut off nuclear, which is, again, a green, clean form of energy; you tell us to not capture the water at Niagara Falls—hydro energy, which is the cleanest, cheapest form of energy that we have; and you want to actually put intermittent sources like wind and solar, which when they don't turn—and you made a comment earlier, Peter. You talked about plugging in the inlet pipe at nuclear—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Minister, I'm sorry to interrupt you. MPP Tabuns has the floor.

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Mr. Peter Tabuns: Bill, you're a smart guy. We've worked together. We've debated together. I'm asking you,

why are you not requiring Enbridge to maximize the conservation and demand management program? Why are you not doing that? And if you're not going to answer that question, just tell me you're not going to answer that question and we'll go on to another question. I've got tons of them.

Hon. Bill Walker: No, I'm trying, Peter, but you did say that, and at the end of the day, by virtue of your policy approach, you would actually increase the burning of natural gas because that's the only thing that can fire up when there are intermittent sources. We have actually spoken to IESO and OEB to assess the achievable potential of energy conservation to inform future energy policy and planning. One of the things we've identified is the opportunity for—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Again, I'm sorry, Minister. MPP Tabuns, you have the floor.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Okay. I'm very surprised because, Bill, generally you're a straight shooter. You're not answering my question as to why you're not maximizing conservation and demand management for natural gas customers. It's something that you could direct, frankly. It's something the Auditor General noted you're not doing. So your government's plan for climate action is being undermined by your ministry.

I'm going to move on though, because if you're not going to do that, there are a variety of other questions I have.

Hon. Bill Walker: Peter, may I offer a comment in regard to our recent expansion of the natural gas program? It's actually going to result in cleaner fuel sources at the end of the day, because we're going to be taking a lot of the more dirty forms off in 43 communities across this great province and helping business—

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Yes, I heard you say that earlier, and so I don't need to follow up on that.

The next question I have is about climate adaptation and the impacts of heating on the electricity system and on the energy system as a whole, because we have a number of energy systems, as you're well aware. We have the electricity system, but we also have the natural gas system and we have the system of distribution for petroleum products. What funds is your ministry allocating to assess climate vulnerability of the electricity system, the natural gas system and the petroleum distribution system? What plans are you making to make sure that those systems don't fail under extreme weather events? And what sorts of funds are you allocating?

Hon. Greg Rickford: We're still in the conservation and energy-efficiency space, so I'll turn it over to my associate minister shortly. But, obviously, when it comes to electricity conservation and demand management frameworks, we have the Energy Affordability Program, the First Nations programs and natural gas demand site management frameworks, and then, of course, ministry-led conservation initiatives; conservation and broader public service ministry-led—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Minister, I'm sorry. MPP Tabuns, you have a hand up. You have the floor.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Yes. Minister, I'm not asking about that. I've moved on. I know I'm not going to get an answer.

Here I'm asking, and I've asked Liberal ministers before you: What are you doing to make sure that the energy systems don't fail under extreme weather events?

And I have to say, I asked a number of Liberal ministers that every year in estimates, up to 2013, when we had the ice storm and people had their power knocked out for about 10 or 11 days, depending where you were. So to me, making sure you have a system that is resilient, that keeps people warm and safe through extreme weather, is really important.

So what I'm asking—I asked once, and I'll ask a second time: Do you have a plan, are you developing a plan, to protect the electricity system, the natural gas system and the petroleum distribution system from extreme weather? And have you allocated funds to make that plan a reality?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I love these committees; it gives you an opportunity to ask the question, and the opportunity to not let me answer it from time to time. Anybody knows that I'm one of the geekier policy wonks here, and it can be difficult for me to get all the information in in such short timelines, but I'll endeavour to do the best I can.

The short answer is yes. It's a very interesting one coming from you, Peter, in the sense that, given all the work, for example, that we have done with the OEB and to a certain extent the innovations or renovations, if you will, in terms of the relationship that the ministry has with the IESO, which has been set at a standard of providing strategic policy objectives to them as opposed to running them—which I think even you would agree was one of the major problems that the previous government had and got them into so much hot water. But with respect to the resilience of our electricity system, which, for the benefit of the viewers here today who are watching this on TV, includes cyber security, the integrity of electricity lines—those telephone poles across vast swaths of this province, and high concentrations of them in southern Ontario—the short answer, Peter, is yes.

Because of the way that we have set up this system now—and I talked about the OEB's governance structure—they're now in a place, to the extent that our 66 local distribution companies, especially through their association, endeavour to work on these critical pieces. Many of them are owned and operated in part or in whole by municipalities, which provides not only a source of revenue for them but an important responsibility to maintain the integrity and durability of these under the extreme pressures, for example, of climate—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Sorry, Minister. MPP Tabuns, you have the floor.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: So, you're saying to me, Minister, that your ministry is not overseeing this; this has been downloaded to local distribution companies?

Hon. Greg Rickford: No, sir, I'm not. To the contrary, the strategic objectives, the strategic policy that we have with respect to both the OEB and the IESO serve to protect and address those very things. We're not in the business of

downloading. We understand and respect the important institutions in our electricity system that, strategically, from a policy perspective and a governance perspective, run correctly, are in a really good position to do that. That is not a downloading to the LDCs; it's prepositioning it through good policy frameworks that allow and provide for the OEB, the Ontario Energy Board, and the Independent Electricity System Operator to make good decisions that address the durability of our system and its integrity for things like the impact of climate change, like the impact of cyber security and various other threats that they may be confronted with.

Wow, I got that answer out before your hand came up, Peter. I'm getting better at this.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Yes, amazing. Who within your ministry is responsible for overseeing studies to assess climate vulnerability and adaptation for energy systems— which person and which unit?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): You have two minutes, Mr. Tabuns.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Yes, hopefully, I can get an answer within two minutes on that.

Hon. Greg Rickford: When it comes to climate change, Peter, we have an acronym known as AHOD: "All hands on deck." Everybody who works in our ministry is responsible and accountable to me, as the minister, to make sure that each and every policy that we develop has some kind of consideration for the most pressing and substantial issues confronting the world right now—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Sorry, Minister. Mr. Tabuns?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Minister, there's an old rule that if everybody is in charge, nobody is in charge. Who in your ministry is responsible for overseeing adaptation and vulnerability?

Hon. Greg Rickford: —responsibility here. They're accountable to me, Peter.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Is it you? Because next time the power goes out for 10 days in Toronto, certainly we'll be putting you in the hot seat. Is it you who is overseeing this and can give us the best answers for how the vulnerabilities are being identified and dealt with? Is that correct? You don't have a staff person?

Hon. Greg Rickford: The answer is me. I'm always accountable, and I know that whether it was a person in the ministry, including my staff or not, you would blame me otherwise, Peter, so come on. The public is watching this. They want a quality interaction that respects the fact that at the end of the day the minister responsible is ultimately the minister responsible. That's why we make it a top priority for the Ministry of Energy to make considerations around the impacts of climate change on the decisions that we make. We believe that through investments in nuclear, by ensuring that the IESO has all the tools in its tool box possible to ensure the integrity of our electricity distribution, we are well-positioned to stand up against the impacts—sorry, Peter; I didn't see your hand there.

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Mr. Peter Tabuns: So if you're the guy, have you been watching this issue of rising temperatures in lake water

having an impact on nuclear power production, both in terms of generating algae that flood cooling lines and also raising temperatures high enough that certainly in the United States you've had about 25 incidents—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): I'm sorry, MPP Tabuns, that's the end of that round.

We'll now move on to the government side for the final 20 minutes of this morning's session, and who will lead? MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you very much, Minister Rickford and Associate Minister Walker, for coming. I greatly appreciate everything that you have talked about today.

I want to expand a little bit on something that PA Skelly had talked about. She was referring to critical minerals and how important that is going to be for us as we move forward in the future, but, as we know, if we don't have a strong exploration program, we're not going to find those critical mineral deposits.

Our province really does understand the importance of the mining industry to our economy, especially as we're going into more of a green economy moving forward. We know that things like electric vehicles and transitioning away from the internal combustion engine are going to be key in the climate change challenges that we face in making sure that we have a green economy. We have to have growth in the mining sector, especially in critical mineral exploration so that we can secure that sustainable future for all of us.

Ontario has an opportunity to be the world leader in critical minerals. We all know that those critical minerals are needed for electric vehicles, for solar panels, even for wind turbines. We know it's needed in pretty much everything with respect to electronics. Exploration companies that search for those new deposits of gold, silver, uranium, platinum, palladium, molybdenum and other critical minerals, it is important, it's imperative that we have a strong junior exploration program here in Ontario.

We know that, like with other companies, these ventures can benefit from assistance getting started with that exploration work. Many of these companies rely on a great deal of external funding coming to them so that they can operate because it is a challenge. They are looking for a needle in a stack of needles when we're up in the Ring of Fire area.

Ontario will be investing more funding over the next two years in the Ontario Junior Exploration Program. Could you expand upon what funding will be available for junior exploration companies through OJEP, and what the eligibility requirements are for that, please?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question, Dave. A big shout-out to the work you've been doing in your capacity as our parliamentary assistant and, in particular, your profound understanding of how exploration works and its connectivity to mining activities as they evolve and, in particular, the contributions you're currently making and helping us understand how things like flow-through shares and being more competitive in that space can help Ontario become a world-class competitor in that important space. We already have a program, of course,

Dave, but we're hearing loud and clear from the exploration companies, the junior companies, that more needs to be done.

As the saying goes, and I'm never ashamed to admit the work that we have left to do, the lion's share of the junior exploration companies in Canada is located here in Ontario. It's just that they're working in other places. Now, Ontario right now has the luxury of having so much mineral and mining activity and production, it runs the risk of giving you a false sense of security. Exploration activities aren't just important to secure future sites for extraction activities; they are a fundamental part of the commodities market speculation on when and how those reserves, if you will—and how much in their quantity and quality—are available, should a mining company come along and want to begin the extraction process. Ontario understands the important role that junior mining plays in the province's mining sector. Junior miners are responsible for funding much of the early explorations and mineral development work that happens in the province.

I spent eight years of my life living and working in the isolated parts of Canada, six of those years in northwestern Ontario, but other parts in the High Arctic and across other provinces. I had a chance to hang out with some of these hardy—and that's a bit of an understatement—exploration dudes and folks. They're the ones who zip out there, sometimes in snowmobiles, with trailers, drilling in the coldest of temperatures, and helping us understand through their sampling what the prospects are in areas of our province very few people ever have the opportunity—and, in my terms, the privilege—of visiting.

So these junior mining companies play a key role in exploration activities and the discovery of new mineral deposits, and ultimately, the healthy functioning of our commodity market on Bay Street in downtown Toronto, which explains why Toronto remains the financial epicentre of exploration and mining activities the world over. Private investors and senior mining companies are attracted to new mineral deposits. Private investors and senior mining companies set up construction projects, obviously, and they account for more than \$150 million, or 26%, of Ontario's exploration expenditures.

In order for Ontario to have a successful Critical Minerals Strategy, it must foster an environment that's supportive of junior miners. One of the programs this government has created to promote a healthy investment environment for junior miners is, of course, the OJEP, the Ontario Junior Exploration Program. It was announced in the 2021 Ontario budget, and it has four primary objectives. If you'll indulge me, I'll walk you through those. I'm so used to looking for the hand that I'm far more sensitive to that now. If it's okay, I'll walk you through the four objectives, Dave: attract and increase investment in mineral exploration, development and mining is one; secondly, to promote the development of critical minerals; third, to promote relationship-building and participation with Indigenous communities; and four, to increase geoscientific data sets.

It's another structured plan that our government follows. Much like in our energy system, we stick with the

plan. And through the Ontario Junior Exploration Program—or plan, as it might be more appropriately called—we're investing more than \$5 million over the next couple of years into junior exploration. The investment will unlock the province's vast mineral exploration potential and, we believe, pave the way for an unprecedented growth in the mining sector.

OJEP is intended to improve Ontario's competitiveness and expand our pipeline, if you will, of mining projects by supporting junior mineral exploration companies through private investors, boosting Ontario's appeal as a jurisdiction of choice for mining—a mining destination, if you will, not just for activity but for investment and prospecting. Then OJEP companies that meet eligibility requirements can apply for funding to cover eligible costs of up to \$200,000 per mineral exploration or development project. These are significant opportunities for them. OJEP is a cost-sharing program. It supports 50% of the eligible project costs for a maximum funding of the \$200,000 that I mentioned, and applicants have to show proof of financing for remaining project costs within two weeks of the ministry's written approval of their funding application. So, as you can see, this is rigorous, but it's designed in its simplicity to ensure that our prospectors are out there under the right financial circumstances and conditions—not just a hot commodity market—to do exploration activities.

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I leave you with this final thought, should you indulge me: Without these prospectors, obviously, when the cycle of mining extraction or activity is down—and we've seen that in the past, speaking as a northerner—it's often the exploration activities, Dave, as you well know, that keep us chugging along and keep us in a position so that when mining companies and private investors—hedge fund companies and the like—come along to look for how to spend their money responsibly, because market conditions, particularly commodities, in the mining sector look more promising, we're ready. The province of Ontario has staked out its claims and together, with our municipalities and our Indigenous communities, we stand poised to explore the prospect—no pun intended—of advancing known sites of assets into an actual mining or extraction activity.

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to answer that question in full.

Mr. Dave Smith: I'm going to expand a little bit on it because before I got involved in this ministry I didn't truly understand how the mining industry worked, and I think a lot of people who are watching really don't have any understanding of it.

Quebec has had a significant amount of investment in the last decade or so and they're basically now leading Canada in mining exploration. It takes a number of years from the time that somebody finds a deposit until they are able to expand upon that and actually develop a mine.

There's a lot of economic activity that happens as a result of a mine functioning. And those mines function for generations, so it's not just a one-time project. Just as a

side variable on it, if we build a road we have economic activity and construction for four or five years, but when we build a mine we have economic activity for 100 years.

There is no difference geographically between the Canadian Shield in Quebec and the Canadian Shield in Ontario. It's an imaginary line that separates the two. Making sure that we have that proper investment in those junior exploration companies, I think, is incumbent upon us for generations of Ontarians.

I know that MPP Tabuns has spoken significantly about climate change. We cannot have a climate change strategy that doesn't include electric vehicles. Ontario has an opportunity to be the world leader in all of those critical minerals that are needed in electric vehicles. But if we don't invest in the junior exploration companies to go out and find those deposits of things like lithium, more deposits of cobalt, more deposits of gold—many people don't appreciate that there is gold in all electronics. We have to be investing, then, in those junior exploration companies because they play a key role in the exploration and discovery of new mineral deposits.

The Ontario Junior Exploration Program can play an important role in helping to support critical mineral exploration throughout newly generated investments in early exploration. The investment expands the pipeline of mineral development projects and supports more mine construction and not just jobs, but careers, for people in this province.

By funding eligible costs associated with early exploration, the Ontario Junior Exploration Program also reduces the risk for private investors and further strengthens Ontario's appeal as a jurisdiction of choice for exploration and mineral investment. Let's face facts: If we are doing that exploration in Ontario, where we have fantastic labour laws, where we have environmental laws that protect so much, it makes so much more sense for ethical companies to be coming into Ontario then for that investment.

Can you explain further how the Ontario Junior Exploration Program builds on this and improves upon the work performed by previous investment programs of this kind? And how will the Ontario Junior Exploration Program support Ontario's critical mineral strategy as we move forward?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thanks for that question, Dave. OJEP was designed in response to a March 2019 recommendation from the minister's mining working group. It's something that the Premier and I established. He actually approached me about it. What we wanted to do, Dave, is bring in experts from the entire spectrum, if you will, of the mineral mining sector. Obviously, it includes geoscience, it includes prospectors, it includes Indigenous business leaders and technical experts that are Indigenous people—in fact, we have two sitting on that mining working group—financiers, municipal leaders and companies who run some of the smallest and some of the largest mining operations known the world over that are here in Ontario.

This mining working group is essential. Their recommendation from one of those meetings was to renew the

former program and to encourage added investment in the junior mineral exploration sector. It's called JEAP with an "A" and was delivered by the Ontario Prospectors Association, the OPA, through agreements with junior companies, and it was funded by the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp. previously.

The JEAP, as I'll call it, the Junior Exploration Assistance Program, funded 61 projects to the tune of about \$67,000 per project, ranging from three to nine months long, but more importantly, Dave, as is often the case—and I'm reminded of this in the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund by successful proponents—it isn't the money that the government is putting into it; it's what it leverages. I know this is something that keeps you awake at night because you're looking for the value proposition of what government spends and what kind of economic productivity or activity it creates. In this case, the 61 different projects help leverage more than \$80 million in further private financing. That's an economic impact of an 18-to-1 ratio. Now, I know you've got that big MBA, Dave—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Sorry, Minister, a two-minute warning.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you—and are plenty familiar with these kinds of ratios, but that's a pretty doggone good one, I would say, if I'm understanding it correctly. But the key improvements include a change in eligibility and criteria and more financial support to junior companies.

I'll just finish with those key improvements that we've made, because under OJEP, twice as many companies are actually eligible to apply for funding compared to before under the previous government's program through the NOHFC. And OJEP-eligible costs and allocations are constantly being updated to better suit the needs of junior mining companies, but the maximum funding project will be capped at \$200,000. So there's a little bit more room to move, from \$61,000 to \$200,000. We think that expands the prospect of those projects—boy, I keep using "prospect" when I'm talking about mining—to ensure that those prospecting activities have an added dimension of quantity and quality prospect to them, and increase the possibility that they would eventually become a mining activity and extraction activity, because the junior companies have a bigger tool to work with.

How's that, Mr. Chair? Do you have to cut me off?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): No, not at all, sir. You have 30 seconds left.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, then, I'll just use this opportunity to say that these efforts have positioned Ontario to become a global supplier on the basis of our assets, and it's my hope that Dave will continue his important work on understanding the importance of flow-through shares, and in the not-too-distant future we'll be able to expand our offering to the exploration component or the prospecting component of the marketplace when it comes to mining, and move Ontario out and to the top of the list as a leader here in this country. I think I've used that refrain here yesterday and today.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Michael Parsa): Thank you very much, Minister. It's 12 o'clock now, and that wraps

up our final 20 minutes of this morning. We will now recess until 1 p.m. I want to thank all of the committee members, as well as yourselves, Minister Rickford and Minister Walker. You'll be in much better hands this afternoon. Thank you, everyone.

The committee recessed from 1201 to 1332.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Good afternoon, honourable members. In the absence of the Chair and Vice-Chair, it is my duty to call upon you to elect an Acting Chair. Are there any nominations? Yes, MPP Smith?

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you. I'd like to nominate MPP Anand.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Perfect. Does the member accept the nomination?

Mr. Deepak Anand: Thank you so much. Yes, absolutely.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Great. Are there any further nominations? There being no further nominations, I declare the nominations closed and MPP Anand elected Acting Chair of the committee. You may take your seat.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Good afternoon, everybody. Without any further delay, let's start the meeting. We're going to resume the consideration of vote 2201 of the estimates of the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines. There is now a total of five hours and 11 minutes remaining for the review of these estimates.

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

When the committee recessed this morning, the government had completed its round of questions. At this point, we will be going to the official opposition for their questions. MPP Mantha, go ahead, sir.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Good afternoon, Chair. I'm making the assumption that you probably went for lunch in the minister's riding and you were confused on the time zone, so welcome back.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you.

Mr. Michael Mantha: It's really good that the minister started his lunch early, which means he's going to finish his day early as well.

Minister, I'm going to have a few pointed questions for you this afternoon. It's more that I'd like to have a discussion with you on discovery, and I will provide you ample opportunity to answer those questions. I think you and I, and all of us who are familiar with the mining sector in Ontario, have lots to be proud about. I've always been one to give credit where credit is due. We've done some fantastic work over the many years since I've been an elected member, since 2011. My friend Mr. Walker—and neighbour; we are joined by the Big Canoe—can attest that I've always been one to take my place and give credit where credit was due. I've worked with him on numerous files, when we were both in opposition as well. We were both credited by the then minister, Mr. Gravelle, for our

work we had done when we were challenged with certain matters when it came to the Chi-Cheemaun. I pride myself on building bridges and I look forward to building some of those bridges with you as well, Minister.

You earlier talked about several of the mining projects that have opened and have come to fruition, and they have not come to fruition through frustration. You and I can both agree that a lot of the delays and the time consumption that was put into these projects was put in place by the previous government. There were a lot of complaints that came in from industry. The top complaint that came in often from industry was timeliness, responses: "Can we get an answer? Give me a schedule. If it's three weeks, it's three weeks. If it's three months, it's three months. If it's a year, it's a year, but just tell me."

I have to say that those timelines have improved. Again, that goes to yourself but also to a lot of the individuals that I see from your ministry. Again, I pride myself on the relationships I've built with them as well within your ministry, Minister. You have some great people who are working there. It's one of the things I miss the most about not being able to gather, particularly at our receptions we have over at Queen's Park, having that opportunity for us to have an exchange, to talk about some of those issues that are really not always going to be easily solved through discussions through MPPs and the minister. But it's an advantage to us to involve those who are within the machine and to having them informed, to giving them the nuts and bolts of everything, because, quite frankly, I don't have all the answers, but I know the people who do. Often those individuals are within the ministry. Again, I like to give credit where credit is due.

I want to give big, big recognition to a couple of my colleagues, because there are many projects recently that have gone forward in the mining sector and a lot of them are within my riding. We talked a little bit earlier about Iamgold and a lot of the challenges that were there. You're absolutely right, Minister: There were a lot of delays that were causing this project to not go forward. I was happy to be part of that opening, where yourself and the Premier were there, along with the Prime Minister. You're right, everybody showed up for that one.

But not everybody showed up for the other ones. Not everybody showed up for the one over at Borden Lake, but you were there. Not everybody showed up at Harte Gold, but you were there. Not everybody is going to show up at Argonaut Gold or Alamos Gold or those other places that are going to open up, but I'm sure yourself, along with the local MPPs, will be there. And that's important, that we know that that bridge is there, that we can work together. We are going to have our different views on a variety of issues, always. That's the dynamics of what we have. But the places that we can work together—we need to recognize the work that we do together is good work. I think it's good for everyone at the Legislature, but mostly everyone across Ontario.

Having said that, I want to go back to some of the challenges that are there within the mining industry. I'm going to apologize right now: If you hear some banging, I

do have some individuals who are actually working at my house, so I will put myself on mute when I finish speaking. I'm trying to do my best to stimulate the economy as well. I have some young individuals who are building me a deck and actually doing the siding on my house. I'm doing my best to make sure that we have the next round of tradesmen and a good labour force for the future.

One of the things that keeps coming up, Minister, specifically in the mining sector: We have individuals in many mines who are looking for specific, key tradesmen. I'll use one for example: a heavy-duty mechanic. We don't have enough of those here in Ontario, so a lot of the mining sector are looking abroad. They're looking to Chileans. They're looking to Peruvians. They're looking everywhere to try to recruit these individuals to come in, because these are key individuals. The reason why they're key individuals: As you know, within the mining sector, for a particular mechanic's job, if you are a real gifted and knowledgeable tradesman, you can do a one-hour job possibly in 15 minutes. That 45 minutes that that machine is actually operating in production and not costing money is extremely valuable.

1340

A lot of these individuals must come as immigrants to Ontario, and there are many challenges. I understand that some of these challenges are federal in nature, but my question to you, Minister, is: What is it that the ministry can do to move these things along? How can we be more proactive in getting this labour force? Because they're not just coming here for the jobs and sending the money home; they're looking to come here and start a new life in Ontario, in small communities like in Dubreuilville, like in Red Lake, like in Wawa. So I want to ask, Minister: What is it that we're doing within the ministry to not only pull in these individuals but to expedite the process to securing this labour workforce?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question, Mike, and it's good to see you here. I loved the opportunity to respond to Peter's questions, but yesterday, of course, with Judith, and now yourself, we can bring some of these issues and opportunities home to us in our vast and beautiful region and, for the benefit of people watching this, to demonstrate three things: (1) An opposition is absolutely essential to any government; (2) that we can work together; and (3) that a government has the right and an ability to move out policies that, as often as possible, give us an opportunity to work together.

You mentioned, of course, being up in the Sugar Zone. As I like to say, how sweet it was that we were able to move that mining operation across the starting line. Mike, as you well know, and to your frustration, that was live, friend, and ready to go. They were held back in the four months between our election and when they actually opened by more red tape. I thought your question was going to lead that way, and hopefully we can talk about some of the red tape reduction we've done and some of the ones that we need to do, because you know what they are, having been in opposition for some time. As you said, the word you used was you were "frustrated" by an inability

to move several projects across the starting line. So that's first and foremost what I'd like to say.

The second thing is that with respect to the timelines, Michael, I appreciate and I similarly acknowledge your colleague France Gélinas. She approached me one day and said, "We really appreciate some of the regulatory matters that your team is addressing swiftly." We've seen a lot of movement in her riding in mining operations, Mike, and I said to France, as I've said to you more explicitly, "That comes from your urging. It comes from the fact that you walk across the floor so many times. I'd like you to stay over here one time, maybe more permanently"—no, I'm just kidding. But you have it on a piece of paper, and we walk away and we try to address it, so thank you for acknowledging that.

Now, to the substance of the question, more pointedly: Mike, as you know, in northern development and mines, we don't have the far-reaching capacities into immigration. Indeed, that is a federal government responsibility, but Minister McNaughton would obviously be in a slightly better position to answer those questions for you, and I can certainly endeavour to provide you with some of the more specific things.

But as I said to Judith yesterday, there is no question that we depend on, let's say, external workforce capacity, especially in the skilled trades area, and so it really just raises two pieces: First of all, what can we do to improve the communities that they're moving to and the quality-of-life experience?

I used up air time yesterday to walk Judith through some elements of the new Northern Ontario Heritage Fund program renewal, which I think you've had an opportunity to work through, Mike. Hopefully some of your smaller communities in your riding will benefit more fairly and more equitably—because those new features of the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund go to some of the things that we hear from mayors of small resource towns all the time. I know you hear it because I hear it from them, too. They always tell me, "I spoke to Mike, but I'm also talking to you about it." That is the different kinds of infrastructure that go to the quality of life, putting those small communities on a platform to have more things for youth to do, to repair existing recreational infrastructure that's so essential and, frankly, to expand the offering—pickleball is all the rage out here in northwestern Ontario, and we're meeting the demands of an aging population that wants to play a tighter, smaller game of pickleball.

I don't want to use up time to talk about that, but it is an example of economic and social diversification within our communities. I believe fundamentally the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund program renewal—which by the way I haven't heard back from the opposition with too many, if any, critiques of it—will help take us in the right direction.

That's fundamental to understanding how we can improve the quality of life, not just for people who already live there but for people who are moving into our communities. We know, Mike, that we have the same problem. Ours is a little bit difficult out in Red Lake, in Sol's riding

of Kiiwetinoong and mine, where these mining sites are built and oftentimes they build out on-site for people just to fly into, live and work intensely and move out. The risk of that, of course, is that it doesn't benefit the community that it's most proximal to or, quite frankly, situated right in the middle of, for example, Cochenour, Balmertown, Red Lake, Dubreuilville, Cobalt and many others.

The question is, how do we not only keep people in those towns, but how do we attract them, and prevent mining companies from doing what they're only forced to do, and that is to build out something that puts their skilled trade workers in there for a defined period of time to do their work and then they go back to their communities? I'm not sure we can completely eradicate it, but I think with some of the things—sorry, Mike.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I do want to cover the NOHFC later on. I want to just—hopefully, because it's coming from the mining sector particularly: Is there a focus from the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines to strategize an approach to the federal government on how they can assist and how we can actually use some of the COVID restrictions that are put in place—having some of those shots available for people who are looking to come to Ontario to get into that field? Is there an approach to strategizing with the federal government? How do we implement a process to getting those workers relatively quickly here in Ontario?

Hon. Greg Rickford: You're touching on a subject matter that was a missed opportunity at the front end of COVID. Had people like yourself and I had an opportunity to have our voices heard with the federal government, it would have been for Health Canada to authorize a lot of the rapid antigen testing capacity and some of the access to vaccinations that those global mining companies were using in other jurisdictions that have similar regulatory frameworks to us, so that we wouldn't have had the very few problems but the important problems that we had on mining sites at the front end of COVID.

Right now, Mike, I can tell you that we're taking a bit of a wait-and-see approach. It's not that we aren't prepared. We would like the federal government—and we've made recommendations for them—to give exceptions to mining companies who have access to equipment in the context of COVID that they use in other jurisdictions whose regulatory frameworks are similar to ours, so that if there is a fourth wave, or moving ahead safely, we can respond quickly to those challenges. Does that flesh out at least part of the question, Mike?

Mr. Michael Mantha: Yes. It will give me something that I can go back to industry—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Four minutes.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Pardon me?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Four minutes.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Holy jeez, that went by fast.

1350

All right. Then, with the four minutes we have, we'll go to a two-minute rotation, you and I, Minister. This,

hopefully—ah, I'll save that one for a little bit later. With the NOHFC program changes, the new program that has been developed—I'm not sure we're going to have time to answer this, so maybe I'll use it into my next rotation, Minister.

There are always winners and losers. When governments come in, we tend to look at programs and we want to put our own signature on it. Sometimes we take out the good that was working in order to implement the new, to put a new fingerprint, a new handprint, on some programs. So there are always winners and losers that are out there.

Right now, you're right: With the engagements that I've had with many of the municipalities and some of the organizations, there hasn't been a lot of opportunity for feedback to talk either positively or negatively of the new programs that have come out. Municipal leaders have said, "Great. We're going to have some opportunity to access some of those infrastructure dollars for our infrastructure," as you alluded to a little bit earlier. However, there are some other questions that I would like to go a little bit more into depth on, with NOHFC.

But before I do that—I'll save that for my other round—there are several ministries that have a variety of vacancies, particularly with area representatives: local individuals who had local knowledge, who had a footprint on many of the organizations, a pulse on the local economy and projects that were moving in the region. A lot of these vacancies are not being filled. They're not being replaced. These individuals are retiring and the vacancy, the job itself, is being removed. I'll give you an example. Here in Elliot Lake, we had an NDM officer since 1976. That individual is no longer in the office here in Elliot Lake. The job itself is still continuing, but the job has been moved regionally. We see this happening in many, many other ministries.

The challenge that this is bringing to the area is, first, it's a loss of knowledge. It's a loss of a good-paying job in the community, to be quite honest with you. But it's that pulse that we lose, and it's that relationship with municipal leaders and organizations that is no longer continuing.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Again, I will eat up that one minute, Minister, but when my time comes back to me, I hope that we can engage in a discussion in regard to what is the plan for a community like Elliot Lake—or Blind River or Wawa or Dubreuilville—that is losing that regional or that local autonomy, those individuals that are tied into the businesses? What is the plan in regard to filling those vacancies? Because not everything happens out of Sault Ste. Marie or Sudbury or North Bay or Thunder Bay. A lot of things happen in Kenora. A lot of things happen in Red River, in Red Lake. A lot of things happen in the smaller communities, and we're losing that knowledge and those representatives. So I would hope that, in my next round, we can engage in that conversation.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thanks, Mike.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Okay. I do see MPP Smith. The new and improved MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: I'm going to direct my questions to Associate Minister Walker—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Wait a second, wait a second, MPP Smith. I thought there was some kind of point of order that you raised a hand for. I haven't even asked you to speak. I have to do my duty first.

Interjection.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): That was a nice whistle, Minister.

We do have two new members here. I see MPP Rudy Cuzzetto. MPP Cuzzetto, please confirm your name and confirm you're in Ontario, sir.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Yes, I am in Ontario. I'm in the south of Mississauga, in Port Credit.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): And I don't actually see but I do know that we have MPP Jane McKenna who's here. MPP McKenna, please confirm that you are MPP McKenna and that you are in Ontario. MPP McKenna, if you do hear us please confirm that's your name and confirm that you are in Ontario, ma'am.

Ms. Jane McKenna: I can. Hi. Thank you so much, Chair. Can you hear me, Chair?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Absolutely.

Ms. Jane McKenna: Thanks so much. It's Jane McKenna, and I'm in my office in Burlington, Ontario.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Perfect. Thank you so much. That concludes the new members who have joined since last time.

Now we will be moving over to the government side. With that, you have 20 minutes, and I will be giving your heads-up at five and at one. Over to you, MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thanks, Chair. I put a tie and a jacket on, because I'll be asking questions of Associate Minister Walker, and he's wearing a tie and jacket, so I couldn't be outdone by him on this.

Minister Walker, I want to thank you, first off, for all the hard work that you've done on natural gas expansion. One of the things that we've learned today is that through your efforts the natural gas expansion program will allocate more than \$234 million to support 8,750 connections in 42 rural, northern and Indigenous communities.

My question is regarding those already connected to natural gas. They're looking to conserve heat and energy throughout the year in order to make the best use of their natural gas savings. Minister, can you let us know about how constituents can conserve natural gas in their own homes?

Hon. Bill Walker: Thank you very much, MPP Smith. You are, in my mind, Dapper Dave. The only way you could look better than with that suit and tie on is if you had your kilt on as well. Perhaps you do; we don't know that. It's always a pleasure.

Dave, we're very excited about that. As I said in my one leadoff, when I was doing the original natural gas, that \$250-to-\$1,500 savings per home can then start looking at things like weather stripping, new windows, new doors, a more energy-efficient furnace, new and different styles of light bulbs. There are all kinds of opportunities for families to then have their choice and to do what they believe

is going to assist them. Energy-saving appliances: There are all kinds, a myriad. To those who may be wishing—those savings won't certainly pay for it—in-ground heat source pumps: Whatever their version that they want to go to, this just opens the door to them.

I think you've offered up an opportunity, as well—I don't know if MPP Tabuns is on, but I'm going to offer two things, and I believe I'd also like to also offer one in regard to the natural gas conservation. But what I want to talk about first is, MPP Tabuns talked about plugged intake pipes for nuclear, shutting them down. But he didn't reference anything about those intermittent power sources such as wind turbines or solar panels. I'd like to understand, in his mind, how many times a nuclear plant has been shut down in the last five years, for example, because of an intake pipe, as opposed to how many days the sun didn't shine and the wind didn't blow and you had to fire up a gas plant, which is not very environmentally safe or viable. So that was one thing that I wanted to ask him.

He continues to talk about subsidies, but he and the NDP, every single time that the Liberals put a budget in, supported the Liberals in their budget to actually give subsidies, particularly to the Green Energy Act, which he noted in his opening remarks. The Auditor General noted that \$39.4 billion was going to be spent by Ontarians—\$39.4 billion. What could that have done for our energy sector, for conservation, for schools, for hospitals, for long-term-care facilities? I didn't get a chance to really ask him that at the time.

Now, I want to just turn to, if I can—because, again, I was trying in his questioning to give a fulsome answer and to provide context, because I think it's important. We're in, as many people say, the bubble. We understand this stuff. We know what's going on. But for the public outside listening and watching, I was trying to give some context in my answer in regard to his natural gas concerns. I want to just share with people that, in Ontario, Enbridge has in place a voluntary plan that allows natural gas customers to opt in for renewable natural gas. This is a consumer choice in place now.

I also wanted to share with the people listening today an excerpt from a letter that Minister Yurek and I wrote to the OEB, stating our support for renewable natural gas. I'm just going to edit it down because I don't want to burn all of your time, MPP Smith: "The environment plan commits Ontario to achieving a GHG reduction target of 30% below 2005 levels by 2030, in line with Canada's 2030 target and includes an action to 'work with the Ontario Energy Board and natural gas utilities to increase the cost-effective conservation of natural gas to simultaneously reduce emissions and lower energy bills.'" That was [*inaudible*] and myself to the Ontario Energy Board.

Further, we travelled down to St. Catharines, and ironically it was an event with Walker Industries and, again, renewable natural gas. It was a great opportunity to be down there and see what they're doing.

1400

I'm just going to share the quote that I offered that day: "Our government is committed to fostering job creation

and innovation in Ontario's energy sector, and this investment in clean energy shows that our commitment is working," said Associate Minister Walker. "I am pleased to see that our government has created the conditions for exciting projects like Enbridge and Walker Industries' renewable natural gas project to move forward."

So I think we're doing some pretty innovative things. I think we're working in collaboration. At the end of the day, we are doing that.

I'm just going to finalize this question, if I can, and I will send a copy of that letter to MPP Tabuns, if he's not on the line. He suggested I was a straight shooter and pretty straight up with him, and I want to make sure we followed up, as we did. But it's interesting—I want to leave a question for him to think about as well. We modernized the OEB, we made it transparent and independent, and yet now he's saying we should just, with the stroke of a pen, send a directive and tell them what they should do. Well, you can't have it. Pick a lane. To be clear, is he asking me here to override their independence or does he really want us to create an independent board without government interference?

Thank you very much, MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thanks, Minister Walker. Actually, you kind of read my mind on that, because I was going to lead you into the renewable natural gas. But you stole my thunder and answered the question before I was able to ask it.

I'm going to pivot a little a bit, still with natural gas, though. Where I want to go with it—we've talked a lot about residential; we've talked a lot about individuals and the cost of electricity, the cost of natural gas and so on for them. What we haven't really elaborated on is what we're doing to help businesses when it comes to conserving natural gas. Can you give us some sense of what we're doing on that?

Hon. Bill Walker: In our natural gas expansion, the first and foremost thing I want to say is the ability for them to save up to 30%—so again, they can go back and they can retool, they can go to energy-efficiency programs, they can go to whatever the energy sources are in their unique facilities to be able to do more energy-efficient conservation and ensure that they are able to do that. I think there's all kinds of opportunity. It's the ability to, like we have said since the day we got elected, put more money back in people's pockets, whether that's a homeowner, whether that's a farmer in the agricultural sector, whether that's a small business, a medium-sized business.

Minister Rickford today alluded to the industrial rates that we reduced by 15%, making them competitive, ensuring that there are jobs and that they, again, can reinvest whatever that money would be back into making them more energy-efficient, making them more environmentally efficient and sensitive. I believe there are a number of things that we're doing across government, with the Minister of the Environment, with ourselves and with some of the other ministers like Minister Fedeli in job creation, being able to provide funding to complement and allow them to be even more energy-efficient and find savings in their own business and energy efficiency.

Mr. Dave Smith: You talked a little bit about individuals, you've talked a little bit about businesses and how they can save on it, but one of the things that hasn't been brought up yet today is—and I'm hoping that this is something that you can give us a little bit more insight into as well—my understanding is that we've done some expansion of natural gas into a number of the First Nation communities. Do we have something, then, that is going to help First Nation communities save and conserve natural gas?

Hon. Bill Walker: Absolutely. There are two very specific ones. One is Red Rock First Nation, which will help 77 customers connect to natural gas. I'm just going to find the other: the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte First Nation, 106 connections. Again, that is going to provide—game-changing for them—an affordable power source that is going to give them the opportunity to save money, to go back, as I said earlier—and a great point by you—so that they can then make other choices: put in new windows, put in weather stripping, more energy-efficient appliances, whatever they want to do there. I think this is fabulous.

In addition to those two First Nations communities, there are going to be two agricultural projects that are going to have significant impact, which, again, will be just great for their communities for sustainability. They are going to be in Brockton, in Bruce county, and the Grimsby-Lincoln project in Niagara—again, certainly agriculture and in some cases agriculture/greenhouse industry, which provide good-paying jobs, and that's that ripple effect to the economy; and, of course, two industrial programs as well in the Hamilton and Niagara areas that are going to provide 7,000 direct and 5,750 indirect jobs and approximately \$1.5 billion in local investments.

As you're well aware in Peterborough-Kawartha, when that money is there and people have the security of a good job, they start to do things like a home renovation project. They'll put more energy-efficient products into their home to lower their costs and have more money to be able to utilize for their family, for their family's education, to take care and help with parents, long-term care, sports and recreation—which I know you're a big, big fan of and have done a ton of things in your community to ensure people are healthy and fit and, frankly, helping with their mental health as well. All of these things in my mind are a ripple effect.

I just want to restate that in phase 2 of the natural gas, which you graciously brought up, there are 28 projects in 43 communities across the province: in southeast Ontario, southwest Ontario, central Ontario, northeast Ontario, northwest Ontario. Some 8,750 new connections, minimum, are going to happen there. Families are going to save between \$250 and \$1,500, and up to 30% in savings to businesses. So, again, huge opportunities, great sustainability, especially coming out of COVID, where people are going to have more affordable abilities in communities across our great province.

Mr. Dave Smith: If we make the switch to natural gas—I'm going to lead you into something here—it's a more affordable way of heating your home. But if your

home is not efficient, it really doesn't matter what you're heating it with, there is an awful lot of wasted money, because energy is lost in different ways by the heat escaping, or cold temperatures in summer, if you're lucky enough to have air conditioning, that's lost.

We've got a Home Winterproofing Program that offers a number of opportunities for low-income customers to save money. It's not just switching to natural gas, then, where they're going to see a savings. How does this program help find savings for people who are already struggling to find ways to reduce their energy costs?

Hon. Bill Walker: Great question, Dave. Thank you for bringing it up, because it is so critical to those people, particularly the less fortunate that don't necessarily always have—so we have programs specifically for on-reserve First Nations and lower-income Ontarians. Again, we'll do a home energy assessment; direct installation of weatherization services at no cost to the participant; financial incentives if the participant chooses to upgrade an end-of-life furnace, for example, to a higher-efficiency model; water conservation measures, for example, shower heads and aerators; smart thermostats; carbon monoxide monitors.

In 2020, Enbridge Gas implemented a pilot project in select First Nation communities to help design future demand and conservation management programming. However, due to communities closing in response to COVID-19, the project was postponed shortly after it commenced. We're proud to say, though, Enbridge is hoping to work with community leadership to discuss when that program can be launched.

But to your point, there are many of those situations. We're coming in, and people who wouldn't be able to afford to do a \$500 or \$1,000, or whatever the dollar value would be, assessment to say, "Here's what you could save"—they just don't have that. So this is a case where, again, particularly lower-income people and, in many cases, First Nation communities can have access to those assessments and understand, and there are many free services that will come in and even do the installation for them that they can tap into. We're very, very pleased to have those types of programs around and to be able to be supporting them.

Mr. Dave Smith: I'm going to back up a little bit on that one because it sounds a little bit counterintuitive for a company like Enbridge Gas, for example. It's a private company. Obviously, they make money by people using natural gas. If we've got a program like the winterproofing program that reduces the actual usage, why would we do that as a benefit to the consumer when we've been accused at times of only focusing on making profit? Why would you put together a program that gives that benefit, that saves people money and reduces the amount of energy that they're using when we're working alongside a partner like Enbridge? Do you mind giving some of the logic behind that?

Hon. Bill Walker: Well, Dapper Dave, I think you're a myth-buster here. You're exactly bang on that we are not always out just looking for the dollar and chasing the

dollar and finding that. We actually truly have programs to support and encourage stewardship, conservation and demand management.

The other piece—and I'm just going to devolve a little bit because it was in my notes and I didn't get to it earlier when MPP Tabuns shut me down. There are a lot of broader public service buildings, about 170,000 buildings out there that, again, need that assessment. We need to be able to measure their water consumption, their energy consumption and make them cost-effective because they're funded and run by government, so the more we can do there—to your exact point, the more that people can conserve, the more people can keep their bills down, that gives them an affordable opportunity to do other things that they choose to do, as opposed to just paying whatever that rate is. The more they can save, the more they have options and the more they have flexibility, and to what you said earlier, it's much more affordable. It's much [inaudible] what they are having.

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I think that's conducive to what we're trying to do, as well, working with companies like Enbridge to make sure that we are making life as affordable for families, agriculture and businesses as we possibly can.

Mr. Dave Smith: With that natural gas expansion—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Five minutes.

Mr. Dave Smith:—there have been a number of things that have come to my office. Chair, were you about to say something?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): No, just saying five minutes. It's just a heads-up at five minutes and one minute.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you.

Most of the people who are converting to natural gas are converting from oil, and there are a few who are changing from propane, but the vast majority of them are switching from oil. Why would we be promoting using a gas like natural gas, over another type of fuel like oil?

Hon. Bill Walker: Great question. Again, when I started to look at implementing this program for natural gas expansion, one of the things that I went to the ministry and asked was, "Let's look at this across the board," and "How do we lower the net emissions prospect at the end of the day?"

Certainly there are other, less clean forms of energy out there. The more we can get people to stop using those and implement a cleaner form, we'll have either a neutral or a net gain in natural gas emissions across our province. Again, that's the goal of us working in conjunction—Minister Yurek has come out with an environmental plan. We truly are committed to ensuring everyone can do their part to support cleaner, gas-free dirty emissions and want to do that.

To your exact point, it's a cheaper form. We're going to save that \$250 to \$1,500 for a family. We're going to lower costs if people are on, for example, diesel or backup power like that in a business, up to 30%, and it's a win-win for everybody. We're getting off dirtier forms of

energy, we're actually helping the environment and we're lowering costs and making it more affordable for families, agriculture and businesses.

Mr. Dave Smith: Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Three minutes.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you.

I'm in a rural part of Ontario as well. I've got the urban centre of Peterborough, but I have a number of farms. I'm actually the sixth-largest geographic area for ridings, and one of the challenges that we have—I'm going to head off the conservation side of it a little bit. One of the concerns we have is with respect to propane and natural gas and the potential shortage because of what's happening with line 5 in Michigan. I know it's not specifically in our budget that we're addressing it, because it's a foreign entity that's creating these kinds of challenges, but I think it really needs to be emphasized how much Ontario still depends on fuels like propane and natural gas in agriculture, in agribusinesses. Someone who's living in an urban environment truly doesn't understand why this would be a big challenge for us.

I know we've had the take-note debate on line 5, but from your perspective—and you represent a rural part of the province, as well—what could really happen to our agriculture industry and what would happen to the price of food if we lost that stable supply of natural gas and propane out of Sarnia?

Hon. Bill Walker: Great question. Again, kudos to our colleague Bob Bailey, the MPP from Sarnia, who has done a fabulous job of raising the flag.

Dave, it's absolutely significant. I think it's 5,000 jobs just in the Sarnia area alone, and up to 17,000 to 20,000 across the province. That stable supply means every single thing you do—if you take that gas line out, you're now adding about 8,000 trucks and/or other forms of transportation. It's going to slow it down. It's going to increase the cost. For every single commodity that you can think of, the cost is going up.

We have stood as Team Canada with the federal government to push and say, "You cannot allow this to happen." All of the fuel that goes to Pearson International Airport comes from line 5. What does that do to the cost of taking a flight somewhere? What does that do to getting fuel to all of our farms in our communities? You've raised a very valid point.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Hon. Bill Walker: I just want to share as well, Dave, that even with propane and some of those other forms, there were 210 projects. We're only funding 28 of them, so there are still going to be a lot of those backroads in our areas of rural Ontario that are going to still have a need for propane or oil or whatever it is. We'll try to get to them as quickly as we can, but there's still, I think, a lot of pie for a lot of people. This is just a really safe, affordable way for people to have lower costs, more affordability and a reliable form of energy to their doorstep.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you for that. Chair, how much time?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): That's about it. You have eight seconds, so thank you.

Hon. Bill Walker: I could have got two more answers in.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Minister, that's so right. One of the constituents was looking at you and he asked me a question. He said, "Is he the minister of energy?" I don't know what he was trying to say, but I got what he was trying to say.

We are moving over to the opposition side. You have 20 minutes. Over to MPP, Mantha. Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Before we continue on with our earlier discussion, I do want to give you a little bit of information and context. The Iamgold mine: I used to play in my mom's office when she was the secretary over at the Jerome mine. That's how far back that mine goes in my family, in my knowledge. My mom used to work there. Actually, my mother-in-law worked there, my sister-in-law worked there, and my brother is working there. Those are very important projects throughout northern Ontario for many individuals.

I know you know the Sugar Zone, but we have yet to discover the Wolf Zone over at Harte Gold, and that's going to be even richer than what the Sugar Zone brought to Harte Gold.

Anyway, I want to go back to where we left off: the vacant local positions that are in various communities across northern Ontario. What is the plan for getting those replaced and filled?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question, Mike. I want to pre-empt it by tapping into I think another itch you were perhaps scratching, and that is the importance of people from northern Ontario on various boards in various ministries that at first glance may not always affect or appear to impact northern Ontario, but in fact do. That's why I can assure you, friend, that at cabinet, I make it my business to review any and all appointments, take a full assessment of those boards and what they do, and ensure that good people—non-partisan, good people—are appointed to those boards.

Similarly, as it comes closer to home in my ministry—and I think as you well know—we ensured that the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund board, for example, reflects the areas across what constitute more than 800,000 square kilometres. If you have any questions or concerns about that, either in the context of today's meeting or outside of that, please feel free to give me your suggestions.

Mike, listen, these are essential, not just for addressing mining but for the other important work that northern development and mining does in our small communities. Of course that goes to the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. You probably don't know this but you and a couple of other MPPs out there in northeastern Ontario referred to Norm Miller and I as the twenty-percenter club. Norm and I are in the 4% club. You have every right to look perplexed. But that's the amount of money historically that your riding—which you actually noted to me one day in the House of the Legislature—is receiving from the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. In contrast, of course Norm and I are receiving a paltry—

Mr. Michael Mantha: Damn, they have a good MPP there, don't they?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I can assure you that structurally we're endeavouring to change that and make it more equitable. I don't dispute that you have done a great job of representation, Mike; I've always wondered how you find out about all the announcements I arrive at in your riding. Something good is going on in there, I can assure you.

Anyway, to the point, those folks who work in northern development and mines do more than just deal with prospectors' claims and various other things that end up in the Ministry of Natural Resources' offices ultimately, or what have you. Those are the front, forward-facing people to the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. For example, I know in your riding I think you have—I'm just going to double-check here, because I wrote it down: Five northern development and mine advisers serve your district out of the Sault Ste. Marie office currently. You have one adviser in Gore Bay, one adviser on Manitoulin Island and another adviser in Wawa. Is that consistent with what you understand, Mike? Sorry; I'm not supposed to ask questions, but I just want to verify. That's verification.

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Mr. Michael Mantha: Yes, you're bang on. There are a couple of positions not only within MNDM, but other positions, local positions, that were held with various other ministries as well. There seems to be a focus change from local autonomy to regional representation and decision-making coming out of those offices. Like I said, here in Elliot Lake, we had the one position since 1976, and we no longer have that position.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'm certainly happy to follow up on that specific position, Mike. Obviously you can appreciate that I don't track every single location. I have asked questions about my own district, obviously. No offence to Algoma—it's a pretty vast piece of land—but Kenora–Rainy River is the size of a small European country, and we have a representative in Dryden, Sioux Lookout, Fort Frances and then the hub, of course, in our biggest city, in Kenora, and then somebody up in Red Lake.

So you're right: It is terrifically important that these exceptionally small towns—even by other standards, to our friends in southern Ontario; I know they've got some little itty-bitty towns, but we've got some little itty-bitty towns. The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund renewal program is focused on those people, because those towns are generally only there for some very specific, particular resource activities. Without representation there or access to it, it becomes difficult.

I can assure you this, friend, and you heard it today at the committee: There is certainly no activity in my ministry afoot to compromise those representations in those small towns. In fact, I continue to be a huge advocate for a decentralization of that. As you can probably imagine, I would love the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines corporate office to be located in the capital of northern Ontario, otherwise known as Kenora, but you can imagine what Ross would do to me—sorry; I've got to stop there. That triggered a question.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Well, we're going to dispute where the capital of northern Ontario is on this call for quite some time. I see Judith is here too, so I'm not even going to go into that conversation.

Along those same lines, I know you're dealing with this problem, Minister, and it's in regard to funding for FONOM and funding for NOMA since the Conservative government has been elected. These organizations normally received funding to the tune of about \$50,000 per year. Now, I understand that NOHFC, your ministry deems this more of a municipal responsibility, so therefore there has been some discussions between your ministry and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. My question to you is just a simple yes or no: Has this been resolved, and when can the organizations receive or anticipate receiving their funding, so that they can continue on with their objectives and goals of representing municipalities?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question. The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund will continue to fund these activities, Mike. We reserve the right to try to understand how that works, and in the end there were no cuts in funding, but in fairness to FONOM and to NOMA, we wanted them to understand that we consider the resources within NOHFC, especially when it comes to things for meetings, to be used responsibly.

Over the course of COVID, I have met with the board virtually, and this has given us an opportunity to understand how we can do that more cost-effectively. I realize that there is context, and frankly I can hardly wait, as much as I love Lake of the Woods, to get into other parts of the province. I've got lots of things to announce, especially in Algoma–Manitoulin. My goodness, the Northern Ontario Recovery Program is coming to a theatre near you very soon, as the COVID restrictions permit. Look, we want to encourage these organizations. They provide us with important information on the ground, and I appreciate both presidents tolerating some scrutiny of this as we transition to the new program.

Mr. Michael Mantha: So they can anticipate their funding shortly, or—

Hon. Greg Rickford: I will get for you here in a moment the status of any application actively that they have, but they can anticipate ongoing support from the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund.

Mr. Michael Mantha: It wasn't for a specific project that they were looking; it was just their annual funding that they utilize for their daily functioning, their yearly functioning. That's what they were asking.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I completely realize that, Mike. They still will have to apply for that. At the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, Mike—and I'm sure you can appreciate this because I know you well enough by now that there's a certain kind of fiscal conservatism to you. In other words, you don't like wasting tax dollars. This is not a waste of tax dollars, but there can't be a feeling of entitlement. We want to make sure that whatever resources, kind of like the board itself might be required to support meetings and gatherings by these various organizations—it has drawn our scrutiny. They've listened, they've responded,

and their annual funding will come from the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, but it will be through an application process, so that we have an opportunity to appreciate how carefully they will treat the taxpayers' dollars.

You remember that the Auditor General, Mike—the only thing in the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund that managed to attract her attention was the lavish parties, if you will, or meetings of the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund at destinations all across northern Ontario: food and drink and stuff like that. I don't think that's necessarily a good use of our dollars, and I see Judith concurring with that.

We don't want anybody to fall into a category of recidivism. If they're coming back annually for their funding, we want them to know that we're taking a good look at that and ultimately there are no cuts to their funding and they can expect that funding in the coming months. Thank you for indulging me, Mike.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Thank you. Chair, how much time?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Not enough. Keep these questions coming.

Mr. Michael Mantha: What?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): You have eight minutes.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Oh, jeez, lots of time. Okay, there are two other things I want to cover in this round: one is interns and the other one is tourism. Which one do you want first?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Interns. I'll take interns for \$100, please, Alex.

Mr. Michael Mantha: All right, no problem. There are many times organizations secure an intern. They have that brand new mind out of a box, ready to be moulded, and they get this individual into their organization, they connect with stakeholders, they do all the networking that is required, but then, they get into the challenge that they can only use that individual for one year. Then we get into that debate, "Can we have him or her for the following year?" and we get into that debate.

Through the NOHFC internship program, is that debate going to be explored so that an intern can come for the following summer so that the organization or business can capitalize on the knowledge that they provided to this individual?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Okay, Mike, I'm not sure I entirely understood that. Are you saying an extension of the defined internship program or some kind of trailer for them to come back?

Mr. Michael Mantha: Yes, you're covering both issues of the question. I was going to go into part two of the question, but basically, that's part two, because as you know, it's so hard to recruit one of those students, those gifted students that we need, whether it's for economic development, job recruitment, community infrastructure programs or whatever that we have, either at a municipal level or an organizational level. Once we have that individual, we want them to remain, but the experience is very limited.

What are we doing in order to provide an additional opportunity and expanded opportunity for the benefit of the organization, municipality or business?

1430

Hon. Greg Rickford: That's a really interesting question, Mike. I hadn't thought about it in that context, and it's probably because most of the emphasis on our reforms to the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund—gosh, you've gotten so much money over the years, I was going to call it the northern Algoma-Manitoulin heritage fund.

Importantly, the way I have looked at this is, what can we offer in an internship program that can get that person to stay there for an employed job immediately following the internship program? As opposed to something where some sort of business or whatever entity says, "Okay. We've used this intern thing. We're not keeping this person on, but we want them to come back the next year." Well, the short answer to that is they could come back to the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund for that internship program.

But the emphasis we're trying to put on—and so far we think we've had success, Mike. I'll get you the numbers. I don't have them at my fingertips, but I think, depending on the program, as they were, our retention for full-time jobs coming out of internship programs is around 80%, and depending on the certain kinds of businesses or the sectors, it's nearly perfect. I think you would agree that that is the ideal position to be in.

Then I'll just finish with this, because I'm sure you have a follow-up: Under the new Northern Ontario Heritage Fund with respect to these, we've actually expanded the internship offering, which may help address the underlying issue to your question, Mike. You'll know that there's the People and Talent Program, the Indigenous workforce development stream and the workforce development stream, placing an enhanced focus on addressing skills shortages in skilled trades in specific places and to provide apprentices with the ability to attend training throughout their development, which as you know we're working on to try to bring it right into areas in northern Ontario to stretch out their experience, to your point, especially in the skilled trades area, and hopefully retain them on a long-term basis.

Does that answer the question, Mike?

Mr. Michael Mantha: Yes. I think we're going to have some follow-up discussions on that—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Three minutes.

Mr. Michael Mantha: —after, I or through my staff with your ministry.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'd be happy to have that conversation.

Mr. Michael Mantha: In regard to tourism, there are some dollars that have gone into tourism. Yes, they're going to be helpful and they are appreciated by the tourism sector. However, the tourism sector I'm talking about is one that you're very familiar with, and so am I, which is remote tourism, where those individuals were left out of the initial tourism announcements. They have now

become qualified for the second one—great—but you know as well as I do those are almost pennies to pay dollars. There is some additional training that has dollars that have been provided, up to \$3,000 per employee to get this training done. That's great. But what the heck are we going to do for these outfitters and these tourist businesses when September comes around? Because we don't know—at least I don't know; I don't know if you have a heads-up or a crystal ball.

The border still remains closed, and many of these outfitters are relying on 90% of their clientele coming from the US. And for a lot of these businesses, it's not just turn the key, put the switch on, turn on the light and the business is open. You know as well as I do there is equipment that needs to be inspected. There are flights that need to be booked. There are individuals who need to come in. There are key players that are involved. There's insurance, there's liability and so on. What is the plan for some of these businesses that didn't initially qualify for some of those tourism dollars? What is the plan for them, come September, when the tourism season is actually over?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Mike, in answering this question—and I'm probably quite limited in my time, but I would be happy to return to it. Maybe another colleague on our side would provide the opportunity for me to answer.

I don't know what the rule is with respect to this, but I can tell you, Mike, that you of course are aware of the Northern Ontario Recovery Program that went a really long way to shore up a lot of nuanced support for these specific operators who are near and dear to my heart. If I was to count my first five closest friends, four of them own and operate these camps out in the wilderness, so as a former operator myself, I can appreciate the challenges they face. We can't change their business model, Mike. I think you would accept that, too. I wish there was more of an opportunity. These are long-standing traditions, that Americans visit them.

I know that Minister MacLeod, Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries did bring forward some renovations in her ministry for business supports, squarely focused on the tourism operators, and that they are rolling out. I don't have any intel for you, except to say that I found out today the feds are going to announce something in the next couple of days about land- and air-based border traffic for people with double vaccinations, but I have no details, friend. All I can tell you is that—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you. That's about the time. MPP Mantha, that finishes the time allocated to the opposition side, but you will have another opportunity in 20 minutes.

I do see MPP Pettapiece. MPP Pettapiece, go ahead, sir.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Thank you, Chair. It's good to see you in the chair this afternoon.

I would like to address this question to Associate Minister Walker, if that's okay. Before I start, it was interesting listening to our northern members talk about northern Ontario, how great it is and how great their communities are. Certainly we all do that, no matter what riding we're in.

I remember a few years ago when the Liberals thought that Barrie was the capital of the north, because they kept announcing programs from there. Fortunately, they're not around, because they didn't seem to understand the north as much as it should be understood. This whole province has to work together, no matter where you are. We have to be cooking on all eight cylinders—or four cylinders, whatever we want to choose—because we can certainly lead again in this country. I know we're on the road to recovery, and certainly this province can lead Canada as an economic engine. I think we all want to see that, no matter what side of the aisle we sit on.

Minister Walker, I want to talk about small modular reactors. You have some knowledge of the nuclear industry, as you did work at Bruce Power for a period of time. I've always been of the opinion that we can talk about all ways of reducing greenhouse gases by shutting this off and shutting that off and doing all these types of things, but I think we need to understand and embrace the technologies that have come forward in the last number of years to help with this situation. We also have to embrace those who are involved in these industries and their commitment to reducing greenhouse gases. There are many programs available in school on climate control and climate measures that we can undertake.

I see these SMRs, I guess is the term for them, as something that has come along and can help embrace our energy requirements. Certainly in remote areas I think there's really quite an opportunity for that. I don't know that much about the Ring of Fire, but it wouldn't surprise me if one of these reactors would fit up there for energy supplies. That's just my opinion right now.

We know that nuclear energy is not only the backbone of Ontario's clean and reliable electricity system, but it's also a vital part of our planning for tomorrow, ensuring reliable and emission-free power for multiple generations. The government continues to put everyday workers and families first by pursuing opportunities to create a more competitive business environment in Ontario. With a strong nuclear supply chain and experienced nuclear operators already in place, can you expand on the government's interest in small modular reactors and the benefits that can bring to the province?

Hon. Bill Walker: Great question, MPP Pettapiece, and I'm pleased to answer this. Just before I do, MPP Michael Mantha originally was very kind and said we have a great working relationship. We have worked on the Big Canoe, the Chi-Cheemaun and a number of other files. I want to thank him as well. You could tell by his and Minister Rickford's interaction that there's lots of good work going on, that we can be across the aisle and still get lots going on.

1440

This is another one of those, although I'm not certain if MPP Tabuns—I can't see who is on the screen. He's not a big nuclear fan, but I'm hoping, particularly for someone like you, Michael, with mines and those off-grid opportunities, that they're going to be able to provide clean forms of energy that are low-cost, clean, reliable for on-

grid and off-grid. So I'm hopeful that we can find a way that you can maybe bring Mr. Tabuns to the table to see the benefits of baseload nuclear supply, which currently fires 60% of our baseload energy, and these are going to do that in small communities.

As Mr. Rickford alluded to earlier in his comments, these are scalable. They can be very small for a very, very small community, or they can be scalable. They're modular, as we say, so that they're easy to construct and move. You can do them very efficiently and the cost comes down. The size and magnitude, MPP Pettapiece, again, can go from a very small one, two or five megawatts, right up to 50 or 100, based on your need. Particularly in those remote communities, whether it would be a mine or a First Nation—and we, again, will always respect the First Nations' ability to be a part of the process, but it certainly is that case where we're flying in diesel fuel to many of these. Again, you're spending the money on the fly-in, you're spending all the money, and all of that environmental impact that is there that you could actually put these modular reactors [*inaudible*] again, engineering, all of the maintenance, the skilled trades, the operators to be able to do those, which are well-paying and are great, great economic abilities for our communities.

We already have the world-class nuclear supply chain, so we're going to be able to give that, in my mind, the next generation of what we've been able to do with Candu reactors, and we're going to make sure that all of those businesses and the people currently employed by and making their lives out of those skilled, well-paying jobs are going to have a future to look forward to. I believe Ontario will continue to be leaders in the nuclear future.

It was great to see in 2019, in December, that memorandum of understanding with Saskatchewan and New Brunswick, and of course we've just recently added on—in consultation, after the feasibility study by OPG, Bruce Power, New Brunswick Power and SaskPower—Alberta. Who would have thought of that five years ago or 10 years ago? But Alberta says, “You know what? We see this as the future.” Even though they have their own energy industry, they're saying this is the way to go, going forward, so it's great to see that.

The report that I just referenced is showing that there are three streams of SMR projects, two in Ontario: a first grid-scale SMR project of about 300 megawatts constructed at the Darlington site by 2028, followed by four subsequent units in Saskatchewan, and a micro SMR demonstration at Chalk River Laboratories by 2026.

Just a little fun jab back to my friend MPP Tabuns and some of his colleagues: In the last election, they were prepared to shut down Darlington and a number of high-skilled and high-paying jobs. We're actually going the other way. We want to not only keep those and make sure that they're there; we want to make sure that we have the next generation of those skilled jobs as well.

This is, I think, a really good thing for all. If you start looking—I'm always a big proponent of not only those high-level supply chain companies that we think about, but all of the people who supply the supply to the supplier who

are supplying in parts of the province all across Ontario. Of course, the fuel for these will be determined and it will be safe, because of course it will go through the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, and all of those same things that we have enjoyed in our own backyard here that, again, fire 60% of our energy needs of the province.

We are the leaders. We're deemed to be leaders in the world in nuclear. MPP Pettapiece, you've got grandchildren coming up. I think this is a great career and, if I were you, I would be recommending that their parents start pushing them and saying, “Hey, think about some of these,” because I believe this will be a viable energy source for the future.

Of course, it's still, in lots of cases, in the discussion and planning stage, but I don't see how, in some of these cases [*inaudible*]. That diesel generator that we're still running in many remote and particularly in those Indigenous communities, how do we get off of that? How do we ensure that we're not just talking about it but we're doing something? I think it's a little bit down the road, but I don't think we're too far away where we actually have some very practical applications for small modular reactors; great economic sustainability, great job creation, and again, that innovation and creativity will continue to foster us and move us forward in the future. Hopefully that helps.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Thank you, Minister, for that answer. We have many challenges in this province. We're such a big province and some of our colleagues have said that their ridings are the size of small European countries. But challenges can be made into opportunities, and I think this is a huge opportunity that we have, especially since there are a number of other provinces that are interested in this and have signed on to explore positioning these small reactors in their provinces. You mentioned Alberta. Certainly Alberta is an energy supplier, but they also need electric power to help with their mining districts and with their energy sector. So I think this is a great opportunity for them, and it's led by Ontario, which is just super.

You talk about my grandchildren and their future. If you had them around you at any one time, you would see they're full of energy. They sure wear us out, anyway, when we've got them around. But I'm sure that this is an opportunity that they could look at down the road.

When the talks to the other provinces were involved, I wonder if you know anything about how that came about. What I'm interested in is, did they come to us and look at our expertise? Because I think we have a lot of expertise in this area, and I just wonder if that's how this happened.

Hon. Bill Walker: Absolutely, and again, great question. Don't take anything away; you've got lots of energy yourself. I've been out with you a couple of times and seen lots of energy when you're out working on the farm or at the hunt camp and certainly when you're on the campaign trail for those people in Perth–Wellington that you serve so well. You're an Energizer bunny in your own way.

This are a couple of things. I think one is the Canadian Nuclear Association, which covers all of Canada and is a great organization that works at the federal level and all of those. I'm going to give Premier Ford a lot of credit here.

He has a lot of leadership in that room with his fellow Premiers. I think it was a discussion saying, “How do we work more collaboratively? How do we ensure that we can do things not just on behalf of our own province, but how can we collectively collaborate?” Again, this is something that can actually benefit all of Canada, it can benefit all different provinces that want to sign on, and I think we’ve seen that.

A couple of stats I’ll just share with you. The proposed Darlington SMR project and the four subsequent units in Saskatchewan can create the following economic benefits over their lifetime:

- 1,528 jobs during project development;
- 12,455 jobs during manufacturing and construction;
- 1,469 jobs during operations;
- 1,193 jobs during decommissioning; and
- a total positive impact on GDP of \$17 billion.

That’s, again, just one of the projects that we’re talking about. That could be something that we can export. We can, of course, go across Canada and North America, but like our Candu reactors, we can take this across the world, I believe, and solve a lot of people’s problems wherever we can.

I’m happy to talk more and more. I don’t know if Minister Rickford wants to add anything from his perspective. Certainly he and the other energy ministers from those provinces and myself—I’ve been grateful for the opportunity to sit at that table—have good relationships. They’re looking at all of our different energy needs and, frankly, our strengths and our weaknesses to say, “How can this work? How can we do things together?” Minister Rickford, from his federal days, has good connections with a lot of those federal ministers. We’ve had good meetings with Minister O’Regan at the federal level and Sonya Savage out in Alberta, for example, so lots of good work going on there.

Minister Rickford, I’m not certain if you want to jump in. If so, raise your hand, and if not, I’ll keep going.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thanks, Bill. Of course, I could talk about SMRs all day long, as you can as well.

Mr. Chair, how much time does MPP Pettapiece have on this? Would he like me to respond as well?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Minister, you have seven minutes. MPP Pettapiece can answer the rest of it.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Go ahead, Minister. This is something that really interests me.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes, on the scalability—and Bill spoke at length—I think the value proposition for the small modular reactor is the supply chain in Canada and in particular in Ontario. The reason I mention it is because it leads to something that maybe has not been talked about, but, as many of you know, is near and dear to my heart. Many people have talked about the applications of SMRs in the northern communities of Canada and in the northern communities of Ontario. I mentioned it in light of the Ring of Fire.

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But you know we need buy-in from the Indigenous communities before any of that can occur, so one of the

strategies—we’re quite open and transparent about it, and I do a fair amount of work with the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, which is headed up by Tabatha Bull, an extraordinarily talented person and a person I call a friend, to understand how we can support and inspire Indigenous-owned and operated companies to be integrated into the nuclear supply chain. At Abraflex, Desiree Norwegian is one of my favourite people—sorry, Jane; I call you “Favey Fave,” but she’s a favourite outside of government who is leading the charge, and it’s been very, very helpful to support and help narrate the potential application for SMRs.

COVID prevented us from doing this, and I just felt like the forum by Zoom wouldn’t do it justice, but one of our goals in the hopefully not-too-distant future is to convene a live forum to develop the discussion around SMRs and hopefully have new signatories, including some kind of representation and participation not just by regions like Nunavut, but Indigenous leadership. That way, we can move forward with a full appreciation for where the gaps might be in understanding how and where SMRs could actually be used. We believe that the brownfield site that we’re using in Darlington now, where three companies are moving ahead with scalable-size SMRs, has applications most definitely not just in remote and isolated regions of Ontario, but across the country. Premier Kenney has suggested these might function quite capably at in situ sites where oil sands are being extracted and processed.

There’s a tremendous opportunity here, but abroad as well. Canada is getting into the game of SMRs, and with the talented workforce that we have in the nuclear sector as a whole, SMRs really just become one among other important strategic business units in the nuclear sector. Obviously, refurbishment and decommissioning are essential tasks, but we’re doing them so well that other countries are starting to take a closer look and saying, “Wow, not only did they do this well; who’s doing it for them?”, and maybe tapping into that workforce when those large projects are done.

There’s medical isotopes and the closure of the Chalk River facility, which I presided over; making sure that medical isotopes were available to us on more of a regional basis, all across Canada, has worked very, very well. Of course, in Bruce, Bill, a simple nod from you would acknowledge that Bruce nuclear is doing an exciting amount of work with Ottawa around producing and transporting medical isotopes all around the world, including and most notably China. Next thing you know, SMRs just become another strategic business unit of a nuclear sector that’s growing, Randy. It’s clean, it’s green and it pays a talented workforce and supplies more than 60% of Ontario’s energy. I can’t say enough about it.

You have the power of your hand—or the Chair, of time—to stop Bill and me from talking about SMRs, but we’re twin brothers from separate mothers on this subject matter, because we see the opportunity and we know now as we speak that provinces and companies from across the country are choosing Ontario as their destination to participate, and/or wait with great excitement and enthusiasm

to see where they fit in the supply chain and what an SMR is going to look like that may suit their needs in the not-too-distant future.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Thank you, Minister—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): You have two more minutes.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Oh, two more minutes. Sorry, I thought you were either ducking and weaving with that microphone, Mr. Chair, or my time was up; I wasn't sure.

This is essential to understand, Randy, because when you look at a nuclear sector that can offer up those kind of strategic business units, I can't think of a jurisdiction in the world that is currently doing that or, if they could, would be able to do it better than us. We are the benchmark. We are the gold-seal standard for safety. Our record speaks for itself. Our large-scale nuclear operations are revered, and from—oh, I'm being shut down by MPP Pettapiece. I'll stand down.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Certainly, from your and Mr. Walker's explanation, your enthusiasm is something else. I wanted to bring this up: I was just informed of the businesses looking to Ontario to relocate a branch of their business to Ontario. It has to do with the agriculture sector, and that's as far as I'm going to go on that one. They're looking here to invest, they're looking here to grow their business, and it's quite an exciting business, from what I've been told about it. Hopefully this will be announced in the near future, because it has to do with agriculture, which is certainly something I'm passionate about.

But I think because Ontario is doing these things, looking ahead to see how we can prosper in the future, companies are looking here again. In the past years with the Liberal government, you know what happened there: We just lost way too many companies going to the United States or elsewhere because of the lack of programs or lack of enthusiasm by that government.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you, MPP Pettapiece. That finishes the time on the government side.

We will be moving back to the opposition side. You will have 20 minutes. Before you do that, I just want to say this: I'm really enjoying the co-operation and the collaboration between the members. Maybe I'm a supply Chair—that's why I look at it in a different way.

Another thing I just want to say: After this 20 minutes, we will be taking a brief break. The reason for that is not everything is possible virtually, so I need two minutes to leave the room. Back to you, MPP Michael.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I want to dive into the actual estimates, Minister, and hopefully we can get through this relatively quickly. I do want to say a few things: I always enjoy being engaged with people across the riding, and it's always encouraging to hear you, the minister, when you're coming to the riding or making an announcement about Algoma-Manitoulin. I will welcome those funds each and every time into this riding as much as I can. One of the reasons why is, as most of the MPPs here, we all have the pulse, the heartbeat—we're always available for constituents and we return calls. That's one of the most important parts of actually being an MPP.

But I won't take all the credit for those dollars that come into the riding. I always give credit where credit is due, and those are organizations, municipalities and individuals that are creative, innovative, persistent, tireless and resourceful, because, as you know, Minister, coming from a northern community, we do not have the capabilities or capacity they have in the larger centres. We have an individual that's probably the CAO, the fire chief, the coach of the hockey team that is in town, and they wear various hats, so there are a lot of responsibilities that fall on many individuals in a lot of the small communities.

Having said that, I want to get into the actual estimates, Minister, and the document that was provided. I want to start off by just asking a very, I would say, straightforward question: The NOHFC revenue versus expenses is down nearly \$40 million in revenues in 2019-20, and I was just looking for an explanation as to why.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'm not sure that I understand your question. I was just trying to look at this particular line item you would be referring to, Mike.

Mr. Michael Mantha: It's the three-year comparison of revenue and expenses. The revenues for the fiscal year of 2019-20 were roughly about \$83,684 versus the expenses of \$121,668, which meant there was a difference of almost \$38 million. So I'm just wondering, what was that attributed to?

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Hon. Greg Rickford: Mike, there's a couple of things that impact that line and it's unique to the NOHFC and how it operates. That is, its revenues and its expenses are on a rolling basis. So even though there's a baseline financial commitment from the treasury to the NOHFC, some funds are not all used up; others are returned. Some of the loan portions of the applicants are paid back. Some carry on as debt. Some years, for some of the reasons we just explained, there may be rolling amounts where an actual—\$87 million, for example, was spent by the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund on applications, not including its operating expenses, which we've brought down to be very low. Then, the next year, that amount rolls over and then we are at a \$113 million. Those are the reasons why those kinds of gaps exist.

In the last fiscal cycle—Mike, I'm not sure if it shows up in the line you're reading because I just couldn't find it at my fingertips; I apologize—the Northern Ontario Recovery Program moved into this space. We initially allocated the final \$20 million of last year's fiscal allocation to the Northern Ontario Recovery Program, but because of the significant pressure on that program—in other words, it was so well-received by businesses across northern Ontario and, in particular, in Algoma-Manitoulin, and I'll be out in the not-too-distant future to announce all of those—we increased it to \$26 million.

Now, I know that in your heart of hearts, you fully support that kind of intervention. We didn't get a chance to finish off your question about tourism and the importance of investments that are coming from a northern-based or -administered program like the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund to shore up where some businesses' supports may not have done justice, either by your opinion

and assessment, mine or business owners across northern Ontario.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I'm hoping to have a little bit more time to come back to tourism, Minister. It's just that this number stood out, because when you look at the three-year comparison, you look at 2017-18, the numbers are relatively low and this just jumped out at me and I wanted to ask the question. I'll just move on.

How much was spent on programs in direct funding by the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund in 2018-19?

Hon. Greg Rickford: In 2018 and 2019? We make the assumption that we will spend every cent of the \$100 million that's allocated, but as I said, we often don't realize that until several business quarters or the following fiscal year, until we've completely reconciled the commitments that we made during that year. As you well know, a significant number of the applications are of a loan and grant mix, and those loans are structured based on the applicant's capacity to come due over the course of future years out.

I can assure you that there's never been a compromise to the amount of spending within what's already allocated to the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund to ensure that we take full advantage of the money. If it isn't spent, it rolls over into the following year. But I think here—give me two quick secs—

Mr. Michael Mantha: You know, Minister—

Hon. Greg Rickford: You know what? I know what it is. It's \$108 million. That's the count for that fiscal year. So there you go. That—

Mr. Michael Mantha: It's \$108 million?

Hon. Greg Rickford: It's \$107.9 million. Given the precision with which you put your questions and the detail that you demand, it's \$107.9 million, Mike.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Okay. And how much will be—

Hon. Greg Rickford: So that's \$7.9 million more than the \$100 million. What's going on? Just a second, Mike. Let me go to the sheet here and tell you how much of that is the percentage that Algoma-Manitoulin got, because they've got a minister who cares deeply about—

Mr. Michael Mantha: That's okay. You can tell me about—

Hon. Greg Rickford: —and then I'll tell Sol that his riding only got 1%, because we're trying to make sure that those communities have access. Algoma-Manitoulin got around 22% during that fiscal year; Kiiwetinoong, around 1% to 2%. And I said, "By golly, we're going to change that lickety-split." That's why we've renewed the Northern Ontario—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Sorry, his hand is up. Mr. Chair, I apologize. I'm out of order.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you, Minister.

MPP Mantha, before you go ahead, I just want to remind everyone here: through the Chair, please. Raise your hand so that I can pass the baton to each other. I'm enjoying it—I'm loving it; I'm not trying to say that—but at the same time, we have to make sure decorum is met. I

have somebody on my right side reminding me, so I have to follow those procedures.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I apologize, Mr. Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Go ahead. Back to you, MPP Mantha.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Okay. Minister, we'll have all the time in the world when you come up here over the course of the summer to talk to me about all those dollars, and I'm expecting the invite. I'm expecting it, so that we can cut the ribbons and present the cheques over the course of the summer.

The same question: How much will be spent in 2020-21?

Hon. Greg Rickford: In 2020-21? Those numbers are not in, Mike, but they will come in at around the number I just quoted you for that fiscal year, unless our debt collection moves out as a liability. Again, this accounting is based on a rolling allocation we get from the treasury, but complicated by the fact that NOHFC effectively presides with a creditor function and doesn't realize some of the money that is still allocated to us so we can reuse it or repurpose it in future years out. So I wouldn't be able to tell you at the end—we're not even at the end; April, May, June—of the first business quarter how much we've spent. But here's what I do know: I believe, roughly, we were at about \$75 million by September, Mike. Don't quote me on that number, but we'll endeavour to get it.

Then we pivoted into the \$26-million Northern Ontario Recovery Program. We originally only allocated that to \$20 million, because, as I said, \$75 million to \$79 million had been used up, and that \$20 million would have met our \$100-million application.

But I couldn't turn down those small businesses, Mike, from Algoma-Manitoulin, who were saying, "Hey, wait a second. This Northern Ontario Recovery Program, with its \$25,000 tranches, is working perfectly for our businesses. Not only are they allowing us to adapt to COVID, but they are providing us with legacy infrastructure that we can move forward"—for example, tourist camp operators being able to build—are you saying hallelujah for that good news with your hand, or are you raising your hand?

Mr. Michael Mantha: Well, I only have a limited time to speak with you this afternoon, Minister, and I know all this good stuff, so I want to try to get to the other questions I have.

How much more time do I have, Chair?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): You have eight minutes.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Minister, how much of this one-time funding was COVID-related? Do you have that number for 2020-21?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes, sir, I do.

Mr. Michael Mantha: And how much of it is going to be permanent?

Hon. Greg Rickford: So, it's \$26 million. If it's anything like \$26,000,342.77, I don't know, but I'll get that for you here. These rapid-fire questions full of fact and detail can be overwhelming for me, Mike, but I do have them. I do know that we had initially allocated \$20 million

for the Northern Ontario Recovery Program, but as I said before, the demand went up to \$26 million and the board made, I think, the right decision—I don't know if you agree with the decision—to expand the Northern Ontario Recovery Program, because it was focused solely on COVID. We put an end to it, Mike, because we were starting to renew the brand new Northern Ontario Heritage Fund.

But listen, friend: If you think that there's time and space for that, I'll take your suggestion. We believe that the new-look Northern Ontario Heritage Fund deserves an opportunity to get to work. We've been at it since last September, and we thought that \$26 million was a pretty fair—in \$25,000 maximum tranches, it represented a couple of thousand projects, of which many went to the Algoma–Manitoulin area, so I don't think you'd want to turn back those pages.

1510

If you have thoughts on a COVID piece for the NOHFC moving forward, all I can tell you is that we would take it under consideration. But it would impact the new programming that we've got under NOHFC, and that might compromise some of those little towns like you talked about—Dubreuilville—in their ability to move their applications forward. And guess what? They're already in the hopper.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): MPP Mantha, go ahead.

Mr. Michael Mantha: On the NOHFC financial performance targets and results, there's a note 8, and I'll read note 8. It says, "Services were under budget as a result of the program renewal timelines and the focus on a reduction in spending."

Here's where I'm going with this: The government announced in February that NOHFC was to be reorganized with new programs. The audited statement for 2020 suggests that services, what the NOHFC offers to northerners and businesses, were under budget because of this reorganizing of programs available, and the focus was on reduced spending. So my question is on note 8, and again I'll read note 8. It says, "Services were under budget as a result of the program renewal timelines and the focus on a reduction in spending." Can you describe what the reduction in spending was?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'll do my best, Mike. Again, in that fiscal year—you're talking, just to be clear, 2020-21?

Mr. Michael Mantha: Correct.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Right. So that reduction that you're talking about was with respect to an accommodation for the Northern Ontario Recovery Program. That note would have been attached to Northern Ontario Heritage Fund spending. In other words, we put a pause, as you well know, on the program spending for NOHFC so we could come to the aid of thousands of small businesses across northern Ontario who were clamouring for some relief as northern businesses, particularly in the tourism section. That's why we allocated \$20 million. If you'd like me to write your proponents in your riding who received up to \$25,000 and say that we apologize for that because

it may have compromised NOHFC's annual allocation, I'm happy to do that, and maybe you could co-sign it, as somebody who supported it, but otherwise the reduction—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you, Minister. MPP Mantha, back to you, sir.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Well, I was looking at the plan that was put or rationalized behind this spending and what amount of this spending reduction is going to be through the traditional channels of direct funding available to northerners through the NOHFC. I was just trying to get to—there was a plan to do the reduction, so I'm just trying to get to an area where I can understand what that plan was and why.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): We have about two and a half minutes.

Hon. Greg Rickford: What I can tell you here, Mike, is that you're thinking about the wrong word. Flip in the dictionary to the word "increase" in spending, because that's exactly what we announced in the last budget with respect to our NOHFC commitment. So I think what you'll find there is a hearty addition, to the tune of \$25 million per year to the NOHFC. I don't know how you voted in the budget proceedings—I was not in that cohort—but I would suspect, with that kind of healthy addition, you quite likely would have supported that.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Minister, with all due respect, I'm just reading this note, and there was a focus. I'm just trying to get some clarity on what the plan was for the reduction in spending. The note is quite clear: "Services were under budget as a result of the program renewal timelines," and the addition to it was, "and the focus on a reduction in spending." So we came in under budget, the result of the program renewal timelines, and there was a focus or a plan on the reduction in spending. I'm just wondering: If that reduction was substantial, what northern businesses, organizations and so on missed out on a potential opportunity for some funds?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Mike, they didn't miss out on any. To the contrary, we got in and around \$80 million in the COVID crisis, and businesses all across northern Ontario came to us asking for COVID-specific relief. So we paused the NOHFC program—if you want to think of it as the crystal ship—and allocated the \$20 million for COVID-specific activities. That turned into \$26 million, so I hope that that's okay with you. If I'm hearing you say that the NORP announcements and the extended pause on the program renewal didn't work for you, then I'll be happy to narrate that in Algoma–Manitoulin—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes the time.

I do see MPP Babikian. Before we move over to the government side and MPP Skelly can ask a question, we have MPP Aris Babikian. MPP Babikian, please confirm your name and please confirm you are in Ontario, sir.

Mr. Aris Babikian: It is Aris Babikian. I am here in Toronto, in my constituency office.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. Again, as we were going through last time, I said we would be taking a two-minute break. Not everything is

possible virtually, so at this time we will be taking a two-minute break, and I will be back in two minutes.

The committee recessed from 1517 to 1525.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Welcome back. Thank you so much for your patience. I appreciate it.

We are going to be going to the government side. I see MPP Skelly. Go ahead, MPP Skelly.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Good afternoon, Chair. It's nice to see you in the chair.

Minister, I don't know if you want to address this, but before we went to the opposition side, you were speaking a little bit about what our government is doing and some hints as to what the federal government may be doing to help our tourism industry in the Far North. Did you want to continue down that path before we get into my line of questioning on red tape?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that, Donna. It's nice to see you today.

The comment I made was sort of late-breaking news on a couple of different media outlets that I frequent regularly to see what stories might matter to the work I do and the work that our government does. On follow up, just the fact that the Canadian government is looking at, with respect to the United States and perhaps other countries—and again, most of this is just generated by speculation in the media—but some comments from the minister to suggest that if there's any cross-border movement outside of what is currently permitted and heavily restricted, it will be focused on double vaccinations. I don't have any other information beyond that.

Obviously, I work very closely with tourist operators across the north and, in particular, out here in northwestern Ontario, in an effort to try to come up with some innovative ideas so that we might be able to get the flow of tourists from the United States coming back across the border, knowing full well that we've been very clear that the province—and I completely support this—will not be engaged in any sort of vaccination passport activities, that that be left to the federal government. To the extent that that's part of what they will be doing with respect to encouraging some reopening of cross-border traffic, that would be their business. But that's all the update that I can give you at this point.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Thank you, Minister. I wanted to focus on something that my ministry has been focused on under the direction and the leadership of Minister Sarkaria, and that is red tape reduction. As we all know, with these burdensome barriers that have been put in place by previous governments—in particular, the previous Liberal government—I think we had one of the highest numbers of pieces of red tape legislation in any province, in any jurisdiction across the country. But our government has been laser-focused on identifying these barriers and doing everything possible, working, of course, with you and other ministers to identify them and to remove them. We're doing this because we believe that it will make life easier for people accessing government services and creating thriving businesses and a business climate for good-paying jobs.

Now, our actions to cut red tape over the past few years have led to annual compliance cost savings in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Our province's mining sector plays a key role, an important role, in our red tape reduction efforts, given that it drives so much economic growth. We need to keep reducing unnecessary burdens in this sector so that we can continue to expand the industry and attract global investment and create more and better jobs in Ontario. Of course, earlier this morning when we had an opportunity to chat, you spoke about the opportunities in the mining sector because of the critical minerals that Ontario has in the north.

Industry representatives reflect the diversity of our mining sector, including accomplished leaders from exploration and mining companies, prospectors, Indigenous business organizations, and they have all provided our province with input on important issues that affect the minerals sector, helping to identify opportunities to better ensure growth, prosperity and competitiveness. By reducing red tape in the mining and mineral exploration sector, we can send a clear signal to the entire world that Ontario's mining industry is strong and globally competitive.

1530

Minister, could you explain what actions your ministry and our government have taken to reduce red tape and related regulatory burdens in the mining and mineral exploration sector, what changes are proposed, and how they will help people and businesses in the north and across the province?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question, Donna, and thank you for the work that you're doing with Prab and ultimately with Minister Fedeli. We're so fortunate that, out of the mix of the four ministers—four colleagues, I should say—focused on red tape reduction in northern Ontario's resource sector, particularly mining, three out of the four come from northern Ontario: you, from Capreol; myself, out here in Kenora; and Vic out there in North Bay, so you know a lot of work is getting done.

You heard perhaps earlier, Donna, MPP Mike Mantha in Algoma-Manitoulin talking about a noticeable change in terms of the response of this government to some of the regulatory challenges that mining operations at various milestones were facing. I appreciated that he was singing the praises for our government's work in red tape reduction with respect to the mining sector. Indeed, I had heard that from at least one other NDP colleague, from Sudbury—close to your neck of the woods—France Gélinas. Frankly, at the Iamgold announcement, judging by the number of MPs and MPPs who showed up from other political parties, I suspect that they have a deep appreciation for, on that particular project, all of the regulatory pieces that we had to remove in order to make that project a success, because otherwise it was sitting on a shelf collecting dust.

I remember at PDAC, in the first year that I was a minister, Iamgold telling me, “Greg, you've got to tell us whether you think you guys can move the regulatory barriers”—or “mountain” I think it was described as—“so

we can get this project to come to fruition. We may just announce once and for all”—“put it out of its misery” I think were words or metaphors that were used.

As I said, we deployed our SWAT team, a delta force of very talented officials in my ministry as well as my very talented ministry staff in my political ministry office, and like on so many other projects, we were able to help them move to the next important milestone. In this particular instance, it was a leave to construct.

Other than that, Donna, our focus has been, through the mining working group and through the work that we do with mining operations, to aggregate, if you will, regulations that are either redundant or that keep coming up as persistent challenges. So without compromising the safety of the workplace and our rigorous environmental standards that are embedded across our ministries as they might affect mining—particularly with respect to the Mining Act, which I preside over—we got to work, Donna, you and I and Prab and my team. I guaranteed Prab that for every single tranche of red tape reduction he brought into the Legislature there was going to be a mining component.

That’s a credit to the important work that you’re doing, the connection that we have with northern Ontario, you coming from the epicentre—or the centre of gravity, at least for now—for mining in northern Ontario. That’s shifting, for good reasons, but Sudbury will always remain on several levels the capital of mining in northern Ontario. It’s just that we’re moving at such magnificent speed in terms of other large-scale mining operations, some other big cities are going to come into play pretty soon, or some small towns are becoming bigger towns or cities because of our success.

I mentioned that we came forward with a number of changes in red tape reduction. Some of that was born of the Mining Working Group; some of that was coming directly from barriers companies were telling us about live. Let me take you through a couple of them. Some of the changes we proposed will impact mining bulk samples: NOHFC forms, approach to closure planning, licences of occupation, bulk sample thresholds and meeting SO₂ level thresholds on an annual basis for the big mining operations in Sudbury—all examples where we’ve not compromised our environmental standards, but made it pragmatic and workable for upstart mining operations, Donna, and long-standing ones like our friends at Vale and others who are operating in Sudbury.

We’re also proposing to amend the Mining Act to allow claim-holders to not have to seek permission to sell end-product bulk samples of minerals and to allow claim-holders to retain the proceeds from those sales as long as certain conditions are met. The ministry proposed to remove and replace multiple funding application forms from NOHFC repositories with a single dynamic application form that will cover all NOHFC programs. By reviewing certain regulations under the Mining Act, the ministry is also committed to strengthening and clarifying what is known as the graduated and scalable approach to mining closure planning, particularly in the case of advanced exploration. The ministry will also commit, Donna, to developing clear public-facing guidance on closure plan

requirements under the Mining Act. Regulatory amendments will follow at a later date—I suspect as soon as the fall session.

Ontario is, in fact, proposing to amend the Mining Act, 1990, to establish an online public registry in the Mining Lands Administration System for mining licences of occupation. As I outlined in my Ontario Critical Minerals Framework Discussion Paper, Ontario is going to commit to undertaking a review of bulk sample thresholds to ensure they meet the balance of a competitive mining sector with environmental protection and sustainability or responsible resource development as its key feature. Regulatory amendments may follow at a later date. By making these amendments to the Mining Act, we’re creating business certainty. We’re reducing red tape, thanks to the work you’re doing and, ultimately, increasing competitiveness and improving the timelines for mining industry proponents and other businesses with more precision, Donna, creating greater transparency and certainty for mining activities to move forward from prospecting and exploration into real mining activities.

I have a vision one day, should I have the honour of presiding over this ministry, Donna, to make more reforms to the Mining Act, build in greater accountabilities, involvement and participation with our Indigenous communities and also to actually promote mining. Many people have joked that the Mining Act is really just the mining act to deter mining activities in Ontario. I’d like to call it an act to promote mining in the province of Ontario if I had the opportunity. I believe in that kind of positive thinking, proactively reaching out to industry, listening to our professionals at the Mining Working Group and making amendments in the various tranches that you, Minister Sarkaria and Minister Fedeli are advancing.

Only your hand and the power of time can stop me from talking about this very important subject matter, Donna, but—

Ms. Donna Skelly: I will jump in then, Minister. One of the things I wanted to ask you about before I lose my time this afternoon is the role of broadband but through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund.

I want to go back to when we had an opportunity to visit North Bay. We stayed in North Bay because the plowing match was in that area. I think that was two falls ago. We had an opportunity to tour certain attractions around North Bay, and one was a permanent movie set. I believe the series *When Calls the Heart* is being shot there. Of course, we’re all familiar with the very, very successful series *Letterkenny*. It was an online streaming series that has become a cult success and very, very popular—a very talented group of people behind that.

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That is just one of the areas of northern Ontario heritage, our film industry, that we don’t always think about, but it is certainly growing and becoming a real factor in film in Ontario. As a province, we appreciate the importance of protecting and of course supporting all of our industries and all our for-profit and not-for-profits to ensure that every part of our province, including northern

Ontario, remains not only a good place to work, but also a really good place to live and to protect our stories, our history.

The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp. plays an essential role in supporting northern Ontario and its communities, and it's just as essential that its programs continue to meet the needs of residents right across the region. We know the north is ripe with the opportunity for growth. We've spoken about it for the past couple of days, just talking about the mining sector, but this growth requires strategic investments into key industries that will position the region for the economy of the future. Of course, COVID-19 has made the need for growth through strategic investment all the more necessary.

A foundational piece of ensuring growth is access to quality high-speed Internet, through the expansion of broadband. My riding, Minister, as you know, is part of Hamilton. Even though we are only kilometres away from Toronto, many of the people who live in the rural part of my riding do not have quality broadband, and of course it impacts their life. Again, with what we've seen, the challenges that COVID-19 has presented, we needed Internet so that we could Zoom. We're hosting a meeting today, a committee meeting, online. Of course, our students studied for the past year and a half online. We recognize that good high-speed Internet isn't a luxury; it's a necessity.

Though broadband is also a federally regulated industry, our province has a role to play, and so the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp. continues to provide a supporting role in the expansion of broadband right across the north.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Two minutes, approximately.

Ms. Donna Skelly: These programs will better serve the residents of northern Ontario. Can you please provide more details about the new Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp. programs which have been developed and how they will, through stakeholder engagement, address the need to provide and protect the programs and also help us with broadband expansion?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question, Donna, and maybe in the spirit of meeting the timelines here that we have, I'll zero in on broadband and just say this: Under the new NOHFC, we've created the enhance your community stream, it's called, to support infrastructure priorities in northern Ontario which will always include broadband. But the program's support of the broadband and cellular expansion initiative out of the NOHFC will complement other Ontario and federal supports to address broadband gaps in northern Ontario.

It is true that last year we started to put the brakes on a few of the broadband projects, because we were fearful that we were building it out by ad hockery, Donna, and we wanted to try and understand, both from our perspective as a government and the federal government's contribution, what larger-scale broadband initiatives would be rolling out and how the NOHFC could complement that. So it was very timely that we paused the NOHFC program spending, pivoted to the Northern Ontario Recovery Program under NOHFC to address specific COVID matters,

and now move forward with the broadband and cellular expansion initiative, which simply complements the work that Minister Scott and her counterpart, Minister McKenna, in the federal government have already announced and will continue to announce in the coming weeks and months, we expect.

Ms. Donna Skelly: And as you said, I was fortunate that my area is also part of the expansion to broadband.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you, MPP Skelly. That was timely. Over to MPP Michael Mantha. Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Michael Mantha: We'll continue on with broadband. We all recognize the importance of it. I'm not going to go into a long story about it, but I do want to bring up a challenging situation which I think the minister will recognize and respect. The carriers will not come to that one road or that one household or that one area because the fact is, those carriers are looking to get as many customers as they possibly can get in the shortest distance with the least amount of dollars.

There are communities and there are locations that are going to continue to be underserved. Not a lot of people know where Red River Road is. Not a lot of people know where Lee Valley Road is in my riding. They're not in the mainstream, and the carriers are not going to go provide those services there. I've spoken to the Minister of Infrastructure a lot about her announcements, and getting the best bang for our buck is what we're looking at.

My question to you, Minister: Is there a plan from the northern development ministry to address some of those shortfalls where some of those needs are absolutely going to be needed, like the community of Goulais River, which is basically a stone's throw away from Sault Ste. Marie, but is still struggling with getting a provider to come to that area? I can tell you numerous stories that I've shared in the House in regard to the Maltais family, where they have their two boys who were basically forced to go sit in the school parking lot to access WiFi Internet in order to do their homework.

Again, the challenge when it comes to broadband is going to be getting those carriers to go into those areas where you don't have the high hits, where you won't have the high usage. So is there a plan that the ministry is looking at for providing those areas with supports?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question, Mike. It's a great follow-up to help fill out some of the space that—unfortunately, MPP Skelly ran out of time.

We were discussing this yesterday. You had your ears on the call when Judith and I were talking about it. Yonge Street accesses parts of both of our ridings. I think Judith will share the frustration—and this is not a knock on our friends at Tbaytel at all, but this is broadband and cellular. Judith, do you ever drive by that one sign on Yonge Street there on your way to Atikokan? It says, "From the North, For the North." And you look at your cellphone and you've got no bars, right? Not a great place to stick up a sign advertising your cellular or your broadband reach.

Again, Tbaytel—just in case there's anybody watching our committees; I know thousands and thousands gather

around the TV to watch these proceedings, but to the extent that anybody from Tbaytel is watching—you do great work and you continue to build out in our small communities and the points in between. Because you're absolutely right, Mike. As we all know as northerners, it's not just about getting top broadband capacity to—I keep using Dubreuilville. I don't know; you've got Dubreuilville in my brain. You're probably up to some psychological thing to make me attract Dubreuilville projects on my next NOHFC board meeting.

But anyways, outside of that conspiracy theory, it's the points in between and those streets—I think it was River Street you referred to. That's what NOHFC wants to focus on, Mike, and that's why I said that there was a little bit of a pause in the middle of NOHFC's last fiscal year on some of the applications, because we knew that there was going to be a tectonic move, especially prompted by COVID, to take a look at broadband equality across the entire province, and for the federal government's purposes, across the country.

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But you and I know the dirty little secrets, don't we, Mike? We know that those streets in parts of those little towns—for example, if you take a look at Red Lake, you could say, "Look at what we've done for Red Lake." Well, Red Lake is really Cochenour and Balmertown, too, isn't it? You've got some towns in your riding that are just like it, and, Judith, it wouldn't take us long to get out of Thunder Bay to Oliver Paipoonge and some of those areas to understand very quickly that they may think they have the access to broadband that the big-city folks do, but they don't.

So through the Community Enhancement Program, Mike, under the new NOHFC renovation, our intention is to, obviously, support upgrades and repairs to vital community assets, which very much include broadband, and in particular, through the rural enhancement stream, what we're hoping to do is to support infrastructure priorities of those rural communities under specific population sizes. As the size of the town goes down, Mike, the amount of money that they can access goes up. Right? It's a beautiful ladder that will bring you to tears when you see how some of your small towns are going to get a fairer shot at what we're trying to accomplish. So the program support of the broadband and cellular expansion initiative, which I alluded to in MPP Skelly's question, will complement other Ontario and Canada supports to fill in those gaps by increasing the connectivity in unserved or underserved areas.

One final comment here—I'm always trying to get that important comment in before the hand comes up, Mike, but this is important—and that is, I've made it completely clear to Minister Scott that we need flexibility, and if her program can't offer it for various structural reasons, because they pair with the federal government, then to let me know about it, because what I can then do, Mike, is help support initiatives like we saw in Pikangikum, where they took up the Starlink program—you know, the satellite piece that Elon Musk runs? We're seeing a lot of people

down in Lake of the Woods who can't get access using that. I want to be able to address gaps in a flexible manner. So, in the shortest answer a politician can give, as short as the questions that might be put, the answer is yes, we intend to fill those gaps as they evolve and as they become realized through the NOHFC.

This was a key feature of the renovation, because, frankly, Mike, under the old program, we were stuck in these regards. All we were doing, to be honest with you, is building out broadband by ad hocery. What you were getting was broadband platforms that couldn't interface with each other, and as soon as I start talking technologically, somebody from my staff is going to text me and say, "Stop there, Minister," because I've been regarded, in computer terms, as a little bit of a troglodyte. But I know what powerful broadband is and I know when I don't have it. Out here what we're working to do, similar to your region, is make sure that the modernized NOHFC can pivot to identify those gaps, like the ones on River Street, I think you mentioned, that would qualify for access to NOHFC to shore up their connectivity.

Mr. Michael Mantha: When it comes to broadband, Minister, I think we need to have lots of discussions—and no, I didn't want to cut you off and no, I wasn't planning on cutting you off. I think it's far too important that we have those discussions and that people find out what it is. If it's a matter of them picking up Hansard and looking at the discussion that we had today, we need to have those discussions.

I know you've been talking with the mayor out of Huron Shores in my riding, Georges Bilodeau, and I did want to relay a thank-you message from him today for the amount of time that you have given him and his group, who are looking at expanding broadband in the area. It's a municipally led program. The benefit of what they're actually trying to do and trying to accomplish is two-phased: One is bringing broadband service to various regions of northern Ontario, but it's also providing them with an opportunity to have a second source of revenues for their municipalities, because they're looking at developing the infrastructure, and then they'll have the infrastructure and they'll be pursuing the carriers, and the carriers will come into the area and actually pursue it. So, again, I just wanted to relay that information, and give Georges the opportunity to say thanks for the time you have given him and his organization and his group. They look forward to continued engagement with the ministry.

I want to switch gears, and I want to go into local services boards now. In my riding of Algoma, we have several local services boards, like in many other communities, like you have in your area as well. The de facto municipality is the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines for all of these local services boards, so they look towards the ministry for help. They look towards the ministry for guidance. They look towards the ministry for rules and opportunities. There are a few instances where they feel like they're being failed and that they are not being considered with their concerns.

I want to go through a few of those concerns. One of them is in regard to abandoned buildings. Along the

highways, gas stations—and these are eyesores. These are economic cancers that are within the constraints of the community. They do not have the funds in order to deal with these buildings, these abandoned shacks, gas stations, motels, but they're an eyesore to the community. They take away the opportunity for enhanced attraction, for tourism and so on.

I'll give you a couple of examples. In the Agawa provincial park on Highway 17 between Sault Ste. Marie and Wawa, there's a gas station right in the middle of the park. It has been set on fire over the course of the last 15 years I don't know how many times. It's creating a safety hazard as well. There are hotels just on the outskirts of Sault Ste. Marie, turning into the communities of Aweres and Heyden, which, again, are creating areas where there are activities that are quite concerning for the public. The police have been involved, there are fires that have been set, there is vandalism that is going on, but there doesn't seem to be any ministry that is willing to step up in order to deal with these particular situations.

Then there is the small local services board off of Manitoulin Island, the Rainbow Country local services board, which is dealing with a daily bridge issue that the MTO is pushing on them. Nobody seems to be listening to the concerns they have for their community in regard to their ideas and what they believe would be an enhanced safety suggestion in order to get those repairs done.

Minister, my question is—there's a variety of questions here, but the ministry should be there for those local services boards, to guide them, to carry them through these issues, to support them and their needs, because, hell, they don't have the capacity. They don't have the engineers. They don't have the individuals to draw these plans. So my question is: Where can they turn within your ministry to get that assistance they desperately need?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thanks, Mike. I think you and I have shared similar pains, it sounds like, for how local services boards can survive. Just very briefly, one of the challenges I have: On one local road services board, an overwhelming amount of the traffic is from cottagers, and yet they're able to be parked all in one lot and only pay one lot fee, where they then shuttle across to an island where they're all on there. That has compromised the quality of that road and put a disproportionate burden on the other residents, most of them full-time, and made it very difficult for that services board to function. And so we work very closely with MTO on a lot of those.

I can only tell you that in the two instances—first, let me back up, Mike. I share your view on that, and I thought you were going to mention OPP stations as part of that. I know that there were a number at the beginning of ours that were closed and left open, and finally some of them gradually got to be put up for sale after they were remediated.

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As well, I'm aware of one or two of what they used to call halfway houses or transition homes that sat dormant and put the local area at risk, because of some of the residual sewer and/or contamination. They were just left

there too long, and that was through the Ontario Real Estate Board. On both those points, the minister at the time and the minister currently continue to make sure—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Five minutes.

Hon. Greg Rickford:—that those priorities are moved along, Mike, if they're crown assets and if it's on crown land, so we can obviously be more helpful.

On the private sector entities, what we found as well—I mentioned an OPP station—sometimes they're bought up by a private company because they're right on the TransCanada Highway, close to another major gas station chain. They may be acquired by them, and then they just sit on it, because they don't want somebody else to come in and open up a business that would compete with them. Do you see what I'm saying? So this dynamic can be very difficult and very challenging when they are left to local services boards, who are operating on shoestring budgets because they fall in what is not known to as many people down south: an unorganized territory, something you and I and Judith would be very, very familiar with.

With respect to that specific gas station, Mike, and with respect to the Bailey bridge—listen, I'd be happy to follow up on those two specific examples. They often involve an evaluation of the crown's obligation to any remediation and/or the enforcement of remediation for their sale, and on a case-by-case basis they're dealt with. If these are the situations with respect to those two pieces—and I don't expect that the Bailey bridge has the same matters as the gas station—I'd be happy to help you navigate. I can tell you, I've got a lot of experience in the past three years doing that, because I've had similar matters in my own riding.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Thank you, Minister, and I will take you up on that offer. In some of those private areas where there was an opportunity for a sale in order to potentially rebuild, the sale fell through because Infrastructure Ontario held back on releasing the amounts of back taxes that were owed on it, so those deals fell through. Because they didn't turn over quite quickly, then there's vandalism that takes place, and then the community is caught with an eyesore and you're—

Hon. Greg Rickford: To follow up on that gas station, Mike: I've got a feeling there's more to that story that we can help you with. As you can appreciate, I couldn't possibly know any of the details, but I think I can help you.

Mr. Michael Mantha: It has been one that I've been dealing with for the last 10 years, to be honest with you—

Hon. Greg Rickford: Wow.

Mr. Michael Mantha:—and I'm just looking at some type—because it's one gas station of many across this province, so there's got to be an idea.

I agree with you in regard to the OPP stations. I know there have been closures—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Two minutes.

Mr. Michael Mantha:—of OPP stations across where they've looked at amalgamating some of those services and I have been working with Minister Scott and Minister

Thompson in regard to releasing those stations for municipal interests and opportunity as well.

I think the Chair said I have two minutes?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute, 35 seconds.

Mr. Michael Mantha: What can we talk about? Minister, I want to get into a conversation with you: I'm sure you're aware that I want to talk about the Huron Central, the short rail between Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury. I understand that there has been progress. I've been very supportive of the progress that is being made. I understand the federal government has now changed some of their parameters in order to provide the funding, along with the province.

There have been no concrete dollars put towards this. There has been lots of discussion over the course of the years. You and I have had many discussions about this. Myself and Ross Romano have had many discussions about this. Locally, we've had many discussions about this. We know the importance of the short rail. We want to make sure that there's a long-term solution and not a band-aid solution where both you and I are going to be at each other's throats over the next two or three years. There's got to be a long-term resolve. I'll leave it at that, and hopefully when I get my next round, we can start off from there.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): You still have 30 seconds.

Hon. Greg Rickford: If I can talk over the Chair long enough, I can tell you that there's work in progress there, Mike, and I think all parties will be satisfied.

Sorry, Mr. Chair. Imagine, me purposefully wanting to talk over you—I apologize.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): No, no. You still have 15 seconds, Minister. I was just saying 30 seconds.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Do I have 15 more seconds?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Yes. You can finish the sentence.

Mr. Michael Mantha: A whole 15 seconds.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you, Mike, for raising that. There are some important contemporaneous developments in that file, and I'll have more to say about it in the not-too-distant future.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Moving over to the government side: 20 minutes. We do see MPP Cuzzetto. MPP Cuzzetto, go ahead, sir.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: First of all, I'd like to thank Minister Rickford, Minister Walker and PA Smith for all the work they're doing with this ministry.

Before I got elected in 2017, I used to work for Ford Motor Co., and the big issue there was the cost of electricity. I spoke to the controller at the time and they said, "If you ever get elected, Rudy, please help and reduce the cost of electricity," especially with all the robots that have been put into that plant in moving forward to building an electric car here in Ontario.

I know that our government has been committed to reducing electricity rates for our big industries here in

Ontario. I just want to know what the government is doing to reduce industrial electricity prices for businesses in Ontario.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that timely question, Rudy. First of all, I just want to take this opportunity to thank you for giving me those see-through masks. My daughters absolutely love them, and importantly, Rudy, my oldest daughter made the observation—Judith, you'd be interested in this with your health background. She said, "Daddy, I have to keep cleaning this mask because I'm breathing out all this fog"—

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Minister, all you have to do is, every morning put a coat of soap on it and it won't fog up all day.

Hon. Greg Rickford: That's fair. That's fine, but my point is that the fog is important because it made her realize how much she's breathing off into a cloth mask and why we should either have disposable masks, or if we're using cloth masks, why they have to be cleaned frequently and/or discarded because they collect a significant amount of condensation from what you're breathing off when you talk, when you sneeze etc.—so very, very useful. Anyways, I digress.

Look, on industrial pricing let me just say this: We engaged in an extensive consultation process, Rudy, and I will tell you right now, in all my years in this business, including a senior position in energy and resources in the federal government, and now an equally important responsibility provincially, and being involved in thousands of consultations, round tables, whatever they happen to be called at the time or presently, I have never been more moved by the level of emotion expressed by people in the industrial and commercial classes of electricity users in Ontario: tears from grown men and women who either represent their industries or represent their specific businesses; foul language—not necessarily directed at me; pure frustration with the model under the previous government.

Now this sounds a little bit like I'm going down a partisan rabbit hole. I'm not, actually, Rudy. These are the assessments and experiences of real businesses and real associations who represent them. The cost uncertainty, the lack of transparency, the laborious processes attached to the Ontario Energy Board and the growing phenomenon of behind-the-meter applications from automotive manufacturers like Toyota, put our entire electricity systems cost model at risk.

In addition, as you well know, we had a couple of other problems induced by COVID. Of course, the deferral of the global adjustment was a direct and immediate response. As I mentioned in a question that was put to me earlier, putting an end to the ICI phenomenon called "chasing the peak"—can you imagine? It was putting manufacturers, including the automotive sector, down, shut down during the summer. That's not happening this summer, Rudy. Your big automotive plants there are functioning quite fine, and they're doing it for a couple of reasons: (1) because they don't have to engage in this ridiculous concept of chasing the peak, and (2) we took the

bold and, we think, important move of jump-starting the province's economic recovery by reducing electricity costs for businesses, by funding a portion of the non-hydro renewable energy contract costs, effective January 1, 2021.

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That may sound a little bit geeky. Let me break it down for you and tell you why that matters to your inquiry. By removing the portion of the cost of renewables from our electricity system, we're delivering to Ontario's industrial-class and commercial consumers a savings of about 15% to 20%—15% to 16% specifically in automotive—on their bills. Actual savings for specific operations would vary depending on location and the intensity of their usage. But importantly, they no longer had to chase the peak, so they could run three shifts, Rudy, if they wanted to. They didn't have to cancel the day shift because electricity was more, because demand was higher. With these bill savings, Ontario's industrial electricity rates are lower or in line with many US competitor states. This was reported by the US Energy Information Administration.

In addition to being competitive on price, Ontario's generation mix was 94% emissions-free in 2020. That's important, because as major manufacturers from around the world take a look at North America and the jurisdictions therein, it isn't just the cost of electricity; it's how emissions-free they actually are. We think we're well positioned to receive and get back, to MPP Pettapiece's comments earlier, the more than 300,000 manufacturing jobs, many of them right in your riding, that were lost because the previous government had absolutely no desire to tweak whatsoever an industrial and commercial-class electricity price so that it was more transparent and more competitive, and it unfairly, disproportionately put the burden of those expensive wind and solar contracts on them because of the amount of energy—electricity in particular—that they required.

So the proposal to fund a portion of the cost of the renewable energy contracts would also maintain stability for customers who receive the Ontario Electricity Rebate, including residential consumers, small businesses and farms. These measures would provide people and businesses with bills that they can manage and help when they need it most.

I'll finish by saying this, Rudy, and I appreciate you indulging me: The combined impact of the global adjustment deferral repayment and funding of a portion of the renewable energy contract costs is a reduction of about 11% and 12% in 2021 for industrial and commercial consumers respectively. The consumer impact of recovering deferred GA costs is more than offset by government funding of a portion of renewable energy contract costs, which is also intended, as you can well imagine, to continue long after the recovery of deferred costs is complete.

Now, to the point that MPP Tabuns made: That hardcore fiscal conservative that he professed to be by virtue of his lines of questioning today suggests to me that he needs to understand moving forward how we can get out of the business of subsidies. Now, I'm sure that he doesn't want us to pull off subsidies like NIER, Judith. Do you

think he was talking about that today in his line of questioning? I hope not. These are essential subsidy programs for northern Ontario businesses, Rudy.

But importantly, once these wind and solar contracts, these expensive ones that completely blew out and distorted the electricity costs from one year to the next to the tune of 2% to 7% to 9% to 11% to 17% on an annual basis until they brought in the Fair Hydro Plan to create a debt trust—we've now moved that out into the taxpayer base because we know that over the course of time, and it's a long time but it's an important time, those wind and solar costs will become markedly reduced.

So, in about 15 years, providing we don't onboard any more of these expensive, lucrative, backroom-type deals to our electricity system as they were under the Green Energy Act—that only accomplished one thing, and that was to line the pockets of Liberal insiders with green, otherwise known as cash, and create expensive contracts that we now can't get out of. Those costs will be written down, not just as an accounting function but as to how much the province has to pay for them, and we will be relieved of some of the subsidies that we're doing now in the name of economic recovery coming from this COVID-induced recession we have been experiencing. Thank you for indulging me in that answer to your important question.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Thank you, Minister. What else I wanted to ask you too, on the same issue here: By reducing the price of electricity, have we seen greater jobs coming into the province of Ontario?

Hon. Greg Rickford: The early economic signals are yes, Rudy. I can't give you specific statistics. I can only tell you that major users in the industrial and commercial class have reached out to me and said, "Rickford"—that's what they call me—"we're staying." I said, "What you talking about?" He said, "We were going to pull up stakes and move out." This wasn't just about creating new jobs, Rudy; this was about protecting jobs in our province. I'm relieved they're making a decision to stay committed, and in the automotive sector, which I know is really important to the people of your constituency and across the greater Toronto area and deep into the heart of southwestern Ontario.

Now, as a result of these pricing changes and their incentives, we are not just competitive with our neighbouring jurisdictions—but what happened, Rudy? I suspect you could answer the question for me, and that is that the automotive industry announced, "We're not just here to stay, but when it comes to electric vehicles," as you mentioned, battery storage and all those new technologies, "we're not going anywhere. Ontario is the place to do this." We've got northern Ontario ready with their mining opportunities to make a fully integrated supply chain of those precious and critical minerals that go into making those, and we're going to do it right here in Ontario because we've got the supply chain. We've got a trained workforce that's ready to pivot to a modernized, more environmentally friendly car that is becoming more and more affordable to more and more people as time marches on.

The only way that that will be possible is to ensure that we make a competitive electricity price, not only for those automotive manufacturers, by way of example, to operate but obviously in terms of the cost of things like charging stations for the future electric vehicle to be an affordable proposition. Because we know, in the past, the Liberal elites have spared no expense in making sure that people who want Teslas—and I've got no problem with the car. I personally can't afford one, but subsidizing people to buy those is not where the smart money goes. I noticed that the federal government revisited that program on their own. You have gazillionaires running around in subsidized Teslas, but people can't afford to shift out of their diesels or their bigger gas-powered vehicles because the incentives are focused on wealthy people buying electric vehicles.

No, Rudy, let's invest in a supply chain in Ontario that's driven by a reduced cost of electricity and a commitment by those automotive manufacturers to build affordable, battery-powered cars for everybody, so that within the next generation or half of a generation, I'll be able to drive a Ford F-150—and I know I'm going to draw fire, probably from people in my own caucus, on my choice of pickup trucks—that hopefully one day is electric-powered. I know it's already a four-cylinder. It makes me nervous sometimes with a truck that big, given some of the stuff that I haul, but nonetheless, it's headed in the right direction.

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Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: It is headed into the electric vehicles. The F-150 will be electric, and I know Oakville will be building five electric vehicles out of that plant, which is great news for the economy and for Ontario in general.

I might go back to mining here a little bit. One thing that I believe is very important is that we mine our materials here, because in other countries they do a lot of environmental damage while they're mining. Not only that, they're using a lot of child labour, which we would not do here in Ontario. What do you think of mining more of our nickel, our lithium, our cobalt right here in Ontario to move forward and building the battery right here in Ontario?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Let me sign off quickly on workplace safety and standards. There's always an opportunity to do better, and I know Minister McNaughton takes this as one of his top priorities, if not his top priority. Our mines, without exception—and accidents do happen from time to time—are world-class, Rudy. As I said, there will always be an opportunity to improve, but what keeps me awake at night, Rudy, in the mining sector—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Four minutes.

Hon. Greg Rickford: —connected to your question is whether we're going to make a choice here in Ontario to simply extract those critical minerals, or whether we are going to get into the business of processing more of them, so that we can fill out that potentially lucrative supply chain.

If I could just take a show of hands, and this is not a political question: How many people think we should mine lithium and cobalt and process it in Ontario, preferably northern Ontario? Can I see a show of hands? All right. We've got consensus again, true to form. Even our colleagues along the way, indisputably, are saying, "Let's do it." That's why Judith is getting up in the morning now and saying, "Hey, what's going on about all this talk around lithium potentially being processed in Thunder Bay?" That's a very real prospect. Your only concern in this regard, Judith, is that those folks down in Sudbury think they have a shot at it. So you and I had better get together, because the cluster of lithium mines of a certain quality that are popping up in your neck of the woods and my neck of the woods beg us to invest in processing capacity in Thunder Bay and pulling them in more meaningfully to the mining sector as a whole.

Similarly, Rudy, with the cobalt plant: Minister Fedeli and I had an opportunity to announce a \$5-million announcement in Cobalt. It was rare for me not to make an NOHFC announcement in Algoma-Manitoulin—I'm so used to doing it—but we went outside the borders of that particular political riding on this occasion to ensure that Cobalt, Ontario, had a chance to process cobalt. It's appropriately named. The town is now in a position to be the only and the first cobalt processing facility in North America. That means one thing, Rudy: We're ready now to go from mining cobalt, to processing cobalt, to fully integrating it into the technologies in southern Ontario for the benefit of the manufacturing sector. So the republic of northern Ontario—did I just say that? I'm sorry. Northern Ontario is now in the conversation of being a part of a fully integrated supply chain for critical minerals.

When it comes to things like lithium and cobalt, what I'm really worried about is whether and how the government can move at the speed of business to ensure that Ontario, and in particular northern Ontario, can be part of that action.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Hon. Greg Rickford: The early signal suggests that we can do it and that we are doing it. But if we don't keep our pedal to the metal, whether it's gas-powered or electricity-powered, we're going to miss the mark, because we already know, as I said earlier, that Quebec is on the move with lithium, and other jurisdictions like the United States just want to take our minerals and process them down in the United States. We'll stand firm. I hope the federal government will stand shoulder to shoulder with us as we prepare Ontario to have not just mining capacity but processing and manufacturing capacity with our critical minerals. Thank you for that question.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Real quick, on the prospecting of critical—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): MPP Cuzzetto, that concludes the time. It was perfect timing.

Yes, MPP Michael Mantha. Back to you, sir. You have 20 minutes.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I found a question that I forgot to ask the minister earlier, and it's in regard to mining development and the tradition of opening up a mining

camp. We know the story: You identify the ore, you get to the ore site, you build a road to the ore site, you develop it, then it's followed by a camp, it's followed by a road, and miners come in. That's the miners' life that we have: They establish themselves in a camp.

But there are subsequent hardships that are felt by municipalities. One of them is, because those camps are set up outside of municipal boundaries, they don't get the taxation revenues. However, those individuals and those companies use municipal roads. There's a larger portion of individuals that go to the grocery store, the gym facilities, use the rinks, book times, are within many of the services that are there. There is more need for infrastructure, higher water consumption, so on and so on and so on.

Anyway, many of the municipalities are asking, "Well, what about us? We want the development happening and let's not turn away the opportunities for jobs and everything, but what about us, the municipalities? We're feeling some of these hardships."

I just want to turn it over to you now, Minister. This is not new to your ears, I'm sure. We've all been at ROMA. We've all been at OGRA. We've met with many delegations. We've heard this over and over again. Is there a plan? Is there an objective? Is there a thought in regard to how we can address some of these additional stretches that municipalities are feeling under infrastructure?

Hon. Greg Rickford: You know, Mike, that is such a great question. I think of it every day. When was the last time you were out in my neck of the woods, in Kenora?

Mr. Michael Mantha: I don't know. You better invite me for some of that bear. I'll bring the bacon from my area and we'll wrap that bear up and we'll put it on the barbecue, and do you know what? I think we're going to resolve a few things if we sit down and have a chat.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I agree, although I'm not as big a fan of backstrap bear as I am its burger, just because I have a friend who has a 100-year-old recipe that mixes into it. Toby, I'm getting you all fired up now. Toby Barrett loves his wild game. But I'll tell you, my bear bolognese is known, at least in the beautiful little town of Keewatin.

The reason I asked you that question that way, Mike—and I'll welcome you for some bear. In fact, I'll bring you some bear. If I can't make it down to Toronto, I'll bring it over to Manitoulin. But in any event, the difference is Kenora to Keewatin is only a couple of minutes, but in between us is Kenora Forest Products, as it was formerly known—oh, there you go. Okay, you've got a container for me. But, Mike, that little stretch of road, before you hit the Keewatin bridge, takes more wear and tear than most roads can imagine. Why? Because those logging trucks have to come into town. You know, some of these old mills were built in the heart of some of our towns back in the day, 1930, when Kenora Forest Products was actually Keewatin Mills, as they knew it at the time, and now we've grown all around it. So up those trucks come, and they beat the crap out of those roads.

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Similarly, in NOHFC, we see mining companies quite frequently applying for supplemental amounts of money,

Mike, for waste water and water infrastructure to NOHFC. Now, I've always felt that the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund should be looking at a lot of the more business-related activities rather than that kind of infrastructure, but I've been persuaded that it's absolutely essentially to shore up where federal and provincial governments couldn't possibly fix it. So what I'm saying to you, before I get the hand, Mike, is the answer is yes. We intend to and are refocusing our ability on that. So that's the first part through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, and I'd be happy to expound on that, should you desire.

But the most important thing, and it sounds like what I'm hearing from you, is some kind of resource revenue-sharing model that is derived from those resource activities for the benefits of municipalities. Because I agree with you: There are many pieces of infrastructure that are taken up, from roads to culverts to recreational centres to hospitals sometimes, depending on the situation—name your piece of infrastructure—that don't account for the population that lives in the town, but for the resource industries and the supply chain industries or service industries that operate around them, just outside of the municipality.

It sounds like if I come to the table with some sort of revenue-sharing model for municipalities, I would have your full-throated support for that. That's exactly what I'm working on. I'm surprised that you didn't bring it forward and hold me to task on it as part of—whoops, I've got to stop there. I see your hand.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): MPP Michael, go ahead.

Mr. Michael Mantha: What I will commit to is having a wholesome discussion about it. I would love to see an idea about it. I think we should be having more of these discussions, more of these ideas and more sharing instead of the—I'm not sure of the phrase you utilized: the cut-throat, shoving down your throat, something—

Hon. Greg Rickford: No, "full-throated." Full-throated support: It means—

Mr. Michael Mantha: How about a dialogue about how we can benefit our municipalities? I think if we go down that road, we will have plenty to discuss.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Mike, the only challenge—I shouldn't call it a challenge—the opportunity and the distinction I'm trying to make is resource revenue-sharing has become a very important instrument for Indigenous communities. We have currently three of them in place. I know there are some real sensitivities around that, and they're justified, from Indigenous communities. So it's not safe, in my view, to refer to them as resource revenue-sharing agreements, because I don't want to detract from a different kind of obligation that the crown has in the modern day to the Indigenous communities for things like mining royalties and stumpage fees.

But this kind of model that it sounds like you and I are talking about is something we think that, not only through NOHFC but through an additional program, it's likely I'm going to get your support from and have you support on the floor of the Legislature—some kind of program that

respects the fact that industries operating in and around municipalities intensively use those resources and contribute significantly to the deterioration and means that municipalities rightly deserve to get in on the action.

Mr. Michael Mantha: What I will tell you, Minister, is there is plenty to be discussed on this. And you're absolutely right: There needs to be a recognition of Indigenous communities and their rights as well and respect being provided to them. That should be, ultimately, our first goal. But, absolutely, if we can address some of these concerns and hardships that many municipalities are facing—I will be happy to sit down at a table and have that discussion with you.

Just switching gears and going on to energy, this is actually a specific question from a group of homeowners who really took advantage of the solar PPAs when they came out. They are all private landowners who erected solar panels that are now 10 years old, and their PPAs are coming to an end in about 10 years. The question that they're asking is, what's next for them? Are those going to get renewed, or are they going to have some obsolete lawn ornaments on their lawns? Is this going to become a component of concern for municipalities and their landfills? There are a lot of unanswered questions, and people are wondering what's next.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Right. That's a great question, Mike. Speaking of lawn ornaments, I'm sure my associate minister, Bill, would like to chime in on the lawn ornaments, otherwise known as non-functioning wind towers, that are quite frequent out in his neck of the woods.

But with respect to active PPAs around solar panels, obviously it's a priority for us to consider what is already part of our supply mix and, under a PPA, analyze how competitive they can be in Ontario's future supply mix. There's no question that if there's any benefit at all to wind and solar, it's that finally, over the course of time, they start to show a cost-competitive price. So provided that those assets are still functioning, it would make sense that we would take a look at them.

I'm not an expert on the lifespan of solar panels in particular and I'm well aware of the fact that the price purchase agreement for solar operators on panels that would be 20 years old by then would likely have to account for any upgrades, repairs and/or maintenance when they come to the province. But when and as they expire, Mike, we do a case-by-case analysis that will be focused on price and how competitive we can be.

To the question asked by your fiscal-hawk colleague Mr. Tabuns, who appears not to be in the business of supporting any energy subsidies whatsoever, we're already doing that in the bioenergy space. Frankly, many of these contracts, the ones you're talking about, had a lot of front-end costs. So to those particular private landholders who have those functioning solar panels, the answer to the question is maybe, quite possibly, if they're bringing a competitive price to it.

Judith asked an excellent question yesterday. It seems much longer ago than that. Judith, in our 10th hour, or whatever the heck we're at, you asked a very important

question about biomass. They're expensive contracts, frankly. Some of them are 17 cents or 18 cents a kilowatt hour or more that we're paying through a power purchase agreement. That's much higher than the 7.5 cents to 7.8 cents that we'd like to be at in the future for a real price per kilowatt hour that's not as, if at all, subsidized, depending on what sector and what region of the province you're in. We've heard from Judith today, and I know you would support, counter to your colleague Mr. Tabuns, that we not pull off the NIER. You don't want NIER pulled off the table, do you, Mike? I just need to be clear before I finish this question.

Sometimes there's a value proposition to paying a higher price per kilowatt hour, and in biomass especially, it makes sense, because they help serve and sustain a responsible forestry sector. But in the case of solar panels, they would obviously have to be able to come back, in the context in 10 years, looking at capacity option markets about how competitive they can be. And I'll tell you something, friend, if they can be competitive, they'll be at the table.

Mr. Michael Mantha: How much time do I have left, Chair?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Six minutes.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Minister, let's do a blitz question. Unfortunately, I won't be able to be part of the discussions tomorrow, and I do have a couple of other questions that could be covered tomorrow, but I'd like to go over them today.

Does the Indigenous economic fund preclude Indigenous grant-seekers from applying for funding through NOHFC?

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Hon. Greg Rickford: Can you just repeat the first part of that question again, Mike?

Mr. Michael Mantha: Does the Indigenous economic fund preclude Indigenous grant-seekers from applying for funding through NOHFC?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Absolutely not. In fact, Mike, in the next round of estimates, if not on the Legislature floor, you're going to say, "Not so fast, Rickford, with these modifications you've made to NOHFC." Do you know why? Because Indigenous communities across northern Ontario are going to get in on the NOHFC action, and that might bring you out of the 20% club down to the 18%, 17% or 16% of the annual take, and it should. We should all be invested in that.

Do you want to know why, Mike? Because Sol Mamakwa has every right to ask what the heck has been going with NOHFC for the past decade and a half, that they've only had access to 1% or 2% of those funding things. It's because of the structure of NOHFC, and I put an end to it. I'm very passionate about it. In fact, I'm fired right up now that you've asked that question and very—

Mr. Michael Mantha: I've got three minutes. I've got three more to fire you up with.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Okay. Well, at the end, the short answer is yes—

Mr. Michael Mantha: Okay. Good.

Hon. Greg Rickford:—and those Indigenous communities from Kiiwetinoong are going to get in on the action, because I have a personal responsibility to them, having lived and worked in those communities for six years of my life.

Mr. Michael Mantha: How much is available in the Indigenous fund?

Hon. Greg Rickford: How much is available in the specific Indigenous fund?

Mr. Michael Mantha: Yes.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Do you mean as a function of the NOHFC program?

Mr. Michael Mantha: No. How much is available?

Hon. Greg Rickford: It's \$100 million. The annual allocation for the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund is open to any and all northern communities to make applications, Mike. In fact, we've taken the unprecedented step of creating the Indigenous workforce stream internship program, which is exclusively—and I hope I don't get nailed for this—available to Indigenous peoples and/or businesses that agree to take on Indigenous peoples.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Two more questions, Minister; I hope we have time. How much of the NOHFC went to Indigenous applicants' businesses prior to the creation of the economic fund? Do you have those numbers?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Not enough. That's why we renovated it.

Mr. Michael Mantha: And how much of the Indigenous fund is a one-time COVID-related fund?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Not enough. That's why we renovated it. But on the Northern Ontario Recovery Program, it was available to any and all applicants, Mike. I will, as a supplemental or follow-up, try to get a profile for you of how many Indigenous businesses got resources through the Northern Ontario Recovery Program. I can't fill out the applications out for them, Mike, but I can make it available to them, and that's exactly what I did.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I'd appreciate it, Minister. How much time?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Not enough.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Three minutes.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Oh, well then, Minister, let's go back to the Huron Central thing, in regard to the progress that is being done there. I know you finished off by saying, "Stay tuned. There's going to be an announcement coming soon," and I understand that the feds have come to the table with opening up a stream that they will be able to apply for. There have been no actual dollars that have been announced by the province. Can you give me an update in regard to how those are progressing? Anything else in addition that you can provide me with?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Mr. Chair, we now interrupt these estimates committee meetings for an important announcement from the Minister of Energy, Northern Development and Mines on the Huron Central Railway. What follows will be the complete details of what we're set to announce for the Huron Central Railway. Who needs to have stakeholders here like Domtar and Algoma Steel

when we've got Mike Mantha, the MPP for Manitoulin, who can go back and can carry the important announcement regardless of whether cabinet has finished making its deliberations over it or not? We can just announce it here.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I give you some credit. I always give credit where credit is due. Come on, Minister. I give you credit.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I've been generous, but let me assure you this, and I will let you in on a secret: All the federal government has done so far is make it clear that they may have a program that they can apply to. What we've done is enter into substantive negotiations to take a look at what a long-term plan or commitment would look like and how, Mike, quite frankly, we can move that support out of the NOHFC so I don't have to walk onto the Legislature floor and see that vein in your forehead start to pulse over the last-minute urgent funding that they've asked for every single year. You know it; I know it as the former minister of FedNor. It's ridiculous, and I am hopeful that it comes to an end. I can assure you, Mike, that the only delays we will be facing with respect to the Huron Central Railway will be the ability of the federal government to do more than just assure them that they have a program they can go to. We are far more advanced in those discussions, and I'll have more to say about that in the not-too-distant future.

You know what I might do? I might just pull it out, put it on the legislative floor and see if for once, you'll stand shoulder to shoulder with me to support the incredible investments we're making across northern Ontario. That would be cool.

Mr. Michael Mantha: As long as it's not part of an omnibus bill with a poison pill.

Anyway, my friend, what if the federal government does not make them eligible? Where do we go from there? Will the negotiations—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you. Thank you so much. That concludes—

Hon. Greg Rickford: This is a critical question. The province—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): That concludes the time. Minister, that concludes the time.

Moving over to the members of the government, I see MPP Cuzzetto. Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Minister, before I touch on nuclear refurbishment, I want to thank our former minister, Elizabeth Witmer, for getting rid of coal plants in 2001. She started that job back then. A lot of people don't remember that, but we are the government that started to get rid of coal.

I know that Kathleen Wynne had invested—well, Hydro One had invested in a coal plant in Montana during her time in government. So I know that our government is really the government for green energy in Ontario.

As well, Minister, I have Hatch here and SNC just on our border here in Mississauga–Lakeshore. I know that they've been working very hard to refurbish a lot of our power plants, especially the Bruce Power plant, the nuclear plant we have. Can you explain the current status of

ongoing nuclear refurbishment projects in Ontario and how important they are for the future of Ontario's nuclear industry?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that. Forgive me, my wife is having a child care crisis here, but I think we've got it resolved. I'm just giving her a text. I'm sorry. These are some long days when you've got kiddies at home on online learning. I don't mean to disrespect the committee at all, but family comes first.

Thank you for that question, Rudy. I'm going to make some general statements about refurbishment, walk us through Darlington and Pickering, but then I'm going to turn it over to my very capable minister and counterpart, Minister Walker, to talk about an asset he's much more familiar with, and that would be the Bruce refurbishments and their costs. Is that okay with you, Billy?

In terms of some general comments, Rudy, we feel very strongly that our refurbishment investments are critical for a safe dismantling of our old and timed out nuclear assets. We'll do this in a safe way, but also in a way that sets a new standard for how nuclear assets should be treated.

In the case of decommissioning, obviously, we're committed to a path to excellence and we're doing as much in Pickering so that we can quite possibly create a centre of excellence for the world to understand how to do decommissioning.

But on refurbishment, of course, these are massive scales. Sometimes, it's overlooked, given the costs they have. By my own admission, they fit into the global adjustment and don't necessarily reflect the absolute true cost of nuclear, although on average, it's much lower per kilowatt hour. But the significant, Rudy, economic activity that is related to refurbishments—I mean, the only problems we have had with refurbishments so far in terms of being on time and at the cost that we predicted is a shortage of skilled workers. This has literally come down to boiler-makers and pipefitters and the like with specific skills that help to do this. That's the only challenge we've faced. Otherwise, we've been on time and on budget. So we can't talk about this until we finish talking about the increased value to the province of Ontario by optimizing both our decommissioning and refurbishment activities.

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In the case of the Darlington refurbishment, what I can tell you, Rudy, is that this was successfully completed in June 2020, just one business quarter off the mark—not bad for government, I should say—and the only reason for that Q1 delay into 2020 was, of course, a critical shortage of specific skilled trades to complete the project.

I can tell you that in response to the COVID pandemic, the start of the unit 3 refurbishment was temporarily delayed to protect workers and ensure reliability of the electricity system during this period. In September of last year, OPG commenced unit 3 refurbishment after putting in place mitigation measures to address the COVID-19 challenges. This year, in January, we successfully defueled and isolated the unit from the rest of the plant, on time and on budget. I know, again, that would matter to fiscal hawks like the member of this committee MPP Tabuns and what he had put forward today in terms of his concerns.

Now, we're proceeding to replace the reactor core components. Darlington refurbishment will secure 3,500 megawatts of clean, reliable and low-cost power for an additional 30 years. Refurbishment and continued operation of Darlington is expected to be up to 2050 and contribute a total of \$90 billion to Ontario's GDP and increase employment across the province by an average of 14,200 jobs annually, including 2,600 jobs on-site at Darlington.

I want to take this opportunity to give a huge shout-out to what we call the "Darlington Four." You'd think that was a blues band, but it ain't. It turns out to be four exceptional MPPs in our caucus who fight every single day—they're up in my grill and Bill's—about preserving and protecting the extraordinary work that Darlington is doing, not just in its operational contributions to our electricity system, not just in terms of the fact that its brownfields are now going to be the front window of our SMR technology development, but also in terms of its refurbishment.

I think I'll stop there and turn it over to Bill to talk about something that's in his backyard with respect to Bruce refurbishment. Bill, take it away.

Hon. Bill Walker: Thanks so much, Greg, and I hope all is good at home with your children.

Everyone, I think, has to realize that Bruce Power is critical to our energy supply, and the successful refurbishment of Bruce is a key priority for our government. The first unit refurbishment, unit 6, began in January 2020 and is expected to be complete within four years. All six nuclear units undergoing refurbishment are expected to be complete by 2033.

I just remind everyone listening: Bruce nuclear is the largest nuclear power plant in the world, with eight reactors, and they will all be operating.

Due to the onset of COVID-19, Bruce Power did actually temporarily reduce unit 6 refurbishment and outage work, in order to keep its workers safe and maintain a reliable electricity supply from its operating reactors. They put in place a lot of measures for COVID-19 as well, and full refurbishment work has now resumed. Unit 6 has been defueled and isolated from the rest of the operating plant on time and on budget, and work is now under way to—

Failure of sound system.

Hon. Bill Walker: —capacity will be available for the long term.

The Bruce refurbishment and long-term operations are expected to increase employment by 22,000 jobs per year and generate \$4 billion in annual economic benefits in communities throughout the province. This is going to be an asset that then is there for the benefit of Ontarians, for jobs and for reliable energy to 2064.

I want to also just share with the committee that refurbishing reactors at Bruce nuclear generating station has enabled the long-term supply of medical isotopes used for cancer treatment and sterilization of medical equipment around the globe. That can't be missed. That has absolutely been critical all the way through, but certainly, we were reminded in something like a pandemic of COVID of all that sterilization and the great things they've done.

I want to also just make sure the committee knows that Bruce Power is responsible for all of the risk of executing

the refurbishment on time and on budget, and if the refurbishment is completed under budget, cost savings actually will be shared equally between Bruce Power and the Independent Electricity System Operator.

A huge shout-out to both Bruce Power and OPG, and our nuclear sector, since we're on this, and the refurbishment and the teams and the workers, the skilled jobs that it's currently creating and will continue to create in the future. But in a special shout-out, Bruce Power has been an absolutely outstanding, stellar community partner throughout COVID. They have stepped up and provided freezers for our vaccines. They give money to shelters. They've made money for PPE. They just recently came down and set up one of the hockey hubs—which were designed and invented by Dr. Ian Arra in the Grey Bruce Health Unit, the medical officer of health—down in Peel, to help with our COVID access. The workers, the volunteers, the supply companies and, again, the supply chain of nuclear are absolutely incredible. We're lucky to have them.

Again, Minister Rickford always makes sure he references MPP Tabuns. It'd be really nice to see him come out and support all of the work that the nuclear field is doing for reliable power. But let's, again, really focus on those isotopes and the impact they're having in our health care. Hopefully he'll jump on board. I had him up there last year to tour, and we're hoping that we can get him to actually see the light and the value of such important assets in our energy system. They are the 24/7 baseload power supply, both OPG and Bruce Power, and again, thank you to all of them.

I hope that helps, Rudy.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): MPP Cuzzetto, hold for a second. Stop the clock.

Minister Walker, when you're speaking, at some angles, we don't hear your voice. It usually blanks out for a few seconds. I don't know if something is wrong with the mike that you have when you're at some angles. It misses out very few, maybe 5% to 10%, of your valuable information that you provide to us. So just be cautious of that.

Hon. Bill Walker: Thank you very much, Chair. I'll try to adjust that.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): We don't want to miss even a word out of your valuable conversation. We want to make sure that that is noted and Hansard can have it.

Back to MPP Cuzzetto. Start the clock.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: How much time do I have left?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Nine minutes, 25 seconds.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Okay. I want to touch on a few little things. I know the shortage of labour in the nuclear industry—steamfitters have been a shortage; I know the age group is pretty well 65 and older in that group of workers. And about Hatch, as well, because Hatch is located here in my riding, and so is SNC—their involvements in the refurbishing of these power plants.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Look, you know, Rudy, some of the details that most Canadians don't know, and certainly

importantly for the people of Ontario: When you shout out loud your disdain for the nuclear sector, not only are you speaking out against tens of thousands of some of the highest-trained and educated workers, not only are you shouting out against some of the most advanced technology—I received an award for my work in medical isotope production—you're shouting out against the production, which is no longer coincidental to the operations of places like Bruce Power, right, Bill? You're speaking out against cancer treatment; world-class, advanced cancer treatment. This is important isotope production that reaches around the world. I've seen it.

Of course, in Thunder Bay, our work is well documented there, in an effort to bring medical isotopes closer to home for us in the land space of northern Ontario, which spans more than 800,000 square kilometres.

But you're also speaking out against good union members, Rudy, people who pay their dues. I speak regularly with the leadership there. I've spoken at their fora. I've had an incredible opportunity to tell them how much we support their commitment to safety, their commitment to producing green energy, Rudy.

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But you're also speaking out, finally—and there may be other things—against some of the largest employment and economic activity infrastructure projects known currently in the country. Go ahead, anybody: Start naming an infrastructure project that you think is big, and Bill Walker and I will double down and tell you that the nuclear projects are even bigger.

I just rattled off the number of jobs that are going to be created, or continue to be created, and/or required, over our refurbishment. I didn't even mention decommissioning—well, I alluded to it briefly. These are large-scale projects and nobody talks about them, Rudy. I'm glad you're using this opportunity and your time to make our viewers aware of the fact that these refurbishment and decommissioning projects are amongst the highest, if not the highest, employment and economic activity infrastructure projects going on in the country, and competitive with them around the world, because they are huge.

I can't state enough—or with enough emphasis, as a good lawyer would say—how critical these have been to the regions where they're situated. Darlington, Bruce and, obviously, Pickering now are buzzing with economic activity. Nobody is complaining about the fact that—especially with respect to decommissioning—this reflects a potential dramatic dip in their unemployment. No, to the contrary, the decommissioning has actually brought additional work in.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Five minutes.

Hon. Greg Rickford: And our plans to continue parts of the Pickering plant moving forward are not only important for sustaining employment, but the decommissioning obviously goes on for an extended period of time and continues to provide and support meaningful jobs and/or economic opportunities.

I don't know, Bill, if you want to expound on that or whether I'm just going to get the hand from Rudy to move

on, but I'll tell you what: We'd all benefit from hearing about how refurbishment at Bruce has affected the small towns and cities in your beautiful riding as an important part of economic activity and job creation. Bill, I'll turn it over to you to see if you can disentangle the complexities of this.

Hon. Bill Walker: Thank you very much again, Greg. Absolutely, over 60 companies have relocated to or located at least a portion of their company in Bruce, Grey and Huron counties, most of them in Huron and Bruce, but it has a ripple effect all over. And then, again, there's the supply chains that are providing components, and the supply chains of the small manufacturers. It's having an incredible impact.

Again, you've talked about it, Greg, but people in the north are trying to keep our young people here. These skilled trades, these long-sustained trades, are now seeing the horizon out to 2064. Not only that, but we're providing reliable base load and affordable energy for all of our other manufacturing companies. But again, I'm really, really excited about the skilled trades, the women in nuclear and the women in skilled trades that we talk about. As a government, we've really tried to push and ensure that everyone has that same opportunity.

And Greg, you couldn't have said it any better, and I know you did a lot of things at the federal level in regard to isotopes. Those are absolutely impacting every single one of our lives. Lutetium-177 is that key isotope used to treat prostate cancer, molybdenum-99 is at Darlington and, of course, cobalt-60 sterilizes 40% of the world's single-use medical devices and treats complex forms of cancer, including brain tumours.

I know when we were at Bruce signing the memorandum with our First Nations communities probably a year and a half ago, they were looking at other opportunities for another dozen isotopes that, again, are going to have that positive impact, that health care impact for us. So I'm with you, Minister Rickford: I believe nuclear always has been—I can't imagine anybody now arguing with it, with the good-paying union jobs. The future is in their hands: the skilled trades, the engineering types, every facet that you can think of.

I just want to dwell a little bit. Not only is it the workforce, but all of those people are our community members, our community leaders, who are out coaching minor sports, figure skating and soccer, and working with all of our groups and organizations, and raising money for a lot of our valuable charities. Again, Bruce steps up all the time, particularly for our backyard: for our hospitals, for our food banks, for our legions. You need something, and the people of Bruce Power—and it's not just the company, it's the people who actually work there who are the heart and soul.

Our communities are booming. They're bustling. You try to buy some real estate in Port Elgin or Kincardine or Hanover—and it's starting to even ripple up the Bruce Peninsula because of people saying, "Why would I not want to come and work there and have a 30- or 40-year career in a very innovative, creative industry?" Again, the

job stability, that goes across all of our economic sectors, every single business out there. Cambridge has plants. Rudy, you were saying Hatch, in your backyard. Certainly Oakville has a big connection to the nuclear industry, and, again, if we get into the OCNI, the supply chain, that just ripples across the whole province. This, to me, is exciting. It's the next wave and certainly—as Minister Rickford and I have talked about earlier today—the SMR is that next generation that in my mind is going to be a parallel path.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Hon. Bill Walker: It's going to lead our country in jobs. It's going to lead it in technology and innovation and, again, that economic provision of jobs and most importantly—Greg, you've said it a number of times—the hope for the future of our youth, those skilled trades, that next generation, which is actually the sustainability of many of our small communities, whether it be in my backyard or across the province.

It's absolutely fundamental to me that it's going to be the key baseload supplier, the 24/7 that is always there. When you flip the switch and those lights come on, you think of OPG and you think of Darlington. They're the ones that are providing it. Thank you to all those workers for all that you've done to make sure that we've had affordable reliable energy throughout the pandemic and for many, many years to come in the future. Thanks so much, Rudy.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Thank you, Minister. My son will be going to Queen's next year for engineering, so it's a good idea that he's taking engineering to get into nuclear.

Hon. Bill Walker: Good idea.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Mr. Chair, point of order.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Go ahead, Minister.

Hon. Greg Rickford: The engineering destination for this great country is McGill University, and I would recommend that if he can't get into McGill, or Lakehead, then—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): The time concludes for MPP Cuzzetto. Off-line, you guys can have this conversation and report to the committee tomorrow about the results.

Over to the opposition. You have 20 minutes. MPP Judith.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: It's been a long day and I always think that, to whoever does the schedule, it should be maybe at least a half an hour shorter because it's a long time to sit. I know that when some people have got their cameras off—I don't know about you, but I'm standing up and stretching because it's just a long time to sit.

I want to carry on from my colleague Mike Mantha. In my riding, I have a lot of unorganized area and townships. Those people who are living in communities across that area, many of them come from a time when homesteads were granted to people. They were immigrants, quite far back, and were given pieces of land, and they developed communities. Then sometimes, in other areas, it was because it was a railway stop and they developed a community around that railway stop and whatever; it was a

point where maybe people had to leave. They built things. The landscape had small schools. They had infrastructure. Some of them built their own bridges. They were Finnish in our area, many of them, or from Scotland or Ireland, and they built these areas up. They are dotted across northern Ontario.

They are quite loyal, the people living in these communities, and several of them, really, are offended by the idea of being called an unorganized township, because they say, “We are a community and we want that name changed.” I might look at a private member’s bill for that, because I think that for many people, they really respect the rural way of life. It’s not just the northern way of life. Many of them are connected to forestry, and many of them are very, very self-sufficient. They live off the land. They have gardens.

I think it’s something to be celebrated in Ontario. It’s unusual, when you’re in downtown Toronto in all this infrastructure, but these people live very close to the land and feel very connected to Indigenous people as well, because often their families were built together. When they first came, those were the families that were also there.

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They said that northern community support, which is part of the ministry, has a mandate to provide advice and funding to support service in the unincorporated areas. Some areas, like I said, don’t feel like they have a voice, similar to what my colleague Mike Mantha said. They have these concerns, but they seem to be—the roads boards can go to MTO, and sometimes they feel shut out by them, but there are other concerns like abandoned buildings, or maybe a dangerous situation they have, or a development that’s happening on crown land nearby. They need a place to put those, and so obviously they come to their MPP. There is this northern community support program, but I’m wondering, is there a breakdown somewhere of the advice and funding they’ve provided to these unincorporated areas and what projects or what plans they have? And where is that reflected in the estimates?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that, Judith. It’s quite likely, if I’m understanding—getting a feel for the places you’re thinking of—they would be places like Dorion, Misty Creek, Gorham, some forgotten homesteads out in the Thunder Bay district that were settlements a long time ago. I have a few of my own. Dinorwic and Redditt come to mind out in my neck of the woods. Of course, one might argue that Hornepayne is every bit a town. It’s had its struggles over the years, but was developed obviously around forestry activity and the railroad. So I have a real appreciation for that.

Some of the solutions go to larger, more complex discussions which I won’t bore anybody with, but they do occur with municipalities about whether or not, Judith, those municipalities would take them over. For example, Kenora, even a hundred years ago or more, becomes—Keewatin, Norman and Rat Portage, and that’s how we got our name, Kenora.

Now, whether the little hamlet or borough, if you will, of Redditt, some 30 kilometres from Kenora, who fight

every single day for every penny they can get to upgrade their water treatment programs—they have to go to the Ministry of the Environment for that and any federal programs. It’s all very piecemeal. There’s a curling rink, which is certainly way older than me, and I’m not that old—kidding—that needed some repairs. They can come to places like the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund.

I think this is what you’re thinking of, and certainly from the perspective of the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, it’s completely available for them to come to us with their applications. I share your concern that it may not be appropriately reflected in the estimates, certainly not with respect to my ministry. You might find them more appropriately in the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing as opposed to more squarely in northern development and mines, but certainly to the extent that we support the economic pieces and the infrastructure pieces—to the extent that we can—they’re available under programming that you see there through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund in a much smaller, less defined amount in northern development’s global budget.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: So in the estimates book, when it says that there is this northern community support program—is there someone in your ministry staff who maybe has more information about that?

Hon. Greg Rickford: We can certainly point you to the right person. In particular, if you have a specific township or services board in unorganized territory that has a specific challenge, they can get it through the support program, Judith, but it’s quite likely there are larger projects that are more appropriately supported either through other ministries or through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. It really depends on what it is. For example, for water and sewer—I mentioned Redditt earlier on—we get a lot of support from the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, because some of the funding out of the program in this ministry would either not cover it or would not cover it if every unorganized territory or service board community, as I’ll call them generally, were to put pressure on that program.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I was quite excited about the discussion about breaking down silos between ministries. I know that has been mentioned in almost every estimates I’ve gone to, that there has been work to try to develop some of that. I think in northern Ontario and probably in rural Ontario, there are a lot of areas where many ministries are affected by a project. What I’m hearing from some folks is that that breaking down—or communication between ministries and funding, sort of like, okay, if everybody put in a bit of money, it would actually be something that we could work with or something, but it seems like that’s breaking down of silos. I’m curious how that looks at your end, because I hear anecdotally, I hear from some bureaucrats about some stuff going on, but I still hear about a lot of barriers. How do you approach that? How do you approach the spending of money in your ministries when, let’s say, a problem has maybe four ministries involved?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that, Judith. That is an expansive discussion that has been ripe at our cabinet

table now. I've mentioned a couple of them in our discussion reaching back to yesterday and including today. For example, when the question arises around broadband and the supports out of the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, a deliberate coordinated effort in any future rollout is tied to our work with the Ministry of Infrastructure to understand how the NOHFC, for example, might be more appropriate in serving the gaps that the larger infrastructure programs can't possibly identify. I think MPP Mantha mentioned River Street in a small town or community in his riding.

Another hot topic right now, Judith, is the utilization of crown land within municipalities. This is starting to elevate my blood pressure. It started out informally, but we've assembled now a more formal discussion between my ministry, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to understand how we can maximize the use of crown land that's not being used that should be being used—used responsibly for the economic benefit or, frankly, for the infrastructure needs, as diverse as they might be, for their benefit.

Similarly, in my capacity in the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs, we have formally inserted ourselves to perform a screening function. In every decision that we make, there's a checkpoint to the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs to see and understand what issues and what opportunities might be available as a result of a policy decision that we're making. We take a tremendous amount of pride in what—I think people use the term “a whole-of-government approach.” Sometimes I'm overwhelmed by what that actually means.

I should say that when we talk about mining and especially forestry—and I talked explicitly about the Hearst biomass and the one that you're talking about in Atikokan. It's not available to me, as much as I'd like it to be some days, to just deal with it myself. I've got to be able to have members of the other ministries. When I talk about these delta forces and these SWAT teams that I send in, they're often composed of senior ministry officials from other ministries and/or political staff in those ministers' offices to diagnose and treat—respecting your health background, of course—the problem that that specific mining company is dealing with.

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Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: All right, well, that's progress in the right direction, but I think there's definitely work to be done there. We still have a ways to go in the culture of government where we have very strict silos of authorities. Probably we need a new approach as far as interministerial affairs or something—I don't know; we'd probably create another bureaucracy trying to fix this one, and then who knows if that'd work. But it's something that I'm very intrigued by, because I see a lot of barriers being created by that, for industry, for individuals and for organizations. When people have good ideas, like you said, I think it slows it down when there's no way, really, to actually easily navigate all the differences.

And sometimes there are very different criteria. I know there's been some work done on having applications be

streamlined when there are different organizations that are involved.

Hon. Greg Rickford: The Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines, if I may, and my portfolio as the stand-alone Minister of Indigenous Affairs, is kind of a living example of what you're talking about. Obviously with Indigenous Affairs we're seized with some very significant opportunities and complexities in southern Ontario, but for the purposes of northern Ontario, I've been able to take a more expansive and holistic look at the opportunity and some of the barriers as a result. As the former Minister Bartolucci said, pairing energy and northern development and mines gave us an awesome opportunity, in his view, to understand outside of NIER, what other things could be done in the energy sector to serve northern Ontario resources and other businesses more fairly.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Five minutes.

Hon. Greg Rickford: That's an example. I'll stop there.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thank you for that comment. Yes, it does seem like when the ministry was created, in the back of my mind I was worried about the northern development piece and mines piece getting—energy is such a large portfolio, but you have an associate minister who is very well versed in energy, so I'm sure that's a good complement of people who are working on those things. But it is a lot of work.

The other piece that I was going to address, similar to my colleague, is the idea of revenue sharing. Because there was a commitment to revenue sharing—I know you and he were sort of rushed at the end—with municipalities and First Nations. That was a commitment made by this government on mine revenues, that there would be a sharing. I know some First Nations and/or Indigenous communities and I believe a few municipalities were at the forefront of that or were engaged with that, but I hear now that there are other Indigenous communities that want to get involved with that mine revenue-sharing. I'm wondering, what does that look like for them?

Hon. Greg Rickford: That's great question, Judith. Thank you for that. Obviously we moved very quickly with respect to resource revenue-sharing—as it was known under the previous government, in fairness. Those agreements commenced just prior to us taking government and it's important, I think, for you to know and for our listeners to understand that we have respected those agreements and, in fact, are moving forward on potentially a couple more.

What is important in that respect, Judith, is to understand that some of these resource projects are in their infancy and it's not completely clear the full scope. I'm pretty sure—well, I know—that the Indigenous communities always look at the optimal time to have these agreements come to fruition in an effort to ensure they're getting full value and see the potential for growth beyond that. That's abundantly clear, obviously, out here in Treaty 3. But notwithstanding the ups and downs of the forest sector, for example, where the uptake for stumpage fees

from which they derive some of their revenue becomes compromised, when the forest sector is healthy and actually expanding, then they get an opportunity to increase their revenue streams. That's one component of it: the existing ones. I mentioned the other ones that are a work in progress, and there's a commitment by our government to continue with discussions.

I would, in fairness, say, Judith—and you may be aware of some Indigenous communities or organizations who think and feel that this hasn't happened fast enough. That would be fair, but these are careful and complex negotiations that provide long-term sources of revenue, often for a group of communities. Consensus has to be nailed down, and it has to be done in a manner that complements any incentives for somebody in the mining or forest sector, for example, to be able to operate.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): One minute.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Finally, to your municipal piece, Judith, as I said, that was a campaign promise. We continue to take this very seriously, and I told you earlier through another question asked by your colleague about the careful attention to not confuse and possibly not refer to what we're looking at for municipalities as actual resource revenue-sharing, because it's an instrument that Indigenous communities understand to be something preserved and protected for their own interests. I don't want to get hung up on names, but I can assure you that ensuring municipalities have access to additional resources that are derived from the benefits of activities taking place in their municipalities or close to them is on the not-too-distant horizon.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes the time for the opposition.

Now, we'll be moving over to the government side for 20 minutes. MPP Babikian, go ahead, sir.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Good afternoon, everyone. Minister Rickford, Associate Minister Walker, thank you very much for your insightful input covering so many important and different sectors. It has been a long day, and we are seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. I hope we will wrap it up very soon.

Minister, you touched upon so many different aspects, but I want to raise an issue which is very important to a large segment of our society, especially people in the Scarborough area and the Scarborough–Agincourt area, where we have so many lower-income people, small businesses struggling with their daily expenses etc. I want you to expand a little bit on the energy assistance programs. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has responded to the concerns of Ontarians affected by COVID-19, specifically with a number of programs that have helped to minimize the financial burden and to support people while they are continuing to work and learn from home. I know that Ontario continues to provide energy assistance programs for households, farms and small businesses, and for households that are struggling to pay their bills, there are several support programs available.

Can you expand on the actions this government has taken and continues to take to help provide relief for

electricity customers in Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic? That's my question, and of course, I will follow up with some other related questions.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that, Aris. I think, first and foremost, that nobody disputes the tremendous impact that COVID has had on families and on businesses and farming operations and that any assistance that we could offer in the context of COVID would be and could be appreciated, but that these are not necessarily things the government would want to take credit for other than the fact that they did it under circumstances that were changing constantly and that we responded to. In my respectful view, that's exactly what we endeavoured to do and I think we achieved it.

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The government acted very quickly to provide direct rate relief, Aris, stability and, as we move forward, customer choice for those billed through what we call the regulated price plan. I'm going to focus squarely on the constituents in your riding that you characterized and many others who simply got to a point where they couldn't afford to pay their bill under the RPP. It includes residential, small businesses and farm customers, and the government support to the RPP customers has included the implementation of off-peak time-of-use price for customers under that program.

So from March 4, 2020 to May 31, 2020, and from January 1 to February 22, 2021, time-of-use pricing for regulated price plan customers—there are a lot of tongue twisters in here—was suspended. We stopped it, Aris, frankly, and customers were charged the off-peak time-of-use rate. Under the previous government's regime, if you will—we just chose the lowest price for 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and we applied that to regions like yours, Aris, who felt the immediate and most profound effects and sustained effects or impacts of COVID. That meant millions of families migrating to their homes to perform their work; at times, students confined to their homes for online learning. It meant dishwashers and washing machines and water supply being used more intensely at times that traditionally were far more expensive.

The pricing change was supported by an investment from the government to the tune of \$484 million. Now, that's no small chunk of change, Aris, as you know. But in the spring of 2020 and again this spring, we felt like even more work needed to be done. So we extended the disconnection ban so that nobody in Ontario was cut off from electricity in the depths of the pandemic. Weather across northern Ontario in the winter is what it is, but I can tell you up here, we had a stretch in January when the average temperature was somewhere around 28 to 35 below zero. The prospect or the thought that a family or a small business or a farm would be cut off from their electricity supply as a result of COVID was completely unacceptable, so we banned it.

And then in the spring of 2020, we additionally developed the COVID-19 Energy Assistance Program. This was done, Aris, to provide financial support to electricity and natural gas consumers who had fallen behind on their

bills specifically because of the pandemic. Eligible customers can apply through their utility providers for credits towards any arrears that they have.

Let's move to June 1, 2020. We introduced the fixed, flat COVID recovery rate, which was based on the forecasted average electricity supply cost, so trying a little bit for this not to touch the fiscal profile of our province and bring something fair. That price point, as published in the OEB's RPP price report of October 22, 2019, was in place until October 31, 2020, at a stable rate of 12.8 cents per kilowatt hour for all periods of the day, the difference, of course, being a couple cents per kilowatt, but hopefully not taking as significant or dramatic a touch to our fiscal position in trying to come up with a rate that was still low and affordable in most cases, but one that didn't involve this dramatic of a subsidy.

In addition, the government deferred a portion of global adjustment costs for commercial and industrial consumers—I know there are a lot of intense customers or consumers in your riding—for the period from April to June 2020. Then starting in January 2021, those costs are being recovered over an appropriate period of time—I think it's 12 months—as they begin to head back towards full scales of production.

We also introduced customer choice on November 1, 2020, to provide electricity customers with the option to switch from time-of-use pricing to a tiered-rate pricing plan, Aris, so that they can choose a billing system that best suits their household and lifestyles. Under the previous model, those poor folks who work the night shift come home, they want to wash their clothes during the day and they couldn't do it affordably, necessarily. There they were, paying the top price. Now, they have the option that best suits their lifestyles, and most RPP customers can now just simply submit a request to their local distribution company to switch between time-of-use and tiered rates. So that accommodates for the fact that they may switch to one format, realize that it's not the best for them—maybe their job changed, maybe their shift over the long term changed and they have different requirements for electricity. This would accommodate for that.

Then the energy rebate grant program, launched on November 16, 2020, is a temporary property tax and energy cost rebate program that eligible businesses apply directly to the province for. This has proved to be, almost without exception, a fast or effective and immediate relief from this. Effective January 1, 2021, funding a portion of non-hydro renewable energy contract costs: This is providing job creators and large employers with an approximate 15% to 16% reduction in their electricity bills ahead of a period of economic recovery for our province. For consumers who are receiving the Ontario energy bill, bills remain stable.

So, Aris, we continue to provide, through the Ontario Electricity Rebate, to eligible ratepayers, including residential consumers, small businesses and farms, an 18.9% reduction on their pre-tax subtotal of their bills. But I hope I was able to walk you through a menu or constellation, if you will, of COVID-specific relief programs that were

offered to the people, the families, the small businesses and farms of Ontario during the COVID pandemic.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Thank you, Minister, for the detailed update. It is quite interesting to hear those details, but what changes has the government made to the COVID-19 Energy Assistance Program for residential and small businesses' availability? How much support will the people get through the CEAP-SB funding?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Wow, Aris, asking the tough but fair questions. What I can tell you is that the province has provided emergency support to thousands of residential and small business customers struggling with their energy bills due to the COVID pandemic. Through the COVID-19 Energy Assistance Program—CEAP, we call it; and CEAP for small businesses and charitable organizations is called CEAP-SB, so very, very simple. In 2020, I can report to you that the government committed an additional \$9 million to residential customers under CEAP and \$8 million to small businesses and charitable organization customers under CEAP-SB.

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We know—we're seeing first-hand—that there continues to be a need for this assistance, and that's why in the spring of 2021, we committed a further \$23 million to CEAP and CEAP-SB. This helps to ensure that support is available to electricity and natural gas customers who are struggling with their bills. Now the government is providing this additional \$23 million to support eligible households, small businesses and farming operations and charitable organizations struggling to pay their bills as a result of the impact that COVID has had.

I can report to you additionally that over 62,000 residential and small business customers have been helped by CEAP or CEAP-SB. CEAP funding will provide residential customers with up to \$750 in support per fuel type, so electricity or natural gas. Small businesses and charities are eligible to receive up to \$1,500 in support per fuel type, electricity or again natural gas, through CEAP-SB.

Ontarians can find the application form online—for those of you who are watching—on their electricity and natural gas utilities website. You can send it by email or mail to your utilities. We're finding some utilities may allow their customers to apply online or by phone, and I encourage you to contact your local utility for more information on these programs.

Funding is limited and applications are processed on a first-come, first-served basis, Aris, but what I can tell you is that after the first \$8 million and \$9 million respectively was exhausted, we felt that \$23 million in additional support should handle the flow that we have been experiencing over the course of the COVID pandemic. I hope that answers your question, Aris.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Yes. Thank you very much for that comprehensive answer and the details. Can you explain how eligibility for this program is determined and the different customers that are going to be able to benefit from this program?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Five minutes.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Sure. Let me start with residential customers first. As of the date that you might be applying, you're actually eligible to receive support for your primary residence if you have overdue amounts owing from one or more electricity bills incurred since March 17, 2020, the date of the initial provincial declaration of emergency.

If you're a small business or a charitable organization, you're eligible to receive support for your small business or your charity if, as of the date you're applying, your small business or your registered charity has an active account with an electricity distributor or a unit sub-meter provider, and as of the date that you're applying, Aris, your small business or your registered charity has overdue amounts owing from one or more previous energy bills incurred since March 17, 2020, which again is the date of the provincial declaration of an emergency.

For the purposes of CEAP-SB eligibility, small businesses, the account must be classified as what we call a general service less than 50 kilowatts an hour if the account is with an electricity distributor, or has consumption of less than 150,000 kilowatt hours of electricity annually if the account is with a unit sub-provider.

For natural gas customers, the account must consume less than 50,000 cubic metres of gas annually. This is a pretty high threshold, Aris, much higher than the energy consumption of the average business, so it means that virtually every small business in Ontario would qualify. That's why we structured it like we did. Customers can contact their utility for more information if they're unsure whether they would meet those technical but, in my respectful view, fairly generous criteria.

As I said earlier, the government's additional commitment of \$23 million to CEAP and CEAP-SB will help to ensure that we continue to provide support for electricity and natural gas customers who are struggling with their bills. As the province continues to work toward an economic recovery, we will continue to assess the availability of CEAP and the associated funding for the program as necessary.

Obviously I'm hopeful that these small businesses in particular, Aris, can get off the ground and recover, but they should know that these safeguards are in place to support and meet their needs as we hopefully emerge from the more dramatic and restrictive and therefore economic impacts of the COVID pandemic. Thank you for your question, Aris.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Chair, do I have time?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): You absolutely have time, sir. You have one minute and 30 seconds.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Okay. Just a quick follow-up question, Minister. The seniors who are living on their own in commercial units are dependent on their fixed income or pension. Today, as you know, the apartment units' monthly rent is so expensive, so high, and by the time they've paid their rent there is little left for them. Are there any programs or is there any way they can benefit from the programs available?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that, Aris. I'm not likely to get through this question but it's a very, very

important one. The short answer is yes. We have, of course, the Energy Affordability Program in place to replace two expired assistance programs and make it easier and simpler for electricity customers like seniors who may be struggling to pay their energy bills to find and gain access to support, in particular through energy efficiency measures. The EAP itself is a great example—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you, Minister. That concludes the time for the government side.

We will be moving over to the opposition side. We may not have a complete 20 minutes, but I'll keep a tab on the time and let you know when it is about 6 p.m. And, definitely, we will come back tomorrow morning and you will have the opportunity to proceed further. Thank you so much.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thank you, Chair. Minister—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Minister, would you like to say something?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Just a clarification, Mr. Chair: You mentioned 6 p.m. It's 4:49 in northwestern Ontario. That's in the Central Standard Time zone, which means that I would have another hour and 10 minutes at this and I'd have to make arrangements with my family with respect to child care. Can you, for the benefit of all Ontarians, recognize and embrace the fact that we have two standard time zones in the province of Ontario and just clarify for me, in case I have to make additional arrangements for child care, that what in fact you mean by 6 p.m. is actually 5 p.m. Central Standard Time, which, of course—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Greg Rickford: —time zone covers 350,000 square kilometres of the province.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thanks for seeking that clarification. As I was saying, 6 p.m. EST. Maybe the words were stuck here and could not come out. It is 6 p.m. EST. Thank you so much.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Okay. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Over to the MPP.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I appreciate your detail on time. You have Lake Atikokan that doesn't even change their time, so there is a whole other glitch in my riding, where I'm in the same time zone in Thunder Bay some of the time but not part of the year. It makes it interesting for conference calls and meetings—and Upsala, also; that's another story. So yes, timelines and times for meetings are always interesting.

Minister, in the interest of continuity, I was interested in the response to MPP Babikian about the seniors' programs and the electricity assistance programs, so I was wondering if you wanted to continue with your response.

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Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes, I'm happy to. I think it's important information to get out there, Judith. Given the potential for the vast audience who would be viewing this on at least public television, I'll continue, if you will.

With respect to our energy affordability programs, let me just give you some technical details. Of course, the

challenge was how to streamline the services and provide real assistance for those who need it most, so let me say that program eligibility is now consistent across the province, Judith. That was the problem with some of the assistance programs that were in place previously.

So while the offerings are actually tailored based on household income, home heating systems, location—so northern Ontario versus southern Ontario—and assessment of the specific needs of the home, the eligibility for program support is based on total household income and the number of members who are in that household. So we've got a matrix starting to form here that drives the support.

Applicants who receive any other eligible Ontario assistance program support—so, for example, from OESP or LEAP or Ontario Works—within the previous year are also eligible, Judith. I think that's important to know.

Applicants have to be responsible for the household's electricity bill to qualify, so it is residence-based. Social housing providers also continue to be eligible for this program.

The EAP, Judith, complements a number of income-tested energy support programs. Participants of the Ontario Electricity Support Program—OESP; I think I referred to it—or the Low-Income Energy Assistance Program, or Enbridge Gas Inc.'s Home Winterproofing Program, can automatically qualify for the EAP comprehensive support.

So you can see, I think, Judith—and I'll take your comments or your criticisms about them constructively—that this is tailored to meet the needs of social housing, low-income housing where there may be a number of people in the household, but also, and importantly, for seniors living on their own, where these costs could be the difference between heating and eating. I think the challenges that are well documented under the old program and under the previous government's electricity costing program made that a real reality. I think that was a metaphor that even your party had used in the run-up to the next election, in terms of affordability for people who—even with pensions and various other income supplements, be they from the province and/or the federal government, or, frankly, that they are just low-income by virtue of the job that they may have, seasonal or otherwise, they can get appropriate assistance for their energy costs.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I think the unfortunate thing, and the feedback that I hear from some folks, is that the eligibility criteria threshold is so low that there are a lot of people struggling who are at a somewhat higher—I think we've seen that with the seniors' dental program. We've had a little bit of a bump up on the eligibility, because it would be so low that you would not qualify, even people who are living on very, very low incomes and struggling.

Seniors really do need help, and, I think, every help we can give them. Sometimes they don't know about the help, so it's getting the word out through seniors' organizations, and then assisting them with the application processes, which, I'm sure, in all our offices we are doing when we hear about them, and when we go out into the community, we talk about it. It is something that is so vitally important,

because people are struggling with energy costs and especially during COVID, with many people losing their jobs and unable to make their bills.

Sometimes people I know were reluctant at first to actually even apply, even the small business people, because they're very proud. It's something they've never had to do before, and they struggled. But this situation that we were in, with COVID, put people at the edge. They needed that extra assistance, and that's where I would have—it was difficult because of the restrictions on gathering. Often, people who don't hear that well or are struggling with mental health—it's very difficult for them, and they do need the help. So that melding with the agencies and the people who are helping folks in the community—I think we could probably all do a better job getting more of that to the people who need it.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Judith, let me just say, if I can: I think that's a great idea. I'll commit here and now to redouble my efforts and go back to my ministry and ensure that, on the energy side, we have maximized all our networks to communicate these support programs through places like seniors' centres across the province, where slowly but surely they will start to reorganize and have this information available at their fingertips. I think that's an excellent idea. We may be doing some of it; I don't micro-manage every single detail of this. But I can't honestly answer the question—I'm willing to admit here—as to how far out our reach is in terms of information. I know it's substantial.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Two minutes.

Hon. Greg Rickford: But you're absolutely right: Gatherings have not been able to serve the important function that they did in the past, Judith, where everybody sits around over an egg salad sandwich and a delicious bowl of homemade chicken soup and tells each other about the important programs that could potentially make life for them at home a little easier. I commit to that now.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thank you so much. That's very helpful, and I think we'll all look forward to going into those seniors' centres and having those conversations and making people aware of the help that's out there for them.

How much time, Chair?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): There's approximately a minute before we take a recess today and reconvene tomorrow morning.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: All right. Well, I'd just like to thank the minister, the associate minister and everyone who has been here today. I've actually enjoyed the discussion, and I've learned things. I also have a lot of questions, so we'll look forward to seeing you all tomorrow morning.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. With that, I'm guessing that we're going to be saying thank you to everyone for tonight. The committee will now adjourn until Thursday, June 17, which is tomorrow, at 9 a.m. Eastern Standard Time.

The committee adjourned at 1758.

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