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10 mars 2022

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF ONTARIO

Thursday 10 March 2022

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE
DE L'ONTARIO

Jeudi 10 mars 2022

The House met at 0900.

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

Prayers / Prières.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

GETTING ONTARIO
CONNECTED ACT, 2022

LOI DE 2022
POUR UN ONTARIO CONNECTÉ

Miss Surma moved second reading of the following bill:

Bill 93, An Act to amend the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021 and the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, 2012 / Projet de loi 93, Loi modifiant la Loi de 2021 sur la réalisation accélérée de projets d'Internet à haut débit et la Loi de 2012 sur un système d'information sur les infrastructures souterraines en Ontario.

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

Hon. Kinga Surma: I'm happy to rise for the second reading of Bill 93, Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022. I will also be sharing the government's time with Ross Romano, Minister of Government and Consumer Services; my parliamentary assistant, the member from Brampton West; as well as the member from Sarnia-Lambton, parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Government and Consumer Services.

Today's proposed legislation comes at a time when having access to reliable high-speed Internet is no longer an option; it is a necessity. The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the importance of high-speed Internet connectivity in our communities and to our economic resilience.

When the virus was first detected in Ontario, people had to quickly pivot online in order to access vital resources, connect with loved ones, and work and learn from home, all in order to keep themselves and those around them safe. But for too many Ontarians, that reality was an impossibility due to low-quality, unreliable Internet access, or no access at all.

Mr. Speaker, our plan ensures 100% connectivity. No one will be left behind. No one should struggle earning an income because of lack of connectivity. Families should never have to worry about educating their kids at home. And young people who miss their friends and family members should never feel isolated or alone. In today's

world, a lack of reliable high-speed Internet is detrimental not only for economic reasons but also for overall health and well-being.

Although many of us are beginning to return to the community in workplaces and schools and visiting local businesses, which I know we're all very excited about, maintaining the strong online economy we've built, especially over the last two years, is critical to our province's continued economic growth. Many of these in-person amenities have pivoted to more online service options and will continue to do so as we reopen because we have learned that online options to complement the way we do business have immense benefits.

There is no turning back in time with respect to the digital growth we have developed as a province, and we need to support how businesses and people are used to functioning now, which is more virtually than ever. We need to make sure the people of Ontario have equal access to participate and that no one gets left out.

Mr. Speaker, we have an obligation to build better infrastructure faster, strengthen our communities and lay the foundation for long-term economic growth. The people that every one of us here today represent deserve that. Our government is answering that call. We're putting people and communities first, with the proposed Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022.

If passed, this legislation will help build on our government's ambitious goal to bring high-speed Internet to every single community by the end of 2025. We are supporting this ambitious endeavour with a historic investment of nearly \$4 billion, the largest single investment in high-speed Internet in any province by any government in Canadian history, along with a strong plan which includes many programs and projects that are well under way.

In 2021, we launched a request for qualifications, led by Infrastructure Ontario, as part of a new competitive bidding process to connect more than 300,000 homes and businesses in unserved and underserved communities. We've received a lot of market participation, including from local small and medium-sized Internet service providers. I am pleased to share that the competitive procurement process is now coming to a close. I am anxiously awaiting the results and look forward to updating the public very soon. This, however, is a huge accomplishment already. We were the first jurisdiction in Canada to execute a reverse auction to connect premises to high-speed Internet.

Many of the broadband infrastructure projects in our plan depend on municipal approvals and access to data to

ensure they are completed quickly. Delays and barriers in these processes can be obstacles for Internet service providers to check homes. This legislation, if passed, would further reduce duplication and delays in getting people the access to high-speed Internet they need. In fact, this legislation, if passed, would build on the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, 2021, and the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021, that the government introduced last April in an effort to remove those barriers. Both pieces of legislation were created to accelerate the deployment of high-speed Internet infrastructure by providing the Minister of Infrastructure with the authority to limit hurdles for provincially significant projects. It included key measures that have made an otherwise slow and tiresome process easier and more efficient.

We are doing everything we can to ensure unserved and underserved Ontarians can enjoy the online world that so many of us enjoy today.

To further support our bold commitment of 100% connectivity, in November 2021 we released a technical guideline to support the accelerated deployment of high-speed Internet. It was based on feedback from our stakeholders and new best practices with timelines for right-of-way as well as hydro pole and underground infrastructure access. As part of this guideline, we issued a statement of intent to help provide more certainty and confidence to our high-speed Internet partners. This statement further expressed our government's commitment to accelerating the deployment of high-speed Internet through additional legislative, regulatory and non-legislative tools that would help pave the way for Internet service providers working with government. I'm pleased to say that today our government is taking continued action on this commitment with the proposed Getting Ontario Connected Act.

Amendments to the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021, would set new service standards to ensure that municipalities provide timely responses to right-of-way permit applications for high-speed Internet infrastructure deployment. These standards would be 10 business days to respond to right-of-way permits for proponents with projects totalling up to 30 kilometres and 15 business days to respond to proponents with projects totalling 30 kilometres or more. It would also require municipalities and other stakeholders to share relevant data in a timely manner when requested by Internet service providers.

An online platform called Broadband One Window has been developed with our partners at Infrastructure Ontario to provide stakeholders with easy and secure access to datasets and to make the sharing of information more seamless. This will also help manage right-of-way access applications, ensuring a more efficient, streamlined process.

Internet service providers working on provincially designated projects need information on local infrastructure projects in a timely manner in order to deliver quickly. Under these new changes, organizations that own utility infrastructure near an identified high-speed Internet project would be required to provide timely access to that infrastructure data.

0910

Together, these proposed changes are a critical part in helping to ensure that provincial broadband projects can be built faster to provide access to all communities in Ontario by the end of 2025.

Today our government is also proposing amendments to the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, 2012. My colleagues will be providing more details on that soon.

All of these amendments would bring incredible benefits to the people of Ontario. They would support timely decision-making and save time and money. Most importantly, these amendments would bring the unserved and underserved people of Ontario the Internet and cellular access they need, faster.

Mr. Speaker, I want to take a few minutes to share a couple of stories from people who have written to me from across the province, frustrated about being left off-line for far too long. I think it's important that we hear their stories. Their voices and experiences lay the foundation for everything we do.

A resident in Thunder Bay looking for a job wrote that he had found many good positions that he would have loved to take on, but without reliable Internet he couldn't qualify.

In Wellington county, a couple found working from home difficult. Their Internet signal was too weak at times to even transmit a single file. On top of that, their Internet cut out during their son's exam.

It was reported in northern Ontario that a resident along with his wife and teenaged sons had to ration how many hours they could go online, since they lived just over a kilometre away from the cut-off for unlimited Internet.

These are just a couple of unacceptable examples of why our government has taken action on this connectivity issue and set such determined timelines. The time is now. The people are counting on us.

Mr. Speaker, this legislation, with the changes that we are proposing, is important to Ontario's communities for today and for the future. By enacting these measures, we will help to ensure everyone in this province has the access to high-speed Internet they need to succeed, connect with each other and contribute to our economic growth. The actions we take today matter.

I truly hope that the opposition will support this bill. Internet service providers will be selected to service geographic lots and the remaining homes imminently. It's incredibly important that we have best practices and standards in place so that they can start building as early as this summer.

Mr. Speaker, the opposition constantly speaks about their challenges with connectivity in the north, so I say to them, do something about it and support this bill. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I see the member from Sault Ste. Marie is up. Minister, are you joining the debate at this stage?

Hon. Ross Romano: Yes, I'd love to.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): At the beginning, the minister did say she would be sharing her time.

Hon. Ross Romano: Indeed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Indeed, so you now have the floor, sir.

Hon. Ross Romano: I appreciate the opportunity to rise in the House in order to speak to the Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022. I will also be sharing my time on behalf of the government with our parliamentary assistant here at the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services, the member from Sarnia–Lambton and the godfather of Ontario One Call. I also want to thank Minister Surma, our Minister of Infrastructure, for her tireless work in getting this bill into the House.

Much like the rest of the critical infrastructure work that our government has been putting in place, this bill and the broadband network that it would expand would help the people of Ontario to recover from the economic effects of the pandemic, as well as help their communities get stronger as a result. This is an important bill that would not only help us get more critical infrastructure built in the province and do it faster, but would also ensure that Ontarians everywhere have the means to access high-speed Internet for them to work, learn and play. That almost deserves a round of applause, I think.

Interjections.

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: And a visit.

Hon. Ross Romano: And a visit, indeed.

Certainly, Speaker, I could tell you, I remember how ecstatic I personally was, because I live in an area where Internet is not always all that strong, so I was very, very happy to see the beginning of this.

For my ministry's part, this bill would amend the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, 2012, to make improvements to the way that the location of underground infrastructure is obtained, and I will be speaking to that in greater detail.

First, I think there is some additional context required on setting out the need for change.

Earlier, during the bill introduction, Minister Surma said—and I might be paraphrasing her words a little bit—“Now, more than ever, everyone in Ontario needs access to reliable high-speed Internet. That is why our government made a historic investment of nearly \$4 billion to connect every community with access to high-speed Internet by the end of 2025.” Speaker, I think we can all agree that this is a very ambitious and important goal, and that the pandemic has really demonstrated to us time and time again how enormously important it is for people to have access to high-speed Internet. Maybe at one point broadband connections were only the purview of early adopters and gamers, but here, today, I will certainly not be the first to tell you that those days are long, long past.

The pandemic has shone a bright light on a number of things, and certainly one of them has been the digital divide. A large part of this is unfortunately due to broken Liberal promises of high-speed Internet access in places like my communities in northern Ontario and parts of rural

Ontario. It's hard to believe that after 15 years in power, the Liberal government of old had so little progress in this area.

The need for everyone to have access to high-speed Internet access is only going to grow. Particularly as millions have gotten more comfortable with the technology that connects us to others, that speed of change just went into overdrive.

I think a lot of us can say that at the start of the pandemic we were really challenged with dealing with a lot of the virtual elements of what was changing around us, but by the end I think a lot of us were quite comfortable with some of these new processes.

So it's critical that every community has the chance to keep up with the pace of change and not be left in the rear-view mirror once again, like we were by the former Liberal administration, of course backed by the New Democrats 99% of the time.

People shouldn't have to always go out on icy days to see their doctor for routine things that can be done securely from their homes.

Businesses should not have to settle for excruciatingly slow connections when they are trying to make their products and have those products get to the online marketplace.

People shouldn't have to move away from their hometown if they're working for an employer that has decided that remote work is the way to go.

Speaker, as you know, I come from a northern riding, and I've seen first-hand how many people, especially young professionals, feel that they have to move to Toronto or the area of Toronto just so that they don't get left behind. We shouldn't just stand by and let that happen. That is why I'm such a big supporter of this bill and so committed to having my ministry do anything we can to support it.

This is the largest single investment in high-speed Internet in any province by any government in the history of this country, and I want to say how proud I am to support the Ministry of Infrastructure in this mission. Our government is working across ministries to bring about changes that will help to get this work done so that Ontarians far and wide are able to do what they please when they please and where they please.

All across this province, there's critical infrastructure criss-crossing under your feet, whether it's telecom cables, gas pipelines, water mains or electrical wires. The Getting Ontario Connected Act, if passed, would in part amend the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, 2012, and make improvements to Ontario One Call. In particular, it would address immediate pressure points in getting location information for this underground infrastructure, also known as locates, that would help avoid accidents and get infrastructure in place sooner. For example, amendments would require the use of a dedicated locator for certain excavation projects. This would allow a project owner to get all of their locate services done by one person, rather than having to wait on a different person for each utility.

Speaker, I recently went through a home construction process, and I don't even want to begin, but it's a very

long, long process, going through a pandemic and having a construction project. Every time you need a different service, a new locate has to come out—more time, more money, more effort, more energy. That’s something that one person could do for the duration of the entire project, as opposed to all of these recurring visits.

Additionally, the locate information would be valid for an extended and standardized period of at least 60 days, to help avoid duplicative work and drive efficiencies. Duplication would also be reduced by allowing contractors working on the same dig site to share location information.

Speaker, these are all simple steps that would help us get work done faster, more easily and more efficiently, and, most importantly, it would maintain Ontario’s strict safety standards. There are more changes that are going to help this industry operate better that we look forward to discussing.

0920

Putting more clarity around requirements for different types of locate services would make things run more smoothly. For example, a clear definition around terms like “emergency locate requests” would take the guesswork out of things and provide more clarity for the industry. In addition, removing terms like “reasonable attempts” in relation to the timelines for locates would put a stronger onus on underground infrastructure owners and operators to get their locates done within a more predictable time frame to support construction activities and individuals who have to wait for those details before they can actually get in the ground to dig. All of these changes will have a huge and positive impact on the businesses and the builders of our province, who can now get shovels in the ground sooner on projects, from broadband to new housing developments, and they will all be built faster, Mr. Speaker.

We’re promoting compliance, because we all know that it’s not enough to just put new rules in place. There has to be compliance. That is why we proposed to give Ontario One Call the authority to issue administrative penalties against non-compliant members and excavators within the industry. These administrative penalties are an important compliance tool for the purpose of ensuring that we are promoting compliance with the act and its regulations. Ontario One Call would be required to publish data on how each underground infrastructure owner and operator is performing on completing their locates on time. Furthermore, Ontario One Call would also publish administrative penalty orders on their website. Lastly in this regard, excavators would also have an avenue to be able to seek recourse against members through the Ontario Land Tribunal for various matters, such as late or inaccurate locates.

We’re improving the governance model. Speaker, the last significant portion of the changes to the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act would be in improving the overall governance and oversight structure. For example, the bill would require a mandatory MOU—that’s a memorandum of understanding—between One Call and the minister. This bill would add

tools that the minister of the day could exercise in the event that an organization does not comply with that very legislative framework. To be clear, Speaker, this is not a commentary on the work that Ontario One Call has been doing. Rather, it is simply wise for our government, and any government, to have authorities that it can act on if a time comes where the public interest is not being met. Now, while these would be measures of last resort, I think it is nonetheless the responsible thing for our government to have contingencies in place. After all, as I have said in the past, we have to look out for the interests of the biggest stakeholders out there, and those are the people of the province of Ontario, Speaker.

This bill would also give the minister the authority to change the size of Ontario One Call’s board of directors and aspects of its composition, appointing directors to the board etc., if I may say—just simply put, as long as it is less than a majority of the board. These powers are not unique, Speaker. Rather, these enhancements are in line with the governance-related requirements placed on other entities that are overseen by my ministry in specific sectors and industries. They are put in place because they allow for our government to better look out for the best interests of Ontarians and their communities.

We’re connected to other priorities as well, Mr. Speaker. I think we have outlined the importance of this bill and the need for change in light of the digital age that we live in, exasperated by the pandemic and exasperated, exacerbated—that’s a tough word for me right now—by a 15-year backlog that has been left behind by the Liberals, supported, of course, 99% of the time by the NDP. Mr. Speaker, no wonder I struggle with the word. It’s just so exasperating—15 years.

We cannot—no, we will not—allow Ontario to be separated by those with broadband and those who are out of luck. The proposed changes that I am speaking of today would go beyond this. In fact, one of the biggest challenges I hear these days is around the price of housing, especially when we’re talking about young families trying to be able to get a home nowadays. That is why my colleague the Minister of Municipal Affairs has been working so hard with the Housing Affordability Task Force to identify and implement real solutions to addressing the housing supply crisis. Whether it’s a new developer who is building a brand new subdivision or a homeowner who is digging a foundation or even an extension to accommodate a growing family, or whether it be a multi-unit housing complex, these changes to the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act would help get this important work done faster while also maintaining public confidence to ensure that everybody can know that it is being done safely.

Mr. Speaker, to wrap up, I just want to again thank the Minister of Infrastructure for the work that she has done and her ministry has done to getting the Getting Ontario Connected Act into this House. I also want to thank in advance my parliamentary assistant who will be speaking to this. He is, as I said, no stranger to Ontario One Call; in fact, the godfather of it.

This province desperately needs communication infrastructure. We have to ensure that we are participating in our digital economy and making sure we have excellent access to our digital economy, but we also have to ensure that we have access to the critical services that it enables. Making sure we have reliable and fast Internet is so important. It is not simply a luxury anymore. It is a necessity, Speaker, and it is necessary in every corner of the province. I'm thrilled to bring forward these complementary changes that are going to allow our government the ability to bring the reality of more affordable housing and more choice—more homes, more choice, of course—to the market when it is so badly needed.

Thank you, again, Speaker, and I will now turn it over to my good friend, the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Government and Consumer Services.

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

The Minister of Infrastructure did say she would be sharing her time with a number of her caucus colleagues, and the next one up is the member from Brampton West.

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: I'm pleased to rise today speak to Bill 93, the proposed Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022. I am thankful for the opportunity to speak about this proposed legislation in addition to the remarks provided by Kinga Surma, Minister of Infrastructure; Ross Romano, Minister of Government and Consumer Services; and MPP Bailey, who will be speaking shortly after this.

Mr. Speaker, now more than ever it is of critical importance to build infrastructure faster to help connect the remaining unserved and underserved communities across Ontario with access to reliable high-speed Internet. Two years ago, all of our lives changed drastically when we were hit by the global pandemic. Within a matter of weeks, our lives and those living in the very communities we represent shifted to a digital economy. People all across the province were relying on their Internet service more than ever to work remotely, learn online and stay in touch with family and friends through online platforms. This was all done from the comfort of their homes, and this shift to an online world was necessary to help protect the health and safety of Ontarians.

For many people, this quickly became their new normal, to wake up each morning and turn on their computer to start their work or school day and participate in video calls without ever having to commute into an office building. For many people, this transition to a new way of life was easy, as they didn't have to worry about their Internet connectivity. However, we understand this wasn't easy for everyone. Hundreds of thousands of people across Ontario are being left behind in today's digital world.

Mr. Speaker, before the government began taking steps to fill these service gaps, as many as 700,000 households and businesses across the province didn't have access to reliable high-speed Internet. Some had no Internet at all, from the local mom-and-pop store on the corner that needs to source supplies, sell products online and connect with their customers; to the students who should not have to sit outside of their school on a cold bench just to catch a WiFi

signal to download learning materials to prepare for an upcoming exam; to the families trying desperately to see their loved ones' faces over Skype or FaceTime but unable to due to a poor Internet connection.

That is why our government is taking the bold and necessary steps to ensure every individual, every family and every business in Ontario has access to high-speed Internet. We have made a historic investment of nearly \$4 billion to connect every community with access to reliable high-speed Internet by the end of 2025. It is important to echo what Minister Surma said: This is the largest single investment in high-speed Internet by any province, by any government in Canadian history.

Mr. Speaker, we are ready to take the steps to help ensure that more unserved and underserved communities have access to reliable high-speed Internet sooner. That's why, earlier this week, we introduced the proposed Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022, which would, if passed, build on the progress our government has already made as part of its plan to get Ontario connected.

0930

This proposed legislation, if passed, would help to further reduce barriers, duplication and delays, making it easier and faster to get shovels in the ground on more high-speed Internet projects.

Investing in and supporting infrastructure projects, including high-speed Internet projects, has always been essential, but now, more than ever, we cannot delay. The stakes are too high, and as I mentioned before, people in Ontario are being left behind. So it is our responsibility to take action and to act quickly, because our communities cannot wait any longer.

Mr. Speaker, as Finance Minister Peter Bethlenfalvy said when he introduced our 2021 fall economic statement, tomorrow's prosperity begins with shovels in the ground today. This legislation, with the changes that we're proposing, would be key to helping get those shovels in the ground sooner to build Ontario. And if passed, the proposed legislation will help us to meet our government's ambitious commitment to provide access to all communities by the end of 2025.

As you all know, building Ontario is not something we can do alone. It takes tremendous work from across ministries, all levels of government, our partners and our municipalities to deliver critical infrastructure projects. That is why we are pleased to be working with the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services on the proposed Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022. Together, we're doing everything we can to ensure that no matter where you live, you will be able to participate in the online world.

We're also working closely with municipalities, who continue to support and advocate for the expansion of high-speed Internet in their communities.

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario just recently offered this feedback: "Internet connections have been a lifeline for Ontarians throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. High-speed Internet and cellular services lay the foundation for continued prosperity into the future.

AMO welcomes the Ontario government's commitment to connect all Ontario homes and businesses by the end of 2025."

As part of our plan, we're working closely with our agency Infrastructure Ontario to make it easier for municipalities and others in the sector to help build these projects faster. This includes Broadband One Window, an online platform that will help people to exchange data and support permit processes more easily. It also includes a technical assistance team that will provide support to municipalities and other stakeholders when needed.

We're providing more certainty for our partners to help us deliver high-speed Internet projects faster.

In September, we launched a competitive process in partnership with Infrastructure Ontario to help us meet our commitment of bringing high-speed Internet access to every community by the end of 2025.

Mr. Speaker, the proposed Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022, would provide the tools and assurances that Internet service providers need so they can start their projects as early as this summer.

Minister Surma explained that this proposed legislation would build on our government's existing initiatives, many of which are already well under way. Our government has already committed \$900 million in more than 180 broadband, cellular and satellite projects across the province.

This includes the Improving Connectivity for Ontario program, also known as ICON. In October, we announced nearly \$1.5 million through ICON to bring high-speed Internet access to four communities, including Rideau Lakes, Saugeen Shores, Kincardine, and Lucan Biddulph. This investment means that more than 900 homes and businesses will soon have access to high-speed Internet. And this is only the latest ICON announcement we have made. Last summer, we approved another 13 ICON projects that will reach 17,000 homes and businesses. There are also 17 other ICON projects that will be co-funded by the government of Canada under its Universal Broadband Fund. These projects will bring high-speed Internet access to as many as 46,000 homes and businesses.

Mr. Speaker, we are also continuing to support shovel-ready projects in southwestern, eastern and northern Ontario.

As I have said before, our government is committed to leaving no one in the province disconnected, including farms and businesses in rural Ontario. That's why, in southwestern Ontario, we have invested more than \$63 million through the Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology project. In total, this project will invest nearly \$255 million to expand high-speed Internet. This project will bring high-speed Internet to more than 58,000 homes, farms and businesses across southwestern Ontario. And I'm pleased to say that construction is under way for more than 60 individual projects all across southwest Ontario. This means that the people living in these communities are already benefiting from our hard work.

We have also partnered with the Eastern Ontario Regional Network, also known as EORN, to help improve

cellular service in eastern Ontario. This project is part of a \$300-million partnership between the Ontario government, federal government, Rogers Communications and EORN. This project will help rural communities take part in the digital economy and have access to the wireless services they need to succeed. Once completed, residents will get near-complete cellular voice coverage and increased access to mobile service in areas where they work, live and travel.

Mr. Speaker, I want to take a moment to share how we are helping to improve access to reliable high-speed Internet services in northern Ontario. We are investing \$10.9 million to bring faster high-speed Internet access to several northern towns and First Nation communities. This will help bridge the digital divide across this area of the province, ensuring that no one is forgotten.

Ontario has already invested to improve connectivity through the broadband and cellular expansion initiative of the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp., and has committed \$63.3 million over five years to the Next Generation Network Program, and to date 11 projects have been launched. Projects include bringing high-speed Internet access to 200 homes in Parry Sound and Carling township, and the introduction of reliable high-speed Internet services to the communities of Dawn-Euphemia township.

Mr. Speaker, we know that improved access to high-speed Internet will have a transformative, life-changing effect for those across Ontario still lacking access to reliable connectivity. That is why we proposed the Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022. It would eliminate delays for builders, accelerate construction and connect more communities to reliable, high-speed Internet access sooner. This is key to reducing red tape, building better infrastructure faster and strengthening all communities across the province.

We are stepping up to ensure that no matter where you live, you can participate in today's digital economy to access vital health care services, work, learn, start a business, participate in the agriculture sector, and connect with loved ones online. The proposed Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022, if passed, would help us connect every region to reliable high-speed Internet by the end of 2025.

Mr. Speaker, we are building a future for our province that is better, brighter, stronger and more resilient today and for generations to come.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): To continue the debate, I recognize the member from Sarnia-Lambton.

Mr. Robert Bailey: I'm pleased today, Mr. Speaker, to rise in the House to speak to the Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022. I'm very happy to have the opportunity to speak to this bill in addition to the remarks made by the Minister of Government and Consumer Services and, previously, the Minister of Infrastructure, and also my colleague from Brampton West.

I also want to echo Minister Romano and credit Minister Surma for the work that she has done to expand and upgrade the network of infrastructure in this province.

Minister Romano also spoke earlier about some of the improvements being proposed to the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act—I don't think I'll say all of that again—and I'd like to add to that a bit more. Minister Romano comes from a riding well outside the Toronto area. And, while Sarnia–Lambton has some access to high-speed Internet, there are still areas in my riding where that's not the case. I think it's critical that the government does what it can to get this kind of infrastructure built faster, more efficiently and with less duplication and delays.

While I was waiting for my time to speak, I listened keenly to both ministers and my colleague about what the Getting Ontario Connected Act proposes and, in addition, the improvements overall that it would have in getting broadband infrastructure built.

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The arguments in favour are overwhelming. For example, speeding up the process to build broadband networks by implementing stronger service standards for municipalities to provide timely locates and access to infrastructure data is a good place to start. These are great ways to get shovels in the ground faster. We know that there are too many delays and too much red tape for project owners to cut through, and we need to do more to help them get their projects under way.

But of course, there's one other thing that needs to be done. Everyone always needs to remember to call before they dig—where did I hear that before? To many, this might sound like a simple thing, but it's a very critical step to ensure that communities and workers are safe and that we don't accidentally create service outages or damage underground infrastructure when we build projects.

Some parts of the province's underground infrastructure obviously create more immediate dangers than others, but they are all important nonetheless. Breaking a gas pipeline or an electrical cable with a backhoe can have tragic consequences, and those can happen literally in the blink of an eye. By contrast, breaking a water main might only be a short-term inconvenience for some, but if it takes a fire hydrant out of commission, the consequences can be devastating, and being without water for an extended period of time in any home means no cooking or cleaning. That's certainly a long way from just an inconvenience.

At the same time, Speaker, telecommunications barriers can cripple a business or cut off a person's access to emergency medical care. This is why the work that Ontario One Call does is so important. It is also near and dear to my heart because the corporation we know today was actually created as a result of a private member's bill that was brought forward by myself and my colleague from across the aisle, the member for Hamilton East–Stoney Creek, in 2012.

Interjection.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Yes, to thunderous applause.

But we know that the legislative framework needs to be updated over time to take into account changes in the industry, and they cannot remain static.

It says here, “MPP Bailey should take time to speak about the history in creating One Call from his own experience,” so I'll do that. I'll expand upon that. The genesis, or the background behind Ontario One Call: The sewer and water main people, actually, were here at Queen's Park a number of years ago now—way over 10—and I got talking to one of their employees, one of their managers. We were talking about business in general and how things were going, and this gentleman was explaining to me how difficult it was getting permits to do work. This was basically in Toronto, where you could have as many as up to 20 different agencies and corporations over the years—the old city of Toronto and the new parts that were added. You had to call all these people before you could even start a job.

He was telling me about how difficult it was getting any work done, and I said, “Oh, yes, I know all about that. Before I came here, I worked in industry, and that was my job, to do locates and make sure that all the paperwork was done.” He stopped me and he said, “Do you understand locates?” I said, “Oh, yeah.” I said I just thought everybody had to do them. It wasn't until I came here that I found out they weren't universal across the province. The industry I worked for, Nova Chemicals, was very safety-conscious, so we probably went overboard to what other industries and businesses were doing at that time in Sarnia.

So I said, “Yes, I understand them. I had to work with them every day and make sure they were okay before I signed off on them for my boss.” So he said, “Well, just wait a minute.” He went and he got a couple of his colleagues, and he said, “This guy understands what we're going through every day. He understands locates.” And he said, “We'd like to come in and see you,” and I said, “Well, okay.” It's like anybody down here. There are people you meet at receptions or in the hall, and they want to come and see you, and you say, “Yes, okay. Here's my card.”

I forgot about it, and about three or four days or a week later, one of my staff at the time, who helped draft this bill, said, “Mr. Bailey, there are people who want to meet you over in the conference room. There's a bunch of lawyers.” I said, “Lawyers?” and he said, “Yes.” He said, “I don't know. It's something about somebody you gave a business card to the other night.” I said, “Okay.” So I went over.

Anyway, the nutshell was they were having very great difficulty, and every time a new minister—and I understand exactly where they were coming from. They said, “We'd explain what we needed, that we needed something better for locates. We'd bring a minister and their staff up to date, and we'd just think we were across the finish line and the government would change the minister, and we'd have to start all over again.” He said, “In fact, just recently, we sat in a meeting with the minister” at the time—not our government, but it didn't matter—“and the minister argued with us that we already had what we wanted in place,” and we all looked at each other and said, “Okay. We'll just leave it because we're not going anywhere.” Then they had to call back a few days later and apologize—obviously not the minister but one of his senior

staffers who said, “The minister was misinformed. Sorry, we don’t have what we thought we had.” Anyway, that was the start of One Call.

Well, I said I could maybe introduce a private member’s bill to give it creditability, get it discussed in the Legislature to give it some credence, never thinking that eventually it would pass. Anyway, that’s the background on Ontario One Call. I’m very pleased and happy where it is today. It’s grown a lot more involved than I ever dreamed of that evening when I stood and talked to that gentleman. I couldn’t picture where it went. But the member for Hamilton East–Stoney Creek and I worked together on that. I’m very pleased there was an opportunity, an example of working together with your colleagues across the hall or across the way.

I’m so pleased today to be here with Minister Romano and Minister Surma bringing these important changes forward. I better get back to my remarks.

I’m proud to be part of this initiative that supports hard-working men and women in the province in the construction industry while keeping the people and businesses of Ontario safe.

Improving Ontario One Call service: It’s been 10 years since Ontario One Call was mandated to be the single point of contact for all underground infrastructure locate requests in the province, and in that time I think they’ve clearly proven their worth.

I think it’s all important to note that Ontario One Call is not a part of government and doesn’t receive any public funding. They are funded by their own members, who are owners and operators of underground infrastructure. All owners and operators of underground infrastructure are required to register as members, including gas/oil utilities, electrical utilities, telecommunication utilities and municipalities.

One Call currently has approximately 835 members, and in the year 2021 it processed more than one million requests. That’s hard to believe, but one million requests to locate underground infrastructure. This is important work that helps keep the people of Ontario safe.

Mr. Speaker, as I said, improvements can always be made. In particular, I think that every organization should continuously be looking for ways to be more efficient, reduce duplication and get things done faster without compromising the original mission. For Ontario One Call, their mission is public safety and supporting timely locate delivery in the province or, more completely, their mission is to “protect Ontario municipalities and communities from the loss of service and harm caused by damages to underground infrastructure by educating the public on the need to ‘Call Before You Dig.’”

I know Ontario One Call is working hard to improve the way they work so things can get done accurately, safely and quickly.

Speaker, I was watching the Leafs game the other day and one of the announcers said something about great goalies. He said the best ones make the hard saves look easy and the easy ones look spectacular. That is Ontario One Call’s goal. Even though the work to locate underground infrastructure might be complicated, it doesn’t

have to be complicated to request and obtain this information. It should be simple. And so, doing things like requiring a dedicated locator to do all of the locating work for certain projects would be an excellent improvement. It would help with the manpower shortages that I know the locate industries—for example, G-Tel—and others, experience every day.

Providing for a minimum validity period to minimize duplicative work over a short period of time—I think the minister spoke about the 60 days. That’s something we absolutely should do. Or allowing contractors who work on the same job to use the same locate information? That would also, in my opinion, be a no-brainer.

Taken together, I think this is a great suite of proposed improvements that would help builders get the services they need, faster and with less delays.

Speaker, before I move off this topic, I also want to touch on an additional point that the minister made about the far-reaching effect that these improvements would have.

Certainly housing is an obvious one. With a drastic shortage of housing and housing options, we need to do things that are going to help bring options to the marketplace and make it more affordable. The amendments being proposed would help support that important initiative.

I know the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing has been working diligently on this, and I know that I, for one, am looking forward to seeing what more the government can do in this regard.

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Speaker, even if the projects are different, these changes would help anyone who needs to get information about what’s in the underground area before they dig. Commercial property developers, a homeowner building a new fence or a deck or planting a tree, road work, transit construction or a municipality building a new park—all of these projects need accurate, timely information to get their projects done, and these proposed improvements would help them all.

Minister Romano also made points about compliance and governance that I also support. Giving Ontario One Call the authority to issue administrative penalties and being required to publish data about the performance of underground infrastructure, owners/operators and administrative penalty orders would be meaningful compliance tools to promote good behaviour. And allowing excavators to seek recourse against members through the Ontario Land Tribunal for various matters such as late or inaccurate locates would also provide a less costly avenue than civil proceedings, which might otherwise proceed.

My last point in this vein is to support the changes that would improve the overall governance model of Ontario One Call and strengthen the government oversight. Some of the things, like a mandatory memorandum of understanding between Ontario One Call and the minister, would reflect the best practices by clearly outlining what the corporation does and the expectations of the government of the day. I know that some of the other measures, while they may never be necessary, are, as Minister

Romano stated, prudent measures to ensure that the public interest is protected.

Speaker, allow me to close out my time on this item; I just wanted to reiterate how important I feel this bill is overall. It's hard to overstate just how important high-speed Internet access has become in a daily person's life, and I should note you don't necessarily have to connect in your home day to day. I know plenty of people who don't want to be immersed in the wall-to-wall Internet style. That's their choice. We all know how overwhelming that can be, and being able to disconnect can be as important as being able to connect in the first place. But we are at a point in our development where communities are suffering if they can't get access to these things—things that other areas of our province may take for granted. When entire sections of the province are being left behind and they can't take part in the digital economy, that is a real issue with significant consequences, and the government can't afford to let that happen.

As I said, the understanding of the reasons behind the development of Ontario One Call—at that time, I couldn't have envisioned what we're doing with the Internet today: expanding it across the province, trying to give everyone access to broadband, taking on those kinds of projects. I know that in my community the construction safety record there is very good, and I'd like to think that this bill, Ontario One Call, which the member from Hamilton East—Stoney Creek and I drafted and passed through this House over 10 years ago now, has led in some small part to that safety of infrastructure, less injuries and less deaths.

We have all seen cases—mostly in the States, thank God—where homes are blown up. There's a gas leak. Somebody was doing some work and the gas flowed back through the trench and into the house, and the hot water heater kicked in and blew the house to smithereens. So, knock on wood; thank God we haven't seen a lot of that in Ontario. I attribute a lot of that to the Ontario One Call and the workers themselves, of course, who are on the job, doing the locates.

I also had the privilege of going to Ottawa, to the Senate. The Senate, when they heard about this bill, wanted to know more about it because the Ontario One Call bill doesn't apply to federal property. It's one of those strange creatures. Railroads, pipelines, rights-of-way, federal airports, I suppose, Ontario One Call wouldn't necessarily—they should use it and they probably do in most cases, but the federal government at the time and the Senate wanted to study it because they wanted to see it applied across the country. They knew that on their property and the lands that they controlled—military bases—that there was a need for something like Ontario One Call at that time. So it was interesting to go there and answer a lot of questions from senators from all across the country.

I don't know whether they really ever got that off the ground—too many competing interests. But it was interesting that they said that if Ontario passes this bill—and I remember the proponents at the time, when I was first working with them way back 10 years ago. I said, “Well,

what's going on in the rest of Canada?” They said, “Nothing. If we can get Ontario, that's the big nut to crack. If we can get this bill in place, get it working the way we want in Ontario, the rest of the country will be”—well, they said “simple,” but I don't think so. I think Alberta has got a version of this, and a couple of the Maritime provinces, but it isn't yet across the country, as I'd like to see it. So that's maybe something I can take up in the future, working with some colleagues from across the country, and we can try to implement this, because I think it has been proven the one number to call has certainly made a big difference in safety and less damage, certainly, with more and more work being done online, with the telecommunications features. Like the gentleman said, you could be working in Lambton county or Middlesex county on a drain or something, with a backhoe, and disrupt the telecommunications cable. That could affect someone who's lying in the university hospital or one of the Windsor hospitals, having surgery. If their telecommunications goes out, it could be very serious. So for a lot of those kinds of reasons, I'm really glad that we passed this bill a number of years ago.

I'm glad to see it improved today. It's like any piece of legislation, that you need to take a good look at it after a number of years, because you can always improve things, and that's what we're all about, hopefully, here: continuous improvement. Just like in industry; one of my bosses told me a long time ago, “The only thing that's constant is change.” That's what you're going to see in industry, and I don't think it happens quite as much, as often, in government as what we see in the private sector but, hopefully, we'll see some of that as well here.

I'm looking forward to seeing this bill pass, these improvements to this. I think it's a great move on the part of the minister. Of course, it will help the Minister of Infrastructure in enabling her ministry to get the kind of work done, whether it's roads—I recall a conversation I had with the former Minister of Infrastructure four years ago. Minister McNaughton, the Minister of Infrastructure at the time, said, “The biggest fear we have”—and I don't know whether we knew; we didn't see COVID coming four years ago. But he said, “We've got all this infrastructure we want to build in Ontario. We're concerned that we won't be able to get the locates done.” If you think about it, that's one of the key parts if you're building the foundation of a house. Before you can build house, you've got to put the foundation in, right?

He said, “Our bureaucrats are telling us it's fine to spend all this money, but if you can't get the work done, if we can't get the locates done—and they're worried about staffing.” He said they were concerned. So I took that back at the time to Ontario One Call. I said, “Look, we've got concerns in the government,” so then they went on a hiring binge.

That's another opportunity this has opened: As we repatriate a number of people from the armed forces who are looking to return to Canada to employment, sometimes—they've got all of the skills, in my opinion, and I know they've been able to place a few in that sector

because they're well trained, they're used to taking orders most of the time and they're used to discipline and technology.

When I talked to Ontario One Call about this, I said, "We've got a program called Helmets to Hardhats in Ontario that we're trying to implement. I think Ontario Helmets to Hardhats would be an ideal example where you could take these men and women from the armed forces and do some more training with them, put them out in the field to do the locates that we need done in this province." I think that has worked out very well.

I know they've got some other options there that they're looking at as well, because there is a real manpower shortage right now in the province: 338,000-plus jobs going wanting every day. I know in my area, Sarnia-Lambton, we're just swamped with requests for workers, people flooding in from different parts of Canada and the States, down in the Maritimes, because we've got a lot of work for the next two to three years there.

They just announced a distillery the other day. That was news to me. They're going to build a distillery. I know distilleries are at your heart, Speaker; you've got a number in Windsor. This is the Diageo label, I think. They make "royal crown," I think—Crown Royal. I'm dating myself. I don't partake as much as I used to. I'd know what the labels used to be. At one time, I would have known all those. But anyway, there's always improvement. That's going to take locates there. That's going to create employment.

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We're very fortunate in Ontario, I think. We've got our issues, we've got problems, but overall, I think things are going very well here. This example here of what we're doing with Ontario One Call, making improvements to it, is certainly going to make a difference.

When entire sections of the province are being left behind with the Internet, they can't take part in the digital economy. That's a real issue with significant consequences, and the government just can't afford to let that happen, especially now, when people have become more accustomed to the benefits and potential of being connected, often relying on access to survive, make a living or even to get an education—of course, during COVID a lot of people had to do their studies online.

In fact, we here in the House did all our committee work by Zoom. I enjoyed that Zoom. I thought it was the best way. I hope that it stays on. I liked the Zoom committees, personally. I think it was great for our witnesses. They didn't have to travel all the way down to Toronto for a 15- or 20-minute presentation at committee. So I'm very in favour of that type of telecommunication, that kind of technology that we were able to put in. We didn't have to stop. I'm very proud that this Legislature kept working, unlike in the city of Ottawa, the House of Commons, where they were virtually shut down most of the time. I was proud that we as members were able to work here, whether it was on committee or in cohorts. We were able to keep doing business.

Speaker, I see my time is slowly coming to an end. I'd like to thank you and the House for giving me this time

today. I hope everyone, when they consider this bill, will vote in favour of the motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We do have time now for questions and responses. I turn to the member from Sudbury with the first question.

Mr. Jamie West: Thank you to the members opposite who responded.

I guess I'll ask the Minister of Infrastructure. One of the things my grandmother used to say was, "You can argue with me, but you can't argue with math." Yesterday, I talked about the Ontario Autism Program and the shortfall of \$137 million in 2021. I see that here there's a commitment to broadband everywhere by 2025, but the Financial Accountability Office reported last week that the Conservative government made an in-year cut to the broadband expansion budget of \$207 million, which was more than half of that budget. How does the math match up with the commitment to provide broadband?

Hon. Kinga Surma: Thank you very much for the question. I will reiterate the fact that the government has committed \$4 billion; \$900 million of that is allocated to 180 projects.

But I will explain something to the member opposite: There are contracts, there are transfer payment agreements, and you make payment when you reach specific milestones for projects. It's like construction anywhere: You pay when the work is complete and when work progresses.

We have a \$4-billion commitment. We have \$900 million allocated actively, as we speak, for 180 projects. As you know, Mr. Speaker, the rest of the 325,000 or so homes will be addressed through our reverse auction, which is under way. We are anticipating results imminently.

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

Mr. Michael Parsa: Good morning. I want to thank the minister and my colleagues for their presentations.

Minister, one of the questions I have for you is—I recall when I got elected in 2018 and I was meeting with constituents, I was shocked to hear that in a riding like Richmond Hill, just north of Toronto, we had pockets where we did not have access to high-speed Internet. It was shocking. You'd think that in 2018, just in around the suburbs of Toronto, you'd have access to high-speed Internet.

I'm going to ask the minister—and especially when it comes to our businesses, Minister. During the pandemic, they all had to pivot and rely on being able to sell their goods online, so they needed access to high-speed Internet. Would you be able to tell me, please, how this will address those underserved areas, in particular some of our businesses where this is now a vital service that they need to depend on?

Hon. Kinga Surma: Thank you for that elegant question. You're right: Internet service providers obviously have to keep up with growing homes and developments—across the GTA, but in the province entirely.

Look, businesses were very heavily reliant on the Internet prior to COVID-19, but of course we all had to

pivot. We had to do everything online, as the member from Sarnia–Lambton said, whether it's educating or earning an income. So in order to ensure that businesses can continue to thrive, they need that connectivity, that at minimum 50/10, which is why our government made the commitment to get everyone connected by the end of 2025, which is, from a time frame perspective, the fastest time frame to make sure they are connected in Canada.

This legislation is so important because, as early as this summer, Internet service providers can start construction, and we need best practices in place to help get them there.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member from Sudbury with another question.

Mr. Jamie West: I'm going to ask this question to the member from Sault Ste. Marie, who also spoke to the bill at hand. Earlier, I asked the Minister of Infrastructure about the cut of about \$207 million to the budget line. The minister said that there's a commitment of X amount of dollars. There's always a budget commitment. I'm looking at what's being spent.

Also, in the Financial Accountability Office's report, they said that the Conservative government has currently only spent 0.6%—that's not 6%, that's less than 1%: 0.6%—of the remaining budget. How does the math work out, with an election coming in June, that we're going to provide broadband across the north if you've only spent 0.6% of a budget that you already cut more than half out of?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Back to the Minister of Government and Consumer Services to respond.

Hon. Ross Romano: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to respond, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. Unfortunately, I simply am not able to pull out an abacus to help the member opposite learn math. We know that the NDP struggles with math, generally speaking, so I won't get into that specifically.

What I will say is that this bill provides us an opportunity to ensure we have access, throughout every corner of this province, to high-speed Internet, something that we absolutely need. I don't think even the member opposite would say anything opposite to that. I believe it's important for him to ensure that the people in his riding have access to high-speed Internet.

I also believe that the people of his riding would agree that it's important to be able to get line locates done faster. I think developers in his area and anybody who is trying to build a house would be very interested, in order to know and to be able to be safe, knowing that these locates can now happen faster because of this very work that's being done by our government.

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

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: I would like to actually say that this bill is a great opportunity, because all of northern Ontario is suffering two things: jobs and services. I would like to ask the minister how this broadband expansion to northern Ontario could help in solving those two issues, like the services available to residents in the north and also opening the way for more opportunities in employment in northern Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Back to the Minister of Infrastructure to respond.

Hon. Kinga Surma: Thank you to the member for the question. I certainly know how critical this is for northern communities, which is why the very first investments, prior to the reverse auction, in ICON and UBF, were made to connect to northern communities: \$11 million, \$30 million in the Matawa project.

Throughout COVID, it's incredibly, incredibly important that families have access to the services they need. Whether it is speaking to your health care practitioner, whether it is having the opportunity to earn an income at home, educate your child at home, connect with loved ones who are across the province, we all need to be able to have that access.

This piece of legislation is going to make construction of high-speed Internet infrastructure faster, more seamless and eliminate duplication, so that we can make sure everyone is connected by the end of 2025.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Niagara Falls has a question.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I would like to thank the minister for her comments today, but I will follow up on my colleague. In 2021, of a \$45.4-million budget, only 1.37% was spent. The year prior to that, out of a budget of \$31.8 million, 0% of that budget was spent.

Actually, my question is going to go to the member from the Soo, for a couple of reasons. He said that the NDP had supported the Liberals 99% of the time. That is absolutely not an accurate statement. And it was the Conservative Party that was in official opposition for 15 years.

But my real question is, one of them—I think the member from Sarnia—raised this issue about workers' safety. Being the safety critic, I'm obviously very concerned about the safety of workers in the province of Ontario. I was hoping the member from Sarnia—can you explain to this House how this bill will strengthen safety for workers? As we know, since 2017 deaths have increased on construction sites.

Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

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The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): And one of the ministers will respond. I guess it's the Minister of Government and Consumer Services.

Hon. Ross Romano: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to rise and speak to this. I thank the member opposite for the question. I think it's critical that we again recognize what it is that we're working on here, what we as a government have committed to doing. We've made historic investments in this area, because again, when we say we're going to something, we do it. We said that we were going to ensure that this entire province had access to high-speed Internet, and that's exactly what we're doing.

You know what, Mr. Speaker? There's a degree of common sense that goes with working on making sure that you're getting other projects done that you can get done at the same time. We know that underground locates are a challenge. We know that people have been concerned about this for a very long time. So while we're doing the

work on getting the shovels in the ground to build the infrastructure we need for high-speed Internet, we're also going to ensure that we tackle another problem at the same time, which is a very critical and important problem about getting our locates done faster.

That is the kind of work that we are doing in our government to make people's lives easier, and to ensure that we give everybody the access to the things they need.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We really don't have time for a quick question and a quick response, and we really don't have time for another hour's debate on this, so we're going to go right to members' statements.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

GASOLINE PRICES

Miss Monique Taylor: Gas prices have recently skyrocketed across Ontario. They have reached record-breaking numbers, even though this Premier promised in 2018 to reduce gas prices. This is having a real impact on everyday affordability for families. People need to get to work; they need to take their children to school; they need to be able to get to the doctor. Yet wages remain flat and the cost of living continues to rise.

In my riding of Hamilton Mountain, gas was sitting at \$1.77 on Tuesday; yesterday, it was sitting at \$1.85; today, it's sitting at \$1.90. Speaker, this is a jump of 13 cents over the course of three days. This is shocking. And I know these price increases are expected to continue. Something needs to be done about this.

My colleague from Timmins introduced Bill 91 last week to bring reliable regulation to gas prices by setting a weekly and daily maximum at the pump. This is action that we need to support Ontarians. We need to see affordable gas prices across the province, but that will not happen if there is no action taken. I encourage each member of this chamber to vote in favour of Bill 91 when it comes to the vote.

Ontarians have had so much to deal with over the pandemic, so let's not let gas prices be one of them. We need to ensure that we keep gas prices fair so people can make ends meet.

SENIOR CITIZENS

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Last month, I was thrilled to have the Minister for Seniors and Accessibility visit my riding of Mississauga–Lakeshore. We spent the day exploring the riding and visiting many exciting projects that will enrich the lives of Mississauga seniors who have contributed so much to our province: from discussing plans for a new YMCA abilities centre in Port Credit with the Fram Building Group; to a tour of Indwell's Lakeshore Lofts project in Lakeview, which includes 68 affordable housing units for people with physical and mental disabilities as well as support programs that include our local food bank The Compass, now located on the first floor.

We also stopped by Turtle Creek Manor, a lively seniors' apartment residence in Clarkson, to announce that they will receive a \$25,000 Seniors Community Grant for a new walkway around their building, and to support more social activities. We also met with Hannia Curi from the Hispanic Canadian Arts and Cultural Association to announce another \$10,000 grant for Latin-style virtual workshops for over 2,000 seniors, including performance arts, chat and exercise sessions.

Speaker, after two very difficult years, it was great to see the smiling faces of seniors across Mississauga–Lakeshore once again, and it was great to be able to showcase some of the fantastic programs we are doing in Mississauga–Lakeshore, a more accessible and inclusive place for seniors and people with disabilities.

I want to thank the minister and his staff for joining me. I look forward to having him visit again soon. Thank you, Minister.

EVENTS IN KIIWETINOONG

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Good morning. Remarks in Oji-Cree.

This morning, I would like to share some of the good work that's been happening across Kiiwetinoong. There's been so much generosity that I don't have time to mention it all. I don't want to overlook anyone, but if so, I apologize.

When it was needed, there were planeloads of firewood, groceries, water, traditional foods and medicines that Sandy Lake First Nation, Neskantaga First Nation, Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug and Mishkeegogamang donated to First Nation communities that were in need, when they were in states of emergency or under lockdown.

I also have to thank Tania Cameron and Rain Harper of Keewaywin First Nation, who went above and beyond to help the people of Bearskin Lake. Tania organized a supply drive that donated over \$60,000 worth of goods for Bearskin Lake, which had a state of emergency when more than half of the community tested positive for COVID after Christmas. Rain was inspired by this and raised over \$10,000 herself, which was matched by the chief and council of her First Nation.

This is what Tania said: "We need to take care of each other. As much as we rely on the government to help us through the pandemic, we also rely on each other as neighbours and a caring community to say, 'Let's do this together.'"

These gestures of love and care for each other are leadership, unity, nationhood. It is nationhood in action.

This is how it's done in the north. We work together and take care of each other. Meegwetch.

SENIOR CITIZENS

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: I want to focus on our wonderful seniors' organizations and how they continue to contribute to our society.

People are now living longer than ever, and this is one of the biggest success stories in our history. Like everyone,

seniors contribute to our society in so many ways. They shop, they use services which employ other people and they pay taxes like everyone else. They also spend much of their time volunteering. In fact, many organizations would find it difficult to function without their senior volunteers.

Seniors are also known to give generously. They donate more charitable donations per capita than any other age group.

Our government is enhancing its commitment to keeping seniors safe, healthy and active through a \$6-million investment in the Seniors Community Grant Program for this upcoming year. Seniors community grants allow seniors to engage with their local communities to promote their physical, mental and social well-being.

I was very happy to provide the Markham Federation of Filipino Canadians with a \$22,000 community grant. This money can make a big difference for this group and assist with the many services they provide for seniors.

Mr. Speaker, I'm honoured to work with many seniors' organizations throughout my life in Markham, such as the Armadale Older Adults Club, the Markham Tamil Seniors Association Canada, the Box Grove seniors' club, the Middlefield seniors' club and the York region Tamil seniors' association. There are several other organizations in my riding.

Our government and our Premier understand their needs through Minister Cho's office, which plays an important role in their lives to receive support when they need it.

Mr. Speaker, we must continue to provide support in our communities to make them age-friendly and create a more age-inclusive society that acknowledges seniors' contributions in our province.

ENERGY RATES

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Recently, the Financial Accountability Office released a report confirming that after almost four years in office, this government isn't going to be reducing electricity bills.

The goal should be the elimination of gouging. This is another example of rising costs for seniors and young families. Parents cannot get their children to school or get to work without a car.

This government committed to reducing hydro rates and gas at the pumps, and both of those costs are rising for residents. Under this government, average residential electricity rates have increased by 4.3%, and Ontario residents are breaking under the cost of gasoline right now. I'm saying to the Premier that his government can and must play a role in offering relief at the pumps and hydro costs for Ontario residents.

1020

The NDP tabled legislation that would regulate prices at the pump by setting a weekly price or daily maximum. The Premier rejected that plan. Is this government seriously going to leave families on the brink without following through to make life more affordable for them?

Oil companies are making billions in profits. Today I read an article that some analysts are predicting gas prices in Niagara to spike to \$2.20 per litre. Who can afford that? Claiming to care about people's pocketbooks after four years of inaction, it is hard to believe that this government is serious about lowering gas or hydro prices for regular families in Ontario.

ECONOMIC REOPENING AND RECOVERY

Mr. Deepak Anand: From losing 300,000 jobs in manufacturing to a rebound of 330,000 jobs going unfilled, under the leadership of Premier Ford, our economy is on fire. With access to 187 million consumers within a day's drive from the GTA, the second-largest automotive manufacturer, the second-largest IT cluster in North America. Young, diverse, and connected, Ontario is an economic powerhouse.

By lowering the WSIB premiums without affecting worker benefits and through red tape reduction, our government is reducing the cost of doing business by \$7 billion, year by year. We are making it easier for entrepreneurs to invest and thrive. That is why companies like Dass Metal from Mississauga-Malton are expanding. Congratulations to Mr. Jaswant Dass on his new state-of-the-art facilities on Enterprise Way.

With people from over 150 countries speaking over 200 languages, our Ontario is a true global village. So I want to say to the workers and entrepreneurs and businesses around the globe, if you're looking for an environment to live, work, grow, invest and succeed in, I want to say, thanks to the hard work of Minister Fedeli and this caucus, our message is loud and clear: We are unleashing Ontario. We are open. We are competitive. We are driving economic growth. Come join us and be part of the prosperous and progressive Ontario.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Ms. Doly Begum: International students are a vital part of our province's prosperity, not just in the present but also for a brighter future. They come here after meeting the highest standards of our educational institutions and contribute to the province's social, cultural and economic fabric. And yet, many students who choose to come to Ontario to pursue higher education and maybe even build their careers here in our province face many challenges even before they get here while they try to navigate the process.

Reports show that for students applying from countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh, where there are no local visa processing facilities, the rate of approvals for student visas is significantly lower, whereas students from countries where local visa processing options are available face considerably fewer barriers. While programs such as the Student Direct Stream, the SDS program, have been helpful in countries like Pakistan, their capacity is not nearly enough to reconcile these challenges.

We are home to some of the best post-secondary institutions and academic programs, not only in the country, but in the world, and international students, their hard work and determination are a big part of that. So I implore the Ontario government to work with post-secondary institutions to ensure prospective international students who get accepted to Ontario universities and colleges are able to get their visas and paperwork in order to come here and become a part of our province and build towards its brighter future.

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities has the responsibility to do the intergovernmental work with the federal government that's needed to make sure Ontario post-secondary institutions can provide that opportunity for the international students who are accepted to face less barriers as they come to our great province.

MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION SERVICES

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Thank you and good morning, Speaker. The pandemic and the challenges of the climate crisis are putting a strain on people's mental health. Addiction, poverty and homelessness are very real, and the effect on mental well-being is profound. The need for new solutions to these old problems is more pressing than ever. Mental health is health, and it should be treated as such by our government.

That's why I've put forward a plan to expand OHIP to include more mental health services so people can access affordable and comprehensive mental health care. This is why I continue to call for investments in permanent supportive housing with wraparound mental health and addictions supports and other supports.

Speaker, I'm so proud of the work that's being done in my community, in Guelph, to support these kinds of projects. Kindle Communities, Stepping Stone, Wyndham House and others deserve our gratitude for the work they are doing to end homelessness in Guelph.

People cannot wait for mental health services or a roof over their heads. That's why I urge the government to make the needed investments in mental health services and supportive housing in the spring budget so we can build the caring communities we want in Ontario.

DAVE BARROW

Mr. Michael Parsa: Speaker, I'd like to take a moment to thank the former mayor of Richmond Hill and my good friend Dave Barrow for his incredible 15 years of service as mayor. His passion for serving our community goes beyond his time in office, as he dedicated more than 35 years of public service to our residents.

Dave Barrow was first elected to office as a ward 4 councillor in 1979 and served until 1985, and as a York regional councillor from 1997 to 2006, before he decided to run for mayor.

Mayor Barrow was truly a leader in our community, and he always went above and beyond to not only serve the residents but to find ways to bring all of us together. It was an absolute pleasure and a great honour to work

alongside him, serving the good residents of Richmond Hill. I thank him for his friendship and leadership. I wish him all the best in his retirement and his future endeavours. I have no doubt that his legacy will remain a pillar in our community.

Speaker, in the few moments that I have left, I would also like to take a moment to congratulate our new mayor, His Worship David West, on his victory. I look forward to working with him and continuing to serve the great residents of Richmond Hill. I have no doubt that he will do a great job filling the big shoes left behind by His Worship Dave Barrow.

I wish him all the best in his retirement.

INSURANCE RATES

Mr. Michael Mantha: There are many challenges going on in Algoma-Manitoulin, particularly on the North Shore, right now.

Fabris forestry, which has been in business for a long time, took me out for a tour and showed me 700 to 900 loads of pulp that have been sitting roadside. If you can't sell your wood, you can't afford the insurance costs.

That brings me to another issue. John Grégoire is a forestry truck driver in my riding. He told me that his insurance went up from \$8,000 to \$35,000. He has a clean CVOR and zero claims.

Here's another example. Kevin and Katie Connell reached out to my office as well. After one single accident over 17 years, their insurance went up from \$15,000 to \$52,000. On top of that, the cost of fuel has increased so much that they are paying an additional \$1,000—plus what recently happened with the increase, you're looking at \$2,000 to \$3,000 more in fuel costs.

Collin Gowlett, a forestry truck driver from Hilton Beach, spoke to me about how the combined insurance and fuel costs are putting him out of business.

We've raised this on this floor numerous times, looking to this government to do something in regard to insurance costs. When is this government actually going to step up and help businesses, not only in forestry, but across this province?

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

REPORT, FINANCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICER

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I beg to inform the House that the following document has been tabled: a report entitled Long-Term Budget Outlook: Assessing Ontario's Fiscal Sustainability: 2021-2050, from the Financial Accountability Office of Ontario.

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HOUSE SITTINGS

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I also beg to inform the House that pursuant to standing order 9(h), the government House leader has provided written notice that a temporary change in the weekly meeting schedule of the

House is required and that the House will convene at 9 a.m. on Monday, March 21, 2022.

VISITORS

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I am very pleased to inform the House that page Morgan Scholz, from the riding of Dufferin–Caledon, is one of today's page captains. We have with us today her mother, Rachel Scholz, her sister Maghan Scholz and her friend Alex Hawa.

We are also joined today by the family of today's other page captain, Daunte Hillen, from the riding of Hamilton Mountain: his grandmother Janet Hillen, his father, Stefan Hillen, and his sister Charlise Hillen. Welcome to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. We are delighted to have you here.

COVID-19 DEATHS

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I understand that there is a point of order. The Leader of the Opposition.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: I seek unanimous consent for the House to observe a moment of silence for the 140 Ontarians who have succumbed to COVID-19 over the past week.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Leader of the Opposition is seeking the unanimous consent of the House to observe a moment of silence for the 140 Ontarians who have succumbed to COVID-19 over the past week. Agreed? Agreed.

Members will please rise.

The House observed a moment's silence.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. Members may take their seats.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: On a point of order, Speaker, I seek unanimous consent to move a motion without notice regarding private member's motion 40, in the name of Mr. Hassan, calling on the Ford government to bring Bill 86, Our London Family Act, back from committee and pass it before the end of the 42nd Parliament, making it clear that Islamophobia and hate have no place in Ontario, and that the question be put without debate or amendment.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Ms. Sattler is seeking the unanimous consent of the House to move a motion without notice regarding private member's motion 40, in the name of Mr. Hassan, calling on the Ford government to bring Bill 86, Our London Family Act, back from committee and pass it before the end of the 42nd Parliament, making it clear that Islamophobia and hate have no place in Ontario, and that the question be put without debate or amendment. Agreed? I heard a no.

It is now time for oral questions.

QUESTION PERIOD

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Ms. Andrea Horwath: My first question this morning is to the Premier. We know that lots of parents and experts and educators are concerned about the government's

decision to remove the mask mandates for kids at school immediately upon return from the March break. We all know that many young children remain unvaccinated. In fact, Dr. Peter Jüni said that the decision the government has made surprised him. He said, "We don't have any reason to rush and I don't exactly follow what's happening, to be honest with you." He said "it doesn't seem like a real necessity right now" and that the wisest thing would have been to wait a little longer.

We've seen no public modelling whatsoever from this government. In fact, the last time we saw any public modelling was back in December of last year. The question is, why does the Premier think it's appropriate to roll the dice when it comes to kids in schools and the mask mandate?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Minister of Education to respond.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: On this side of the House, we have full confidence in Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health. I know that is a contrasting position. Where the members opposite have used political opportunism at a time of crisis to undermine confidence in public health, this government, our Minister of Health and the Premier of Ontario believe in the scientific advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, who said yesterday, "The measures are working and I do think that the increase in air quality, the investment in improved ventilation, HEPA filtration, cleaning, as well as the investment of testing for all students, will continue to keep our schools safe."

Mr. Speaker, Ontario is literally one of the last provinces to lift our mask mandate. In Alberta, it's March 1. In Saskatchewan, it's March 1. In Quebec, it's March 7. In Manitoba, it's March 15. In New Brunswick, it's March 14. In Nova Scotia, it's March 21. In Yukon, it's March 18. We are being cautious, gradually lifting these measures in accordance with public health, maintaining rapid testing, improving ventilation and ensuring screening before kids enter our schools. We are doing all of this, giving children hope that they can get back to normal classrooms—so vital to the mental health of children in this province.

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

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Well, Speaker, many experts share Dr. Jüni's view. The Children's Health Coalition, including hospitals like SickKids, warned that they wanted masking to stay in place. They said, "Masks also protect those most vulnerable, including high-risk, immunocompromised and fragile children." That's from the Children's Health Coalition.

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario president, Karen Brown, said, "Lifting the mask mandate too soon may result in further disruption to in-person learning and negative impacts on the health and safety of ETFO members, students, and their families."

Why is the Premier taking a totally unnecessary gamble with the health and safety of our kids when experts are saying he's going too fast?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: While it may have been the preference of the Leader of the Opposition to adhere to the medical advice of teachers' unions that would have closed

schools indefinitely, as children can get back to normal schooling, we believe we should follow the advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health and his medical officers of health, who have given the province unambiguous advice and the confidence to move forward in a cautious manner, maintaining 3.6 million rapid tests every other week to our school and child care systems. We have ensured that high-quality masks continue to be provisioned free for staff and free for students in our schools.

We are continuing to clean our schools with an enhancement of funding, and we obviously will continue to make the case for everyone to be screened cautiously before they enter schools.

We're going to continue to give hope to children, who have been so impacted by this pandemic and the disruptions of COVID-19. We have a collective duty to get them back to more normal classes, with strong protections in place, and that's exactly what our government has done.

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

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Despite the Premier's previous promises that he would not put children at risk—in fact, he told parents very clearly that he would not take unnecessary risks when it comes to their children—that's exactly what many experts are saying is happening right now.

Dr. Jüni, the head of the science table, said this: "We don't have data ... regarding the epidemiology of COVID right now in the province that would support the decision."

The Premier is lifting the mask mandate without it: no evidence, no science, no modelling. So my question is, after all we've been through in this province—all the sacrifices people have made, all the lost time of our children in schools, all of the death and the pain and the anxiety—why would the Premier move ahead with lifting a mask mandate in schools without the public modelling to support that decision?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: The Chief Medical Officer of Health yesterday provided the evidence for why Ontario is moving in the right direction, with every public health indicator moving in the right direction. That should be collectively very promising for us. We should welcome the fact that we have fewer case rates, we have less transmission happening within our settings. That's because of high vaccination rates. It's because of a strong adherence to public health measures, because this government, led by the Minister of Health and under the leadership of the Premier, has followed the advice of the past and current Chief Medical Officers of Health every step of the way.

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Our school program has been effective. Today, for the first time in some time, there's not one school closed in Ontario, because of the strong efforts of our province—of roughly 5,000 schools in Ontario. I want to be clear: We are abundantly aware that COVID-19 is among us. We need to be cautious as we move forward. The fact that we're continuing to have rapid tests—millions sent to schools—providing PPE, screening children, enhancing cleaning and sending 40,000 more HEPA units to schools

in the months of March and April underscores our commitment to safety, underscores our commitment to keeping kids learning in school.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Ms. Andrea Horwath: My next question is also for the Premier. I'm really concerned—I think lots of people are really concerned—about what impact these decisions will have on people who already are waiting inordinate amounts of time for surgeries and other procedures. We know that the surgical backlog is immense. Millions of procedures and surgeries have been delayed. And there's evidence around the world that would suggest that when the masks come off, the cases go up, and people end up in hospital.

Anthony Dale of the Ontario Hospital Association said this: "While overall, hospitalizations and admissions to intensive care units have dropped significantly in recent weeks the pandemic is not yet over." He said, "Ontario's health care system is still experiencing high levels of occupancy." Ninety-two per cent of beds are currently full.

Why hasn't the Premier factored in these huge backlogs in our health care system, which is already struggling with beds that are full and staff who are exhausted and overworked? Our health care heroes, who have provided such great support to us, may end up in a bad, bad place if things go the wrong way. Why wasn't that factored into his mask decision?

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

Hon. Christine Elliott: Well, to the member opposite, all of those issues have been taken into consideration when lifting the masking requirements, because we are in a very good situation right now with our hospitals and with dealing with those delayed procedures. We want to make sure that everyone gets the care that they need as soon as possible, whether it's a CT scan or an MRI or whether it's a surgery.

I would remind the member opposite that during 2020-21, the average Ontario hospital completed 88% of their targeted surgical allocation, and over 884,000 scheduled surgeries have taken place since this pandemic began. But we have also made significant investments to allow hospitals to proceed through these lists more quickly. We've invested half a billion dollars in order to allow surgeries to be done evenings and weekends. We want to make sure that we can take advantage of every single spot and availability of time in our ORs, operating rooms, in order for people to get these surgeries as quickly as possible.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Our hospitals have no room for error here. Many, many experts have made it perfectly clear that they think the Premier is just simply moving too fast. Anthony Dale, the head of the Ontario Hospital Association, says this: "Given the risks and uncertainties from COVID-19, particularly for vulnerable populations such as the unvaccinated and immunocompromised,

responsibility for any consequences from this decision rests with the government of Ontario.”

It seems as though the government has ignored the impact of these decisions and how that will affect people who are desperately waiting for surgeries and procedures; a million surgeries; 20 million procedures backlogged. What will be the impact, Speaker? I ask the government: What will be the impact from ending the mask mandate on our already overcrowded hospitals? Surely the government has some specific information that they can share with Ontarians in that regard.

Hon. Christine Elliott: Our government has always been very open and transparent with the people of Ontario concerning the situation with respect to COVID, what our occupancy rates are in our hospitals, the number of people being admitted into intensive care units. We've seen all of those measures go down quite rapidly since January, since it reached its peak. Those numbers are in good shape. The waste water surveillance is indicating a downward trend, in the vast majority of them. So we are ready to proceed with those surgeries to make sure that people get the care that they need.

I would remind the member opposite that those numbers are not in the millions. We know that even before the pandemic, there were about 200,000 people waiting to have surgeries or procedures done. That has increased to about 250,000 now, so we're looking at an additional 50,000.

With the investments we've made in order to increase surgeries and procedures, it's not going to result in years for those numbers to come down; it will be a much shorter time period than that. So people will get the help that they need.

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

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Speaker, it really doesn't need to be this way. We could be making decisions that would really clear that surgical backlog and the diagnostic backlog and not put more pressure on the system.

The hospitals are still full. Staff are exhausted after two full years of this pandemic. We know staff have left the health care system in droves because of the exhaustion, because of the anxiety, because of some of the trauma that they faced during the pandemic. Those staff who are still in our system have been performing miracles to help our patients here in Ontario.

My question is, when we could and should be much more cautious, why is the Premier in such a rush when the real push should be to get those backlogs dealt with, to get those folks the surgeries they need, to get the procedures done so folks will know what their health situation is and make sure that they get the vital health care services they need? That should be the push. Why isn't it?

Hon. Christine Elliott: It is important for the people of Ontario to have the actual facts, Speaker. As of today, I can advise that there were 742 hospitalizations across the province because of COVID, 244 people in intensive care units. That's a significant decline from January—which means that there is room in hospitals in order for us to

proceed with these surgeries and that we have taken a very cautious and phased approach in reopening Ontario. That is what Dr. Moore has always recommended and that is what we have always followed.

But as Dr. Moore has also said, “We have tools that we did not have just two years ago, including highly effective vaccines that have changed the course of the pandemic, high vaccination rates that continue to improve as more and more Ontarians see the value of getting boosted to protect themselves, their families and their communities.”

It is a vastly different situation than what we were dealing with several years ago, with the rate of Ontarians who have been vaccinated, with the money that we've put into hospitals in order to increase these surgeries. We are confident we can both continue to proceed to remove masking as well as continue to reduce the surgical backlogs.

HOUSING

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: My question is to the Premier. Premier, one of the most heartbreaking moments for a parent is to know that their children will not grow up close to the community that they grew up in. As a parent, I get this. My son was pulled away to serve in the military. However, over the last four years, the housing market has been pushing young families out of Niagara.

Joe Flocca, a father and a grandfather, is about to watch his daughter and their young family move to Alberta. This is despite making over six figures. This is despite wanting to stay close to their family. They cannot find housing in Niagara that they can afford. That is because, under this government's watch, we have seen home prices go through the roof in Niagara.

Premier, after four years of the cost of living skyrocketing, four years of your broken promises, how can young families afford to buy homes in the community that they grew up in?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Hon. Steve Clark: Speaker, there is a housing crisis in Ontario. I've said this right from the first day I stood in the Legislature.

The member opposite talks about the last four years. Well, the last four years for her party in the opposition have been pretty clear: To every measure this government has put forward to provide more supply and help those young families stay in communities where they want to live, work and raise their family, this party said no every time. We placed policies on this table to increase housing supply: They said no. We placed legislation on the books to protect tenants and strengthen our community housing: They said no. We've actually asked the federal government to pay a fair share of housing, \$490 million. Will they support us? Their answer is no. Over and over again, their party has made it very clear to young families and young sons and daughters—on their availability of housing, they say no every single time. Quite frankly, Speaker, it's disgraceful that the NDP are like this.

1050

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

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Back to the Premier: Premier, you are a parent. You have to understand how painful it would be to watch your child being forced out of the community and their province.

Joe's daughter's name is Lenny and she currently rents a townhouse in Niagara for well over \$2,000 a month. They have no faith that, after four years, this government has a plan to make housing affordable. Your housing task force showed that housing prices in Ontario increased hundreds of thousands of dollars over the last four years.

This housing consultation is three and a half years late, Speaker, made up of CEOs and millionaires that proposed little for first-time homebuyers and nothing for tenants.

Will this government adopt the NDP's plan for first-time homebuyers, like helping them with financing, down payments and rent control? Or does the government plan to do more of the same while expecting different results.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Aurora–Oak Ridges–Richmond Hill and parliamentary assistant.

Mr. Michael Parsa: I thank my honourable colleague for the question. Mr. Speaker, I absolutely agree with the member. Life was unaffordable as a result of 15 years of neglect by the previous government. I think they went out of their way to make sure that they could make everything possible more expensive and unaffordable for Ontarians.

In contrast, Mr. Speaker, when we got elected, we saw that. We were told, all of us were told—but when we tried to address it, at every step of the way, what did the opposition do? They voted no: every single initiative that we put forward to make life more affordable for Ontarians. The NDP is the party of no. While this party says yes to Ontarians to make life more affordable for Ontarians while creating more jobs for Ontarians, what does the NDP do? They vote no every single time.

The only time that they can hang on and say they voted yes is when they partnered with the Liberals when they were in power. They held the balance of power, and they supported the Liberals. That's on record; Ontarians will never forget that.

But we, on this side of the House, Mr. Speaker, will work hard to make sure life is more affordable for every single Ontarian.

TOURISM

Ms. Laurie Scott: My question is for the Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries. As the minister has stated previously, Ontario's tourism sector was one of the first hit, hardest hit, and will take the longest to recover. These businesses faced extreme uncertainty over fear of outbreaks and owners worrying for the safety of their own staff. Direct supports from our government allowed businesses in the sector to stay afloat, and now with restrictions lifting, the industry is ready to welcome back more Ontarians.

I know there's more we can do, and one of the measures introduced by this government was the new Ontario Staycation Tax Credit. Speaker, can the minister tell us how these hard-working Ontario families will benefit from the program?

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: I want to say to my colleague and long-time friend from Haliburton–Kawartha Lakes–Brock how wonderful it is for her to be such a great champion for the tourism industry in sectors in her own community. I have seen it with my own two eyes with her, and the level of respect and admiration her constituents have for her and the business owners in her community is quite something.

I want to thank her for the question because this is really important. As we start to ease restrictions, it's important for every member of this assembly to look at their own backyard and see how they can best support their tourism industry. There will be no full economic recovery in the province of Ontario until your heritage, sport, tourism and culture industries are back up and running, whether that's a local museum, your public library, a major attraction like Ripley's, the entire region of Niagara Falls, Thousand Islands, Muskoka, Blue Mountain or Kenora–Rainy River and that entire area.

Some 1.85 million Ontarians will benefit from this \$270-million tax credit. Individuals will be eligible for a maximum credit of \$200 for up to \$1,000, and families will receive a maximum benefit of \$400 for up to \$2,000—

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

Ms. Laurie Scott: I thank the minister for that strong response and her dedication and passion for the tourism industry in our province. It is great to hear the government is putting money back into the pockets of hard-working Ontarians. Ontario's tourism businesses have survived some of the most uncertain times in the history of the province. However, they still need support. The staycation tax credit only applies for eligible accommodation expenses, so there's even more to be done to help businesses that have been hurt the most but are not eligible.

Speaker, through you, can the Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries explain how this tax credit will benefit Ontario's businesses?

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: We know that every dollar invested by this ministry yields about \$21 in return. At the peak of these sectors, they were a \$75-billion suite of sectors that contributed to a spectacular double bottom line. On the one hand, the things that make us love where we live or why people want to visit here create a cultural fabric. At the same time, it drives a \$75-billion suite of sectors, which is larger than the GDP of Manitoba.

That's big business. It's small business. It's also the largest volunteer sector in the country. And that's why it's so important that this tax credit works to get people moving again and rediscovering and reconnecting in Ontario. Paired with a number of our other investments, such as for the Globus Theatre and others that are in the member's riding, we're continuing to invest to encourage people to get back out.

I have to say this, and I have to say it very clearly: Just because we're reopened, these sectors don't necessarily

recover, and it's up to every member in this House to make sure they're supporting their local community in tourism, culture, heritage and sport.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Ms. Peggy Sattler: My question is to the Premier.

The lifting of mask requirements in schools after March break has many London parents concerned. Ann Weber's four-year-old son has health issues that have put him in the hospital with a common cold. Since he can't get a COVID shot, Ann drives him to school instead of putting him on the bus and picks him up twice daily for snacks and lunchtime, so he never has to be among unmasked students. Knowing that everyone in his class wears a mask gives Ann just enough peace of mind to keep her son at school.

Why is this Premier rushing to remove the one remaining layer of protection that kept students like Ann's son safe at school?

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

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I would encourage the member opposite to consult her own medical officer of health on the matter, who would support the lifting of measures cautiously, one of the last provinces in this nation to do so, following the advice of Dr. Moore, the Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario.

When you speak about one of the measures that can reduce risk in the classroom, it's the air ventilation standard that we have invested in since September: 73,000 HEPA units in place. But while we're lifting masking—it's, of now, a choice for students and staff—we're also enhancing the air ventilation quality in schools by deploying 40,000 additional HEPA units to publicly funded schools, 9,000 more to child care centres. And I feel like we have to provide the full picture. We're not just doing that. We're actually enhancing the air quality in schools, reducing the risk accordingly, maintaining rapid tests, and providing PPE for free through to June, including N95s, the only province in Canada to do so for education staff.

I'd encourage everyone to consider vaccination. We had 400 vax clinics in schools over the past three weeks. We're going to continue to do that to reduce the risk, to protect kids, keep them in school, learning.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary? The member from London North Centre.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Sara is a parent and educator in my riding who is deeply worried about her daughter Kira. Kira is immunocompromised and COVID poses a serious threat. Sara wrote to me, "I might have to leave my job if masking is taken away. I don't know what else to do or how to get people to care that some of us can't afford to get sick. The fact that municipalities can't even make their own decisions on masking is particularly cruel."

My constituent Christine calls stripping and limiting the powers of local health units "political interference." Dr. Alex Summers, Middlesex-London medical officer of health, strongly recommends continuing indoor masking. Top scientists are asking for some wisdom and a little bit

of caution. This political decision took Ontario's science table by surprise.

Look, we all know that Premier Ford wants to fashion himself as the people's Premier and rules by public opinion alone. But will he listen to science this time and keep masks in schools until Ontario's science table, not politicians, declare it safe to unmask? Will the Premier do the right thing and make sure kids are safe?

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Hon. Stephen Lecce: Mr. Speaker, the Chief Medical Officer of Health, the principal adviser to the government, has been clear that the measures we have taken as a province—the high vaccination rates, the investment in ventilation, the adherence to good hand hygiene and PPE—have gotten us to a place where we can move forward with optimism and, yes, with caution.

Our kids deserve to be in normal schools. We have systematically and cautiously reopened schools in a more normal environment, reinstating normal semestering and high-contact sports and clubs. Now we're moving forward to allow children to return to more normal schools while maintaining the protections that have kept them safe through this pandemic.

The member opposite speaks about the wisdom of caution. I will remind him that Alberta, Saskatchewan, Quebec, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Yukon are moving before the province of Ontario. We were one of the last provinces to do so. We are doing it with a sense of caution, which is why we're deploying 40,000 more HEPA units to protect these kids and keep them safe.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mr. Rick Nicholls: Speaker, through you, to the Premier: This COVID-19 pandemic has gone on now for two years. When this pandemic was first identified, you'll remember that there was no game plan for handling it, especially in the early stages. I was a member of your caucus at that time, and when asked in January 2021, about eight months into the pandemic, I actually gave you an A-rating. As time went on, you'll recall how I began to respectfully question the science table on their stats and projections.

When the vaccines arrived, they were touted as safe and effective, despite, in my opinion, a lack of solid clinical data that would have more solidly proven the efficacy of the experimental drugs.

I believe that the experimental drugs did help some of our vulnerable population in long-term care.

Premier, based on current data coming forward, what would you do differently now—and I'm talking about lessons learned—to protect the health and safety of all Ontarians?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'll ask the members to make their comments through the Chair.

The government House leader to respond.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, the final part of that question, I think, was the important part of it. Lessons

learned, of course, is something that we will be seized with in this Parliament and the next Parliament. We'll be seized with ensuring that there were lessons learned.

It is one of the big disappointments of the 2003 SARS pandemic in this province that the lessons learned were not actually implemented by the previous Liberal government. It is why we had to move so quickly to bring in IPAC measures, why we had to move so quickly to have Ontario health teams brought on board, why we had to build long-term care, why we had to build health capacity. It is the very reason we had to move so quickly.

In the top part of his question, he asked why the government wasn't prepared. It was because, under 15 years of Liberal rule, they did not learn the lessons of SARS—going into warehouses with outdated and expired PPE.

We have learned those lessons, but there is always going to be more to do. We will ensure that we continue on our work to make sure Ontario is always prepared.

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

Mr. Rick Nicholls: Thank you for that response.

Through you, Speaker, back to the Premier: In the past, the focus has been on the number of people contracting COVID-19, questionable PCR testing, and the number of people dying from COVID-19. Now, 15 months after the vaccines were introduced, many people are having serious adverse effects from the injections, proof that vaccines were introduced too soon.

Recently, a top-secret document from Pfizer is proving that their COVID-19 vaccine is causing some deadly adverse effects. It would appear that Pfizer and the FDA wanted to hide their findings. There is a 38-page document detailing how many people have suffered adverse effects and what kinds of adverse effects they have experienced. The first adverse event Pfizer admitted that's associated with the vaccine is 1p36 deletion syndrome, a congenital genetic disorder that affects fetuses and deletes part of their chromosomes, causing them to be born with severe intellectual disabilities.

So, Premier, why did you and the science table continue to advocate for everyone to get the vaccine if you knew this?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Honestly, I think it would be easy for me to have a response that virtually all members of this chamber would appreciate, but I'm not going to do that, Speaker. The vaccines worked very, very well and have changed the course of the pandemic, not just here in the province of Ontario but across this country. Millions upon millions of people in this province—billions, globally—have taken a vaccine. As I said, it has changed the course of the pandemic.

I think that we should all be grateful that it's not only that all Ontarians and, globally, people are getting vaccinated against this, but just how quickly our scientific community research and development was done to put us globally in a position to defeat this once and for all. I think we should celebrate that. And I know all members have worked very hard to ensure that we're in that position today, with the exception of a couple.

MANUFACTURING JOBS

Mr. Robert Bailey: My question is to the minister of economic development and job creation: Minister Fedeli.

Under the previous Liberal government, our manufacturers were abandoned, and the high cost of doing business drove them out of this province. They gave up on one of Ontario's most critical sectors and did nothing when over 300,000 jobs in manufacturing fled Ontario. That's the legacy of the previous Liberal government.

Through you, Speaker, can the minister please tell this House how he and his ministry are reversing 15 years of damage brought on by the previous Liberal administration?

Hon. Victor Fedeli: When our government took office, we listened to the business community and took action to cut red tape, reduce taxes and make Ontario more competitive. As a result, we lowered the cost of doing business by \$7 billion annually. And then we put the right business supports in place, like the \$100-million Regional Development Program.

Just this week, we were proud to announce an investment of more than \$10 million from Stirling Marathon in Elora. That investment of theirs will create up to 50 new jobs over the next five years to re-shore their residential appliance production line here into Ontario, creating good jobs, strengthening the local supply chains for the future. The province provided a \$1.5-million contribution through our Southwestern Ontario Development Fund. Speaker, this is yet another of the thousands of Ontario business success stories, showing that Ontario is getting stronger.

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

Mr. Robert Bailey: Thank you to the minister for his response and for his work in reversing the harm the previous Liberal government inflicted on our men and women who work in manufacturing. It's great to hear that our government has taken the right steps to reduce the cost of doing business, all the while putting in the right supports to encourage growth in our manufacturing sector.

My constituents and, I'm sure, all Ontarians are curious about what else is being done by your ministry. Through you, Speaker, can the minister please tell us how we are supporting all different types of businesses in Ontario's diverse manufacturing sector?

Hon. Victor Fedeli: As a result of lowering the cost of doing business by over \$7 billion, every year, we've seen our manufacturing sector take off. Hofmann Plastics in Orangeville has invested \$20 million to build a brand new 41,000-square-foot automated warehouse to produce plastic packaging containers for the construction, chemical and food industries. Our government invested \$3 million through the southwestern development fund.

Shogun Maitake has invested over \$30 million for the construction of a new 120,000-square-foot facility in St. Thomas to grow maitake mushrooms for use in biopharmaceutical and supplements. Again, our government invested \$4.5 million through the Southwestern Ontario

Development Fund. This fund supports regional priorities and challenges and boosts the province's economic recovery. And yes, Speaker, this is another of the thousands of Ontario companies showing that Ontario is getting stronger.

AUTOMOBILE INSURANCE

Mr. Kevin Yarde: My question is to the Premier. Auto insurance companies have made record profits during this pandemic. We would have assumed that auto insurance rates would have gone down, but it's the complete opposite. Auto insurance rates continue to rise in Brampton and across many municipalities in Ontario. Many people have been doing their part, leaving their cars at home, not travelling as much and trying to reduce their emissions. They even have clean driving records: no accidents, no tickets. But they are still being price-gouged by insurance companies.

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Now, this is not an issue that we can't fix. The Liberals promised for 15 years they would fix the auto insurance price gouging, but they did nothing. In the last four years, the Conservative government promised time and time again that they would lower auto insurance rates; however, we continue to see skyrocketing auto insurance rates.

At a time when Brampton and other municipalities are struggling with high inflation, when will this government assist the people of Ontario and lower the auto insurance rates?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Brantford—Brant, the parliamentary assistant.

Mr. Will Bouma: I appreciate the question on auto insurance. Mr. Speaker, through you to the member, our government has been keeping a very close eye on the auto insurance industry as we go through COVID, making sure that insurance companies are treating the people of Ontario fairly during this unprecedented time. That's why we've had a very, very clear message—and I appreciate that point. You should provide relief that reflects the financial hardships your customers are facing because of COVID-19. By encouraging and promoting timely action by insurers, our government has enabled more than \$1.3 billion in consumer savings, affecting 93% of Ontario drivers, removing barriers to relief. All of the 14 largest auto insurance companies in Ontario that control 97% of the market provided some form of relief to the people of Ontario.

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

Interjections.

Mr. Kevin Yarde: I don't think that's something to applaud about. We're still paying over \$2,000 in auto insurance in the Brampton area.

Again to the Premier: Auto insurance companies are price-gouging the people of Brampton at a time when they're struggling to keep pace with inflation. They're struggling with groceries; they're struggling with gas; they're struggling with housing costs. This government is

promising to address the high costs of living with their licence plate fee removal.

Speaker, the \$120 licence plate renewal just doesn't cut it, when people in Brampton and across the GTA are paying over \$2,000 per year in auto insurance premiums. Instead of supporting the people of Brampton, this government is ensuring that auto insurance companies keep overcharging Ontarians. They're approving high auto insurance premiums. They can do something about it, and they can do it today: They can lower the auto insurance premiums. The people of Brampton are confused by this government's promises that they are lowering auto insurance when it is not happening.

My question to the government is: Will this government commit to making life affordable for these folks of Brampton and reduce auto insurance costs?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill.

Mr. Michael Parsa: I thank the honourable member opposite for the question as well. Speaker, when it comes to affordability, I think you have heard the Premier and our government be very clear: Every single decision that we make is to make sure that life becomes easier, more affordable, more attainable for the people of Ontario. A prime example of that is more than 760,000 Ontarians are now going to take a bigger paycheque as a result of us raising the minimum wage to \$15. When it comes to gas prices, when we told the opposition that the carbon tax was going to make life more unaffordable for Ontarians, it was only this side—this was the one side that said, "We will do whatever it takes. We will stand against anyone who will make life more unaffordable for Ontarians." We're the only ones that said it—4.3 cents lower in the price of gas as a result.

Mr. Speaker, we took steps to make sure life is easier for businesses that took a hard hit during the pandemic. But again, for every single decision that we made to make life more affordable for Ontarians, what did the opposition do? They voted against it—

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

The next question.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mr. John Fraser: My question is to the Premier. Mask mandates are being lifted March 21, and while they've been kept in settings like hospitals, long-term care and public transit, the Premier decided to lift them in our children's schools—this despite the fact that the head of the science table is urging caution and the Children's Health Coalition of Ontario had asked the government to wait two weeks—two weeks. Dr. Paul Roumeliotis, the medical officer of health, had this to say: "We would need a couple of weeks to assess what happens after spring break because we typically get surges of cases after a school break," and "I think the schoolboards [and] people needed more time to prepare."

Why would the Premier ignore this advice and not take a more cautious, sure-footed approach in our children's schools by simply waiting two weeks?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): To reply, the government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Look, right from the beginning of the pandemic we have ensured that our schools have been safe. The minister highlighted in previous answers just how important it was that we work together and very closely not only with the Chief Medical Officer of Health but with stakeholders to ensure that we had proper ventilation in our schools, that we had rapid testing available in our schools, that there were free N95 masks. This is something we have been seized with right from the beginning, and it is one of the reasons why we have one of the safest return-to-school policies in the country.

But having said that, it is also very important, as the minister highlighted—and I know it has been a priority of both the Premier and the Minister of Health—that we bring kids back to a more normal type of school setting. We're one of the last jurisdictions to do it with respect to lifting the mask mandate, but we're well on our way to ensure that we can lift the mandate, have children in a more normalized school setting while ensuring the utmost in safety for our students.

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

Mr. John Fraser: Speaker, given that the government is removing masking mandates in places where vaccination rates are high, why are they removing masking requirements in places where vaccination rates are low?

Ontario is at the back of the pack in Canada for vaccinating our five-year-olds to 11-year-olds. We should be at the top, and the needle just hasn't moved much in the last four weeks. That's not surprising, though, because four weeks ago the Premier was casting doubt on vaccines.

We know that vaccines and masking are our most effective tools against COVID. So, Speaker, through you, when will the Premier have a plan to get vaccination rates up for five-year-olds to 11-year-olds, and will he do the right thing and simply follow the advice of the Children's Health Coalition and wait two weeks?

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

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you to the member opposite for the question. I want to quote the Chief Medical Officer of Health from this morning who said, "Look it over: 55% of five to 11s have had their first dose. Over half of them have come forward for their second dose. In our high schools, 91% of our children have gotten vaccinated with two doses. Around 10% have even come forward to get their third dose." He also said, "We've got a good level of protection in those environments."

Now, we accept that we need to remain vigilant through the rest of this pandemic. That's why we're adding 49,000 more HEPA units—more HEPA units in this province than all provinces combined in the province of Ontario.

And to the question on vaccinations, over 400 school-focused vaccine clinics were administered over the last three weeks. We're one of the few provinces in this nation to go into schools seeking consent to reduce barriers to vaccines. We know they work, and that's why we're encouraging uptake for boosters for our staff and vaccinations for first, second and third doses for those eligible within our schools, paired with strong ventilation improvements right across Ontario.

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

ECONOMIC REOPENING AND RECOVERY

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: My question is for the Minister of Government and Consumer Services. Minister, yesterday you held an important announcement in Etobicoke about what this government is doing next in order to help bring about a booming recovery for our province. Ontarians are counting on our government to bring real and meaningful change to how Ontario gets its goods, the goods it needs to keep our province safe and strong for years to come. As such, I would like to ask the minister to please tell us more about the new Building Ontario Businesses Initiative and what it will do for the future of our people and businesses?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): To respond, the Minister of Government and Consumer Services.

Hon. Ross Romano: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A huge thanks to the member for Mississauga—Erin Mills for his question and for his great advocacy for the people of his riding.

Our government's new Building Ontario Businesses Initiative, or BOBI for short as we like to call it, will leverage existing public sector buying power to help direct more government procurement opportunities towards local Ontario businesses, Mr. Speaker.

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While Ontario businesses have social responsibility practices in place such as labour ethics and environmental standards, other jurisdictions may not have these same standards, which drives their costs down. We've heard this before, Mr. Speaker. But our businesses here in Ontario should not be disadvantaged to foreign ones because of the cost of these standards. We are levelling the playing field so we can ensure that the people of this province have the opportunity to compete on the government procurements that we have right here in Ontario. With BOBI, we are going to make sure that buyers are able to procure products and services using weighted domestic criteria so that our local suppliers can be evaluated fairly, in order to ensure that we are putting more tax dollars to work and giving more preference to our local businesses and vendors—

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

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: I would like to thank the minister for this answer. Speaker, our province has had to endure one of the most difficult periods in modern history. It has affected our businesses and people unlike anything we have seen. Under these unforeseen circumstances, we have

had to find new and innovative solutions in order to best protect our people and businesses.

My question, through you, Mr. Speaker, is again to the Minister of Government and Consumer Services. Could the minister tell us how the Building Ontario Businesses Initiative is going to contribute to our efforts in spearheading Ontario's economic recovery, and what makes it especially important for our people and our businesses?

Hon. Ross Romano: Thank you again to the member for his question. Do you know what? The best way to talk about this, Mr. Speaker, is with an example, and it's about never again, when the Premier of this province stood before our entire province and said to everyone that never again would the people of this province be beholden to any other jurisdiction for our PPE needs. We engaged Supply Ontario, we engaged the real fundamental tenets of the Building Ontario Businesses Initiative, and never again will we be beholden to any other jurisdictions, because now we are going straight to the source and we are getting nothing but the best of the best in supplies. You know what? That's because they are Ontario-made products.

We are harnessing the immense buying power of our province to build up our supply chain, boost Ontario jobs and businesses, and put money where it is needed most as we are recovering. With BOBI, we are also aiming to break down barriers to increase government procurements towards our local businesses, to ensure that the little guy has the opportunity to build their business and also rebuild our economy. We are choosing to invest in our people and our potential because we know that their ingenuity and ability and can-do attitude are what took us through the last two years, and are what are going to elevate us through the next several years of recovery. I look forward to greater work as a result of this initiative.

PUBLIC TRANSIT

Mr. Faisal Hassan: In my riding of York South-Weston, our community relies heavily on what is an underserved Toronto transit system. People rely on Jane Street or Weston Road and Eglinton Avenue and Lawrence Avenue; they rely on buses. I have long advocated for fuller transit service and funding that benefits the very real needs of our community.

The transportation minister is proposing changes to transit funding. When one considers the TTC identified a \$185-million operating gap in 2020, my concern is, how are proposed changes going to affect transit service and jobs?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I do sympathize with the member opposite. It was a very difficult 15 years under the Liberals, with the inability for them to start to build transit and transportation in the province, so I can appreciate how frustrated and how angry he must be, Speaker, in particular given the fact that when his party held the balance of power, they didn't actually focus on transit and transportation in his riding.

The good news is that, listening to this member and to the people of Toronto, and really the greater Toronto area, we're making these investments in transit and transportation—one of the largest investments in subways in the history of the province. We're expanding two-way, all-day GO trains, not only to the member's riding but we're doing it out to London. I know my community of Stouffville, which never has had that, is starting to get it. We're making these very, very important investments, working with the city of Toronto, because we know how important it is for economic growth in the financial capital of the country to have better access to transit and transportation.

We're also building roads, bridges and highways across the province. So I do agree with him. I understand his frustrations, and we'll get the job done.

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

Mr. Faisal Hassan: While the last 15 years was bad, the last four years was worse. Here, Speaker, I have also written another letter to the minister.

Back to my question to the Premier: Recent conversations I have had with the hard-working folks of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 113 have raised some serious red flags about the proposed funding, how gasoline taxes are allocated and how integrated fares will be utilized.

In your 2019 budget, \$1.1 billion allocated for the TTC via gas tax was removed by this government. I believe it is fair to ask: Where did that money go, and why was it not used towards improving the operation and maintenance of our public transportation system?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Speaker, I'm a bit confused as to why the NDP would say that it's worse, given the fact that the Minister of Infrastructure is delivering a three-stop Scarborough subway. I think that that would be better for the people of the community.

The Minister of Infrastructure is delivering the Eglinton Crosstown. I know that the Minister of Infrastructure and the Minister of Transportation are delivering expanded GO train service. So the NDP have really caught me by surprise now, that expanding services, making it better, improving it for the people of their communities of the province of Ontario, is somehow making life worse. I'm confused by that.

Look, I was speaking just this morning to a new mother. Her name was Jessica. She has got a beautiful son, Benjamin. She was telling me just how important these new investments in transit and transportation are to her and her family, so we'll continue to do that.

I'll have to have a discussion with the member opposite, because I really do remain confused as to how improving services, expanding services, making life easier for the people of the province of Ontario is defined as worse for the NDP.

LAND USE PLANNING

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: Good morning. My question is for the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. In mid-February, a meeting was held where the municipal Cambridge heritage advisory committee voted

against showing support for a proposed million-square-foot warehouse in Blair village.

Shockingly, the mayor of Cambridge and city council are now sneaking in the heritage impact study and the traffic impact study at a council meeting scheduled for this coming Tuesday, March 15. This meeting was initially scheduled for June. Why the rush? Residents have been given less than a week's notice, and it's occurring during March break, when people are away. This is a direct attempt to undermine any hope of community involvement.

I have to ask the minister again what, if any, assurances are in place to hold municipal councils in check when they undemocratically push through programs against the will of constituents.

Hon. Steve Clark: Speaker, I'm not sure why this member has an aversion to talking to her own mayor and her own council. Municipalities are duly elected levels of government. People go to the polls and they elect their mayor and they elect their council, and they operate on the system collaboratively with the province. If this member has an issue with a heritage committee meeting next Tuesday, she should contact Mayor McGarry and council and express her concerns.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary?

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: Well, unfortunately, the Cambridge municipality is like this government: They don't listen. Earlier this week, I read a petition asking the minister to confirm that the city of Cambridge failed to meet its obligation to complete public consultation. The petition was put together and signed by hundreds of people in less than 24 hours.

For over a year, the Blair community have been rallying, attending meetings, writing letters, making phone calls. They are concerned that city council is going to push through with their own agenda. They are feeling ignored and suppressed by their government.

Speaker, we have been told time and time again by this government that public consultation will be conducted. I have been told by members of the community that they have not been consulted. What else do they need to do to make it clear that they are not in favour of this project? I ask the minister, on behalf of my constituents: Will the minister rescind the MZO in the village of Blair?

Hon. Steve Clark: Again, I've said this many times: We issue an MZO based on a resolution from council, which in this case happened. If this member has a problem with her municipal council, if she wants to attend a meeting and express her views, she's quite willing to do so. I know that she didn't serve at the municipal level, but she has been in this House for four years; she knows how this place works. She knows how municipal council chambers work. If she has got a problem and her residents have a problem, they can go to the council meeting and they can express it. It's just that simple.

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CANCER SCREENING

Mr. Gilles Bisson: My question is to the Minister of Health. Gastroenterologists over the years have learned

that, if you have early intervention when it comes to people with colon cancer, you can really turn the outcomes around. One of the things that gastroenterologists have been able to do, up until recently, is that if they had a patient that they thought, "You know what, we should keep a closer eye on you because your polyps grow faster," or maybe they saw something on the last one, they are able to bring that person in for a colonoscopy more frequently, every year, every two years or every three years—whatever they think, but normally it's their call. Your government has now changed this so now it's every 10 years. It's not at the call of the specialist.

Mr. Speaker, why is the Ford government trying to micromanage what physicians and gastroenterologists are supposed to do?

Hon. Christine Elliott: I've said this many times: The health and well-being of the people of Ontario has always been our government's top priority. We have provided physicians and primary care providers with the tools that they need to do their work.

In a situation such as you've just described, if someone needs to have surgery done or have a test done more frequently, that is certainly up to the provider to provide. We have room in our hospitals. We have provided hundreds of millions of dollars for equipment. We have invested \$5.1 billion in creating another 3,100 beds and that's across the province of Ontario. That's every part of Ontario.

So it's clear that if it's called for in patient care, this work can be done on a more frequent basis, not once every 10 years but whenever it's needed.

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

Mr. Gilles Bisson: Mr. Speaker, that's just not the case. What the government has done is they have restricted the ability of gastroenterologists to be able to do colonoscopies and only be able to do them within that 10-year period in very, very narrow circumstances—if the person is passing blood, different things like that. But you know as well as I do that a lot of colon cancer is caught—how? By going for a colonoscopy, not waiting until you start bleeding or start feeling ill.

What gastroenterologists are saying: Why are you trying to micromanage the work that they do in making sure that patients are safe?

So I'll ask you again: Why is this government, Mr. Speaker, so intent on micromanaging decisions that should be made by our medical community and instead insert themselves inside and say, "Oh, every 10 years, everything will be fine"? Because it won't.

Hon. Christine Elliott: What we do is follow best practices in the province of Ontario. However, if there's a situation where a gastroenterologist believes that someone needs to have a test done within that 10-year period, it's perfectly available for them to do so. It absolutely is. We have the machine and we have the equipment. We have the availability in hospitals or in suites where that can be done.

If someone has a history, a family history or some history of trouble themselves, they will be followed more

closely by their primary care physician and by their gastroenterologists. And if they need to have that done more frequently than 10 years, those tests will be done.

RÉPONSE À LA COVID-19 COVID-19 RESPONSE

M^{lle} Amanda Simard: Monsieur le Président, on est tous tannés de cette pandémie et de porter ce masque que ça fait maintenant plus d'un an qu'on porte constamment. Croyez-moi, j'ai hâte de l'enlever. Hier, le gouvernement a annoncé que ce port du masque obligatoire prendrait fin le 21 mars, sauf dans les milieux à risque élevé. Ça semble super, sauf qu'il y a un hic.

The Premier decided to remove the mask mandate for Ontario's schools, despite the advice of experts at SickKids, CHEO, McMaster Children's Hospital and the Children's Hospital at London Health Sciences.

La table scientifique du gouvernement a clairement indiqué que des masques de haute qualité sont essentiels pour aider à minimiser le risque de propagation de la COVID-19 dans nos écoles, surtout quand ce gouvernement n'investit pas dans la ventilation et l'amélioration des locaux scolaires, même quand les fonds du gouvernement fédéral coulent à flot.

Monsieur le Président, dans quel monde le premier ministre pense-t-il que la COVID-19 ne se propagera pas dans les écoles de l'Ontario?

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

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I will remind the member opposite that Steven Del Duca's position in this Legislature is that we should have had longer lockdowns. We should mandate three doses in order to be fully vaccinated. We should mandate a vaccine on young children as a prerequisite to enter a school. That is a different position than that of our government, that has followed the advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health who believes that we are now prepared to move forward with caution, with higher ventilation standards, with access to PPE and, of course, with the maintenance of screening before people enter schools.

We will follow the advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, who believes that the metrics in public health have allowed us to get to this place. I'd hope, members opposite, you would affirm in your supplemental your support and your confidence in the Chief Medical Officer of Health in this province, who has guided us ably to get to this point, so we can move forward with hope and optimism in Ontario.

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

LEGISLATIVE PAGES

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'm going to ask all of our pages to assemble.

It is now time to say a word of thanks to our legislative pages. Our pages are smart, trustworthy and hard-working. They are indispensable to the effective functioning of this chamber. They cheerfully and efficiently deliver notes, run errands, transport important documents throughout the precinct, and make sure that our water glasses are always full. We are indeed fortunate to have them here.

Our pages depart having made many new friends, with a greater understanding of parliamentary democracy and memories that will last a lifetime. Each of them will go home and carry on and continue their studies, and will no doubt contribute to their communities, their province and their country in important ways.

We expect great things from all of them. Maybe some of them someday will take their seats in this House as members or work here as staff. We wish them all well.

Please join me again in showing our appreciation for our legislative pages.

Applause.

DEFERRED VOTES

SUPPLY ACT, 2022

LOI DE CRÉDITS DE 2022

Deferred vote on the motion for second reading of the following bill:

Bill 96, An Act to authorize the expenditure of certain amounts for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2022 / Projet de loi 96, Loi autorisant l'utilisation de certaines sommes pour l'exercice se terminant le 31 mars 2022.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Next, we have a deferred vote on the motion for second reading of Bill 96, An Act to authorize the expenditure of certain amounts for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2022.

Call in the members. This will be a five-minute bell.

The division bells rang from 1137 to 1142.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'm going to ask the members to please take their seats.

Mr. Sarkaria has moved second reading of Bill 96, An Act to authorize the expenditure of certain amounts for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2022.

All those in favour of the motion will please rise one at a time and be recognized by the Clerk.

Ayes

Anand, Deepak	Gill, Parm	Pang, Billy
Babikian, Aris	Hardeman, Ernie	Parsa, Michael
Bailey, Robert	Harris, Mike	Pettapiece, Randy
Barrett, Toby	Hogarth, Christine	Piccini, David
Bethlenfalvy, Peter	Jones, Sylvia	Rasheed, Kaleed
Bouma, Will	Kanapathi, Logan	Romano, Ross
Calandra, Paul	Ke, Vincent	Sabawy, Sheref
Cho, Raymond Sung Joon	Kramp, Daryl	Sandhu, Amarjot
Clark, Steve	Kusendova, Natalia	Sarkaria, Prabmeet Singh
Coe, Lorne	Lecce, Stephen	Scott, Laurie
Crawford, Stephen	MacLeod, Lisa	Skelly, Donna
Cuzzetto, Rudy	Martin, Robin	Smith, Dave
Downey, Doug	McDonnell, Jim	Surma, Kinga

Dunlop, Jill
Elliott, Christine
Fedeli, Victor
Fullerton, Merrilee
Ghamari, Goldie

McKenna, Jane
McNaughton, Monte
Miller, Norman
Nicholls, Rick
Oosterhoff, Sam

Tangri, Nina
Triantafilopoulos, Effie J.
Wai, Daisy
Walker, Bill
Yakabuski, John

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): All those opposed to the motion will please rise one at a time and be recognized by the Clerk.

Nays

Andrew, Jill
Begum, Doly
Bisson, Gilles
Blais, Stephen
Collard, Lucille
Fraser, John
Gates, Wayne

Gélinas, France
Hassan, Faisal
Hunter, Mitzie
Karahalios, Belinda C.
Kernaghan, Terence
Mamakwa, Sol
Mantha, Michael

Sattler, Peggy
Simard, Amanda
Stevens, Jennifer (Jennie)
Taylor, Monique
Vanthof, John
West, Jamie
Yarde, Kevin

The Clerk of the Assembly (Mr. Todd Decker): The ayes are 54; the nays are 21.

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

Second reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Pursuant to standing order 67, this bill is ordered for third reading.

SUPPLY ACT, 2022

LOI DE CRÉDITS DE 2022

Mr. Sarkaria moved third reading of the following bill:

Bill 96, An Act to authorize the expenditure of certain amounts for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2022 / *Projet de loi 96, Loi autorisant l'utilisation de certaines sommes pour l'exercice se terminant le 31 mars 2022.*

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Pursuant to standing order 67, I am now required to put the question. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard some noes.

All those in favour, please say "aye."

All those opposed, please say "nay."

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

Call in the members. This will be another five-minute bell.

Interjection: Same vote.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Same vote? I heard a no. Same vote? Same vote.

The Clerk of the Assembly (Mr. Todd Decker): The ayes are 54; the nays are 21.

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

Be it resolved that the bill do now pass and be entitled as in the motion.

Third reading agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Point of order?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I'm just rising in accordance with standing order 59. I just would like to inform the

House that on our return on Monday, March 21, of course we will be coming in at 9 o'clock, but also to inform the House that we will be lifting the masking mandate here in the chamber as well.

On Monday, March 21, in the morning and in the afternoon, we will be on Bill 88, Working for Workers Act.

On Tuesday, March 22: in the morning, Bill 88, Working for Workers Act. There will also be, before question period, a tribute to former member Claude Frederick Bennett. In the afternoon, Bill 88, Working for Workers Act, and in the evening, PMB ballot item 31, standing in the name of the member for Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston. As the Speaker will recall, the House passed a motion that authorizes the Speaker not to recognize the member for Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston.

On Wednesday, we will move to, in the morning, Bill 93. During routine proceedings, there will be a ministerial statement on the Journée internationale de la Francophonie. In the afternoon, opposition day number 3, and in the evening, PMB ballot item 32.

On Thursday, March 24: Bill 93. In the afternoon, we will be debating a bill which will be introduced earlier in the week by the government, and we will move to ballot item 33, standing in the name of the member for Scarborough Southwest.

NOTICE OF DISSATISFACTION

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Pursuant to standing order 36(a), the member for Timmins has given notice of his dissatisfaction with the answer to his question given by the Minister of Health concerning colonoscopy procedures. This matter will be debated Tuesday, following private members' public business.

There being no further business at this time, this House stands in recess until 1 p.m.

The House recessed from 1149 to 1300.

REPORTS BY COMMITTEES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL POLICY

Ms. Natalia Kusendova: I beg leave to present a report from the Standing Committee on Social Policy and move its adoption.

The Clerk-at-the-Table (Mr. Wai Lam (William Wong)): Your committee begs to report the following bill, as amended:

Bill 88, An Act to enact, amend and repeal various statutes / *Projet de loi 88, Loi édictant, modifiant et abrogeant diverses lois.*

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

Report adopted.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Pursuant to standing order 77(b), the bill is therefore ordered for second reading.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

1692783 ONTARIO INC. ACT, 2022

Mr. Gates moved first reading of the following bill:
Bill Pr60, An Act to revive 1692783 Ontario Inc.

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

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Pursuant to standing order 89, this bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills.

1712042 ONTARIO LTD. ACT, 2022

Mr. Gates moved first reading of the following bill:
Bill Pr61, An Act to revive 1712042 Ontario Ltd.

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

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Pursuant to standing order 89, this bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills.

PROTECTION FROM COERCED DEBTS INCURRED IN RELATION TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING ACT, 2022

LOI DE 2022

SUR LA PROTECTION CONTRE LES DETTES CONTRACTÉES SOUS LA CONTRAINTE DANS UN CONTEXTE DE TRAITE DE PERSONNES

Madame Collard moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 99, An Act to amend the Consumer Reporting Act and the Prevention of and Remedies for Human Trafficking Act, 2017 with respect to certain debts incurred in relation to human trafficking / Projet de loi 99, Loi modifiant la Loi sur les renseignements concernant le consommateur et la Loi de 2017 sur la prévention de la traite de personnes et les recours en la matière à l'égard de certaines dettes contractées dans un contexte de traite de personnes.

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

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'd like to invite the member to briefly explain her bill.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Victims of human trafficking are also victims of coerced debts that prevent the survivors from getting a new start. The bill would prohibit collection of debts that were forced onto survivors of human trafficking and would prohibit that records of these debts be published or used to evaluate the finances of survivors.

The bill amends the Consumer Reporting Act and the Prevention of and Remedies for Human Trafficking Act,

2017, to prohibit the inclusion in consumer reports of unfavourable information about a consumer that resulted from human trafficking. The Prevention of and Remedies for Human Trafficking Act, 2017, is amended to add a new part IV, which provides for the concept of a coerced debt, that being a debt incurred under a credit facility while the debtor was subjected to human trafficking. The provisions of this new part prohibit the collection of coerced debts and prohibit persons or entities from taking them into account when determining whether to provide services or products to the debtor.

PETITIONS

OPTOMETRY SERVICES

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It gives me great pleasure to present the following petitions on behalf of Dr. Cheryl Letheren, Dr. M. Salminen, Campus Vision UWO, and Mary-Louise Hitchon at Wharncliffe Optometry. The petition is entitled "Petition to Save Eye Care in Ontario."

"To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Whereas the Ontario government has underfunded optometric eye care for 30 years; and

"Whereas the government only pays on average \$44.65 for an OHIP-insured visit—the lowest rate in Canada; and

"Whereas optometrists are being forced to pay substantially out of their own pocket to provide over four million services each year to Ontarians under OHIP; and

"Whereas optometrists have never been given a formal negotiation process with the government; and

"Whereas the government's continued neglect resulted in 96% of Ontario optometrists voting to withdraw OHIP services beginning September 1, 2021;

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

"To instruct the Ontario government to immediately commit to legally binding, formal negotiations to ensure any future OHIP-insured optometry services are, at a minimum, funded at the cost of delivery."

I fully support this petition. I will affix my signature and deliver it to page Julia to give to the Clerks.

SKILLS TRAINING

Ms. Jill Andrew: I'd like to thank my constituents Alicia Payne and Alicia Richardson. I'd also like to thank Dalmar Abuzeid as well as many, many wonderful performers from ACTRA for their leadership and advocacy on this issue.

This petition is entitled "Protect Our Crowns: Update the Hairstyling Program Standard to Include Black Natural and Textured Hair and Reflect Black, Indigenous and Racialized Communities."

"Petition to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Whereas Black, Indigenous, and racialized people are often subject to race-based hair discrimination, including experiencing racism in schools and in the workplace—

resulting in negative impacts on their lives such as school-based bullying and harassment which impacts academic performance and economic impacts such as job discrimination and reprisal in the workplace for so-called ‘unprofessional’ hair styles or texture;

“Whereas physical presentation, which includes textured hair maintenance and protective styles, is directly linked to physical safety, mental health and sense of identity, self-esteem and confidence;

“Whereas Black, Indigenous and racialized performers of natural textured hair often arrive in their workplace of film/TV and theatre sets with professional hair stylists who have received insufficient training for working with their hair type—risking permanent damage to their physical appearance and therefore earning potential;

“Whereas hairstyling training in Ontario currently only focuses on cutting, designing, permanent waving, chemically relaxing, straightening and colouring hair, but does not have any instruction or practice to ensure every hair stylist can service Black people’s natural hair or the textured hair of many Indigenous and/or racialized community members, whether performers or otherwise;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to immediately pass MPP Andrew’s motion number 35 calling for the government of Ontario and Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development which regulates the hairstyling trade profession in Ontario to amend the hairstyling program standard to mandate culturally responsive training, specific to Black and textured hair in hairstyling education and practice across Ontario.”

I enthusiastically support this petition. I’ve affixed my signature and will pass it to Leah for the table.

CURRICULUM

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It’s my honour to present this petition on behalf of Eunice, Effie, the Safe Campus Coalition, the Western University students’ council, as well as all the volunteers who gathered signatures on this petition. It’s entitled “Support Survivors of Gender-Based and Sexual Violence.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas upstream prevention education and prioritizing the voices of survivors are vital; and

“Whereas prevention work should be progressive, evidence-informed, and survivor-centric in order to proactively mitigate sexual and gender-based violence before it happens; and

“Whereas post-secondary students should be equipped with campus and community sexual- and gender-based violence response resources; and

“Whereas institutions’ sexual violence policies must take a trauma-informed and survivor-centric approach;

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

“Immediately amend section 17 of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities Act and the Ontario curriculum to:

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“—require that post-secondary institutions participate in a gender-based and sexual violence campus climate survey administered every three years;

“—require post-secondary campuses to employ an appropriate and proportional number of gender-based violence educators;

“—require that all staff and faculty be trained in how to respond to disclosures of gender-based and sexual violence in a way that is survivor-centric and trauma-informed;

“—include sexual health in all subject areas of the K-12 curricula and, specifically, amend the health and physical education curriculum to include research-based education about consent and safe relationships.”

I fully support this petition. I will affix my signature and deliver it to page Elya to give to the Clerks.

EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I would like to thank the advocates at Justice for Workers for this petition entitled “A Just Recovery Means Decent Work for All.

“Whereas COVID-19 has exposed the way in which low wages, temporary jobs, unstable work and unsafe working conditions are a health threat not only to workers themselves but also to our communities;

“Whereas systemic racism in the labour market means Black workers, Indigenous workers, workers of colour and newcomer workers are overrepresented in low-wage, precarious and dangerous employment and more likely to be without paid sick days, supplemental benefits or working part-time involuntarily;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to change employment and labour laws to:

“—provide at least 10 permanent, employer-paid emergency leave days each year and an additional 14 during public health outbreaks;

“—ensure all workers are paid at least \$20 per hour, no exemptions;

“—promote full-time work by offering additional hours to existing part-time workers before hiring new employees;

“—provide set minimum hours of work each week, and provide schedules at least two weeks in advance;

“—legislate equal pay and benefits for equal work regardless of race, gender, employment status or immigration status;

“—protect all workers from unjust firing (stop wrongful dismissal) and ensure migrant and undocumented workers can assert labour rights;

“—ensure all workers are protected by ending misclassification of gig workers, and end all exemptions to employment laws;

“—make companies responsible for working conditions and collective bargaining, when they use temp agencies, franchises and subcontractors; make companies financially responsible under the Workplace Safety and

Insurance Act for deaths and injuries of temp agency workers;

“—end the practice of using temporary agency workers indefinitely by ensuring temp workers are hired directly by the client company after three months on assignment;

“—make it easier for all workers to join unions by signing cards, allowing workers to form unions across franchises, subcontractors, regions or sectors of work ...; and

“—enforce all laws proactively through adequate public staffing and meaningful penalties for employers who violate the laws.”

I'm proud to affix my signature, and I will send it to the table with page Benjamin.

TAXI OPERATORS

Mr. John Fraser: “Review the Unfair Business Practices in the Ottawa Taxi Industry.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas more than 125 taxi plate owners, renters and many others were evicted from their job with Coventry Connections during the pandemic lockdown. Drivers listened to the Ontario government's public health orders and stayed home. They were assured by the Ontario government's emergency orders that they would not lose their jobs nor have any consequences arising from the lockdown;

“Whereas their union, Unifor Local 1688, abandoned its members during this time. The union worked out a deal with Coventry Connections and did not ask” members “to ratify this deal;

“Whereas these independent drivers have had no income for the past three months as they can no longer access federal COVID funds; they are also being asked to pay an exorbitant amount to Coventry Connections for their taxi plates in order to return to work. The drivers are also asking to eliminate the extra \$5 million liability insurance on top of the \$2 million required by Ontario law. The city of Ottawa has imposed that extra insurance without any thought as to what it will do to the whole taxi industry;

“Whereas Baird MacGregor Insurance Brokers LP have insured Coventry Connections and all affiliated” cabs “as well as ... taxi plate holders in Ottawa, Ontario, for more than 40 years, is now refusing to insure these independent drivers as well as preventing” them and “any other broker from insuring these drivers. The insurance industry will not provide insurance to the independent drivers in Ottawa who are currently trying to start up their own company;

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

“To stand up for the independent ... taxi drivers” of Ottawa “who want to get back to work, by investigating the taxi insurance industry and taxi owner Coventry Connections.”

I'm giving this to page Leah.

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: The petition I have is entitled “Stop Doug Ford from Cutting Mental Health Care.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas Doug Ford has announced a \$335-million per year funding cut to mental health care and services;

“Whereas an estimated 12,000 children are waiting up to 18 months for mental health care, and there are 63% more children in the ER for mental health issues than there were in 2006;

“Whereas a cut to already threadbare mental health funding will mean longer waits for care and fewer services—which can result in mental health conditions being exacerbated, and more people living with mental illness spiralling into crisis;

“Whereas front-line care workers and first responders are doing the best they can, but coping with a shortage of resources;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to reverse Doug Ford's \$330-million per year funding cut to Ontario's mental health services.”

I fully support this petition. I will affix my signature and deliver it to page Pania to give to the Clerks.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Ms. Jill Andrew: I have a petition entitled “Petition for Real Protections from Above-Guideline Rent Increases:

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas housing is a human right;

“Whereas rental rates in Toronto—St. Paul's and across Ontario are increasingly unaffordable;

“Whereas we need to protect our affordable housing stock in Ontario;

“Whereas paying to maintain a building should be the responsibility of the landlord;

“Whereas above-guideline rent increases can increase rent well over what people can afford;

“Whereas inaction on this issue will mean thousands of Ontarians will be forced from their homes;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to immediately review above-the-guideline increase rules and regulations, and ensure that rental housing remains affordable in Ontario.”

I enthusiastically agree with this petition and support it. I've affixed my signature and will hand it to Julia.

TENANT PROTECTION

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: The petition I have is entitled “Call on the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to Implement Real Rent Control.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas the average rent has increased by over 50% in the past 10 years;

“Whereas nearly half of Ontarians pay unaffordable rental housing costs because they spend more than a third of their income on rent;

“Whereas all Ontarians have a right to a safe and affordable place to call home;

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

“Petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to pass our Rent Stabilization Act to establish rent control that operates during and between tenancies; a public rent registry so tenants can find out what a former tenant paid in rent; access to legal aid for tenants that want to contest an illegal rent hike; and stronger enforcement and tougher penalties for landlords who do not properly maintain a renter’s home.”

I fully support this petition, because housing is a human right.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

GETTING ONTARIO CONNECTED ACT, 2022

LOI DE 2022 POUR UN ONTARIO CONNECTÉ

Resuming the debate adjourned on March 10, 2022, on the motion for second reading of the following bill:

Bill 93, An Act to amend the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021 and the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, 2012 / *Projet de loi 93, Loi modifiant la Loi de 2021 sur la réalisation accélérée de projets d’Internet à haut débit et la Loi de 2012 sur un système d’information sur les infrastructures souterraines en Ontario.*

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate?

Mr. John Vanthof: It’s always an honour to be able to rise in this House—and today, to give the lead for the official opposition on Bill 93, An Act to amend the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021, and the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, 2012. Before I start on the actual bill itself, I have to—I’m looking for the right word—commend the minister, because this—

Interjections.

Mr. John Vanthof: You might not like what I’m about to say about that commendation. This bill can be debated on its own merits. The last broadband act, the Building Broadband Faster Act, on April 12, 2021—just as a backdrop, the minister and I had a question in question period, and she accused us of not supporting broadband because we didn’t support that act. But that act had a poison pill in it. In the middle of it was something about an MZO, about a warehouse that was going to be built, and the government knew we wouldn’t be able to vote for that. That’s what makes this place so difficult.

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Just to demonstrate how tense things get when governments put poison pills—which the minister hasn’t done in this case, and that’s why I’m commenting. During the debate on the Building Broadband Faster Act, I asked the then Minister of Natural Resources why that poison pill was put in, and his response was, “If you don’t like it, just pretend it isn’t there.” I’m sure we all remember that. He tore the middle of the act out. Well, we can’t just pretend things aren’t in laws that the government puts forward. So when a government continually says, “You didn’t support this and you didn’t support this and you didn’t”—well, often, there are things in those acts that are basically unsupportable. As a result, you can’t have a real fulsome debate about what’s actually in the act.

To the House leader’s credit and, I think, to the minister’s credit, this bill—I’m sure there will be issues we will bring up, but we are debating a very important subject to everyone in this province and we are debating it on its own merits. I really think that this is the way it should be done. This bill will rise or fall and we will vote for or against based on what’s in the bill about broadband, as opposed to the poison pill. Although if we do vote for it, we will be accused of propping up the Conservative government, like you always accuse us of propping up a majority Liberal government, which isn’t actually—

Mr. Michael Parsa: Then minority.

Mr. John Vanthof: We did prop up one minority government—but not 15 years of majority. That’s the way minorities work, but it’s not the way majorities work.

So if we vote for this bill, we will not be propping up the Conservative government; we will be voting on a bill on its merits.

If you look in the last Parliaments, I believe the Conservative Party also voted close to—

Mr. Michael Mantha: Fifty per cent—

Mr. John Vanthof: —50% of the time also propped up the Liberal government.

So voting for a bill or against a bill—you can paint it however you want.

At least on this piece of legislation, we will be talking about the legislation and about the core of the legislation and about one subject: broadband. Again, I commend the minister for doing that.

Our world is changing because of broadband. We brought this up many times in this House. I don’t think you can truly participate in our modern society without it. I think the government recognizes that. I think, on all sides, we recognize that.

I listened intently this morning to all four speakers for the government lead—oh, correction: The PCs, in the last Liberal majority, did not vote for the government 50% of the time. It was 49.6% of the time that you propped up the Liberal government. Thank you for that.

Interjection.

Mr. John Vanthof: We like to be accurate in the NDP.

Getting back to the subject of broadband: You cannot participate in our modern society without access to usable, accessible broadband. I listened to the four speakers in the

morning, in the government's lead, and they focused on the need for broadband. It became evident during COVID-19. Kids learning from home and people working from home—obviously, COVID-19 changed our lives. But the issue, like many other things in COVID-19, was there before COVID-19. It's just that before COVID-19, a lot of people weren't focused on it because the majority of people were already getting broadband.

If you look back at how the Internet was created and how broadband companies work, they are profit-oriented. I was also in the for-profit sector, and you are going to concentrate on serving markets where you actually make money. That makes sense. That's why broadband is much more accessible in highly populated areas. There are holes, granted, but it's much more accessible in cities and larger towns, because that's where you can serve enough people to make money. Because it has always been a for-profit sector, areas where the profit potential isn't there tend to be the last on the line or tend to not get service, period. In northern Ontario, we're very used to that. We have a chip on our shoulder in northern Ontario about that, but we're very, very used to it, because our population is very low and the full service tends to run out by the time you get to northern Ontario.

A prime example is, there are populated areas in northern Ontario that do not have 911. It's a universal system across the province, except in some areas, and those are populated areas. I have a property in one of them. Whenever someone stays at that property, I have to explain that 911 doesn't work, and the numbers on the road have nothing to do with 911. You have to call 1-800-da-da-da-da and then explain.

When governments of all stripes say things like, "Oh, this is going to serve everyone in Ontario," we always say, "Um, let's just make sure."

Having said that, we have been pushing for a long time to get adequate broadband throughout rural Ontario. In fact, on October 1, 2018, on behalf of the NDP, I introduced a private member's motion on investment in rural and northern broadband infrastructure where we proposed to invest a billion dollars to try to eliminate the digital divide. To the government's credit, that motion passed unanimously. Not much happened after, but the motion passed unanimously. At the time, the Minister of Infrastructure came over to talk to me and said, "We need to do this, but man, that's a lot of money."

I don't think at that point the majority of people in Ontario realized how difficult it is to operate without broadband in a modern society or even how difficult it is to operate—I come from the agriculture sector—a modern farm without adequate broadband. It's impossible, and actually it makes a difference in not only how profitable and efficient you are, but whether or not you can actually operate, because there are things now in all businesses, including agriculture, where you need access to workable, usable broadband.

So we put forward a motion on October 1, 2018. It passed unanimously.

On November 26, 2020, I put forward a bill on behalf of the official opposition, the Broadband is an Essential

Service Act, Bill 226. Once again, it passed, because broadband is an essential service. I think everyone agreed with that. We've been pushing this for a long time.

Enter COVID-19: Now everyone realizes that broadband is an essential service, not just the people in the country who didn't have it.

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On behalf of the official opposition, I did a broadband tour of areas in southern Ontario, and I learned something. As I just said, northerners often have a chip on our shoulder that only northerners aren't getting the service—and we get that, naturally, because we have a lower population. I did this broadband tour, and I believe it was in Picton that the local chamber of commerce organized a meeting and they were talking about how there was a certain area in the parking lot of Sobeys that didn't have cell service. At that I thought, "Wait a second, they have problems too." We have whole areas that don't have cell service, but I learned something: that in southern Ontario, rural Ontario, they have issues too. Actually, we had a meeting with the Ontario Chamber of Commerce last week. I believe they met with all the parties. We had a laugh at that, that I still remembered how that triangle in the Sobeys parking lot didn't have cell service. Broadband is still a huge issue.

I like to tell personal stories to explain things. I've been here 10 years, and I think this was about five years ago, but it shows how there's such a difference between rural and urban Ontario. I went to—I'm not even going to name the town. I went to a little town, and I had to go to an event, and I was about half an hour early. I'm sure many of you do the same—we all try to meet people. I went to the local general store to just talk to people. About a week before, in the adjoining town, a house had burned down and they tried to call 911. They had 911 there, but because it was raining, the telephones didn't work. The land lines don't work when it rains. I was in the next town a week later, talking to the lady behind the counter in the general store. I said, "I see you don't have"—and I knew they didn't have broadband—"very good cell service." She said, "Oh, no, it's not bad. If you go three miles that way or if you go up the hill on the abandoned railroad track, you can get a good signal." I said, "What about your land lines?" She said, "Oh, no, they're great." I said, "Really? That's funny. In the next town"—and she knew the story—"the house burned down and they called 911, but because it was raining, the phones didn't work." She looked at me in all seriousness and said, "Well, everyone knows the phones don't work when it rains." In the background, there was a TV with the Bell Fibe commercial playing. It might as well have been Star Wars. We're conditioned to that.

So forgive us if we're a bit skeptical when we see any government—they would be skeptical of our government as well—say, "We are going to connect everybody by 2025." Forgive us if we're a bit skeptical in 2022, because it has taken a long time to get this far.

Again, we had an interesting question and answer this morning. I brought this up to the minister, as well, the last time—if I can find it here in my notes. Maybe someone

here can find the actual numbers, what was budgeted and what was spent. I have it here somewhere.

Each year, the government budgets money for broadband, and for the last three years, the money actually invested was an awful lot less than what was budgeted, by a huge percentage. I believe it's—

Interjection.

Mr. John Vanthof: Oh, there we go. The Financial Accountability Officer revealed that the government cut the rural broadband budget in the 2021-22 budget by \$207 million, more than half, and to date only spent 0.6% of this. The year before, it had a \$45.7-million budget for rural broadband and spent 1.37%. And the year before, I believe it was in the \$35 million—\$31.8 million, and spent zero. There's a difference between budgeting and investing.

And now they've got \$4 billion on the table. We're going to need that. But again, what is budgeted and what's actually invested are two different things.

In the question and answer, I believe it was—the minister of consumer affairs?

Mr. Michael Mantha: The Minister of Government and Consumer Services.

Mr. John Vanthof: He said, “The NDP doesn't know much about numbers.” Well, do you know what? When you budget and don't invest it, we know enough that it doesn't get done. The answer could have been, “Due to COVID-19, there are problems with supply chains and we're not getting these contracts done.” I could have accepted that. That's not the answer we got. But that is also going to be the problem going forward.

If in the last three years you've hardly spent any of the money that was budgeted, that money goes into savings. You can say, “Oh, great, we saved X amount of money. We're not spending the money we budgeted.” But it's not being invested, so now it's going to be that much harder to catch up. If you budget \$4 billion, that doesn't mean that the \$4 billion is actually going to get invested, especially just a few months before an election.

In one way—I'm going to get to this point in a second—it's actually disquieting. That's maybe not the right word. I'm very concerned that at some point, the government is going to try to get this money out the door, and again the little places are going to be missed.

I will give an example. It's like when the government announced—remember the first rollout of the rapid test kits? “Oh, we're going to cover northern Ontario. We've got North Bay, Sudbury and Thunder Bay covered. We're good.” That's basically what it was. There's a problem there.

If the same thing is going to happen with—and maybe it won't. I don't know. I'm going to get into that in a second. But we've heard this story so many times before—that this is going to be covered, this is going to be covered. Forgive us if we don't 100% buy the story, because we've been down that road before with every other service.

The bill itself? We're still contacting stakeholders, but the principle of the bill itself, to do locates more quickly, to not repeat the whole process—do you know what?

There could be issues that we haven't seen yet, that our stakeholders haven't seen yet, but barring any unforeseen circumstances, I think we could live with the principle of the bill. But there are so many questions, beyond the bill, that need to be answered so that those of us in rural Ontario can have the confidence to think that we're actually going to see service.

1340

Before I get to those problems, there's one thing that I didn't hear this morning from any of the speakers on the government side about this bill. They talked about access to broadband and how important it is, as have I. I didn't hear one person talk about how one of the biggest obstacles to broadband is affordability.

I'll give you an example. I rent an apartment here because I live much farther than 50 kilometres away from my home. I'm not a technical person, so how many megabits per second—if you're going to get me to explain that, Speaker, I'm going to get in trouble. But I can tell you that I pay \$50 a month here for the fastest you can get. How I judge what is the fastest you can get is, my daughter is doing a PhD thesis and—she does something with programming satellites. I'm not that bright, but my daughter is pretty bright. If she's at my apartment, she never complains about the broadband. She does computer programming. I just look at it and say, “Oh, no.” My mind twirls.

At home, I used to have satellite Internet, and I had to quit it—the high-altitude satellite. They got too many people on the satellite—

Interjection.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes, you couldn't do anything.

So now I have a small Internet provider. I can see the top of the tower from my house. They built a tower in my neighbourhood. I'm fine with it. I can do everything I want with that high-speed Internet that I've got, but my daughter can't. My daughter could not work from my home—anyone who has that service. That's a roadblock. I would love it if my daughter could come. We live in a beautiful area. Housing is cheaper. I'm not saying she has to move back, but one of the reasons why she cannot move back to Timiskaming–Cochrane, to the country, to a nice house on the lake, is because she will never be able to do her job, and that is the same for all kinds of people. I'm very happy with the company that is doing that service. But those are two different types of services. So that's a huge issue.

Getting back to my point: I pay \$50 here and \$140 for the one at home. We all know that you need access to high-speed Internet for your kids, for your social life, for life. And we all know that the cost of food, the cost of gas—in northern Ontario, there is no public transportation to speak of. You're getting in your car or you're getting in your truck, and you're paying \$2 a litre. Food costs more. Everything costs more. So you would hope that if there's a government-subsidized program, at the end of the day, one of the goals would be affordable broadband. I didn't hear that. There's a difference between “it's available” and “it's affordable.” For me, because of my job, 140 bucks a month is not the end of the world. But for many people I

represent, when they have to choose between what they need, \$140 is a lot of money—and there's no guarantee that the government's program is not going to be more.

We've done a bit of digging on what the government is proposing—not digging like the one-call digging, but digging like freedom-of-information-act digging—and we have some serious questions. The minister said it in her speech and in response to one of our questions—that the way this is set up is that there is going to be a reverse auction to provide these services. Some people call a reverse auction a Dutch auction. I've been to a few auctions. I'm trying to get my head around it. Actually, my colleague the member from Oshawa has done a lot more digging on this than I have. It's her critic portfolio. She is very active on her critic portfolio. She couldn't be here today. She will be speaking on this later. She and our researchers have done quite a bit of digging on this.

The way I understand it—and I hope that if I'm wrong, the minister clarifies it; and I really appreciate that the minister is here. The province is divided into lots and how the lots are serviced so the qualified participants can bid on servicing the lot. Am I good so far?

Interjection.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. But from what I can see from the documents that we've been able to get, not all lots are going to be serviced the same. Some lots, some parts of the province, are going to be serviced by wire, so they will have true high-speed by fibre optic cable, and some parts of the province are going to be serviced by satellite, or tower to tower, which is not the same service. Using my past example, if it's tower to tower or satellite, people like my daughter will never be able to work in those lots, because that's not the same level of service as the wired ones. Where it gets frustrating is—and I understand that they won't release where the lots are or what the size of the lots are. So again, you question it.

I'll just use my riding as an example. I don't know if the lots are township or district—because it makes an incredible difference. I've got parts of my riding that have wire and parts of my riding that have nothing except high-altitude and now Starlink. So, in the case of my riding, would it be a satellite lot or a fibre optic cable lot? It's a serious question, because not everybody is going to end up with the same Internet. No one has been clear on that. Everybody is going to have broadband by 2025, but some people are going to have much better broadband than others. If that's all that's possible, make that clear, and how that reverse auction is going to work.

1350

Also, it says in the minister's reply to the member from Oshawa's order paper question that they're focusing on having small independent operators being able to bid. Again, that depends on how big the lot is. I might be completely wrong about this, but I can't get the information. My small independent operator is not big enough to bid on Timiskaming–Cochrane. There are big operators. They're big enough to bid on Timiskaming–Cochrane, but do you know what? They're not providing the service now either.

So what is going to prompt them to provide better service after?

I had one of the big operators, and their satellite got so overloaded that I had to find something else. So how is that going to work? Why aren't we allowed to see what the lots are, to see what the services are? They might have some good ideas.

When we say, "Oh, Infrastructure Ontario"—I have ultimate respect for IO, but I'm not sure that IO knows what's actually going on, on the ground. I'm not sure that some of the best small operators aren't going to be shut out of this process just because they're not big enough.

Do you know what the biggest issue is for small operators to provide the service now? It's getting access to the trunk lines from the big operators. The big operators aren't willing to give up any of their space on the big cables. I don't see the assurance that the big operators aren't just going to go to the Dutch auction and bid to provide the service and still not, deep down, provide the service.

"Trust us, we've got this under control"—that has failed us so many times on so many levels. We need some kind of assurance, because there are places that are going to get cable and there are places that are going to get it through the air, and that is not the same Internet. I know that.

We don't know how big the lots are. We don't know what speed people are guaranteed to get. I'm sure that's somewhere in the contract, but we don't know, and this is changing so quickly that, again, we don't trust. We've been through this so many times before. You have a Dutch auction—"Yes, we will provide the service for X on this big a lot"—and that could very well take out the operators who are actually trying to provide the service now. If they actually had access to some of those trunk lines, they'd provide the service now, and could provide a lot more service. But a small-town operator is maybe not able to bid on a lot the size of Timiskaming–Cochrane. I could be totally in the weeds, Speaker, but I don't know how big the lot is; the minister does—great.

I'll go back again to Temiskaming. Some of it is wired; some of it is through the air. We'll take a little town like Gowganda—because I have people moving to Gowganda. They spend a couple of days looking for the best Internet provider. Then they call that Internet provider and they realize there is only one Internet provider in Gowganda and their satellite is full—"Sorry. If we get a bit more room on the satellite, we'll give you a call." And that's one of the majors.

It leads me to another question—again, because we don't have access to this information: What about the areas where nobody is going to bid? There are areas where, no matter how you cut it, you're not going to make a profit providing Internet. Those areas will benefit society.

The example I always use is my dairy farm. My dairy farm was at the end of a dead-end road. And do you know what? I don't think that it ever really paid Ontario Hydro to put all those poles on down to the end of my dead-end road, because I never used that much hydro. But it gave a

big return on investment to society and to the area as a whole, because I hired people; I added a lot to the economy.

We're doing the same thing with broadband. Putting broadband into areas where the broadband company doesn't necessarily make money—I can understand the broadband company not getting excited about putting broadband in there, because it doesn't make the money. But it does—and it will—make the province's economy greater, by far greater than their investment.

But the question remains, how is that going to work? Is there a guarantee that once this auction is over, those little towns are going to get service? What is the guarantee that it's going to be usable and affordable? We haven't seen that yet. The people who have done the best job of doing that, so far, have been the small providers and the aggregators of the small providers, like SWIFT and EORN. They work with big providers, too. Those two organizations, one in southwestern Ontario and one in eastern Ontario, have spent a long time trying to put all these pieces together, and they've put projects together, and the minister and the other speakers are talking about them. They have done a lot of work to do this. I'm sure they're still working with the government, but this stuff takes time. If just throwing money at it was going to do it, we would have been further along than we are.

I really wish that we would have some more information. I understand there are limits to commercial—especially at a Dutch auction, you can't know what the other guy is going to bid. But we need some kind of framework for how this is going to work, because saying that everyone is going to be covered by 2025—covered by what? How much is it going to cost? Is it going to be usable? Those are tough questions, and they're questions that—I'm not questioning the intent of the government; not at all. I think we all want the same thing. There are lots of things I question the government's intent on; I'm not questioning the government's intent on this. But this isn't as easy as—if it was easy, then the townships in my riding that don't have 911 would have had 911 by now.

But what ends up happening is that the majority gets it, and then around the edges stuff falls off the table. And do you know what? A lot of people I represent live on the edges. We've lived on the edges through all kinds of stuff.

1400

I'm willing to predict that the lots in northern Ontario are really big, because Infrastructure Ontario doesn't want to deal with a whole bunch of little contracts. They like the big ones, and I can understand why. It's easier to deal with. They like dealing with big companies. But it hasn't been the case that that actually works.

A case in point: At one point, the provincial government actually owned broadband infrastructure in northern Ontario. It was held by the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission. When the Liberal government of the past decided to divest from ONTC, before we northerners could rise up and stop them, that's the first thing they sold. They sold a fibre optic cable that ran through northeastern Ontario. And they basically gave it away. If my numbers

serve me correctly, I believe it cost \$60 million to install and I think they sold it for \$6 million. They sold it to Bell—Ma Bell. Great. But when it was Ontera—and they still use the name—Ontera provided Internet service. Ontera cared; Bell, not so much.

I understand why. I'm not anti-Bell. Bell focuses on where the most profit is. That's why people invest in Bell, or invest in anything. You're not going to—if a company is saying, "You know what? We are going to provide service to everybody and we don't care if we make money or not," oh, man, that is not looking good on your investment portfolio. That's where government has to step in, because there are some places that need the service and it's not profitable to do.

We have no guarantee that this Dutch auction scheme—the first in Canada, first in North America—is actually going to provide that; none. You just have to think of how a Dutch auction, or how any auction, works. I'm a farmer; I go to lots of—I used to go to lots of auctions. I've done a few auctions. We actually have another Deputy Speaker, remember, from Huron—Bruce, I believe—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound.

Mr. John Vanthof: Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound—he's a pretty good auctioneer. I'm nothing compared to him.

At a regular auction, something comes through the ring, or a bid, or something you're bidding on, and you start at whatever, a hundred, and you go to 105, 110, until no one wants to go higher and you get the contract or, in my case, you get the cow. But a Dutch auction is different. At a Dutch auction you start high, and each time you drop—and you're looking at your co-bidder, your co-competitors, and whoever bids first gets it. That's how a Dutch auction works.

It's really weird that I have to explain how this is all working. I'm sure if I'm out to lunch, people are going to correct me, and I'm hoping they do, because any correction is more information than I've got now.

So if you have a lot, let's say the lot of Timiskaming, and how many people there are not serviced, and it starts at whatever, a million or whatever, and then whoever bids first, provided they're qualified, they have to provide that service. If it's a smaller lot, a town or a couple of townships, a smaller operator could provide that, providing he or she or they can get service to the trunk lines, because if you can't get service from the big operators or you can't access, there's another auction, a CRTC auction that sells the actual airwaves. If you can't get service to that, you're kind of out to lunch as a small operator.

It's been the small operators, traditionally, who have done the job. But it all depends on how big the lots are. It's very incumbent on that: how big you have to be to qualify for the auction. I'm not, again, questioning that the government doesn't want to, but it makes a huge difference.

How I equate it—and these don't go by Dutch auction, so let's forget about the Dutch auction. It's a whole different thing. But highway service contracts: Highway service contracts used to be that the MTO did the management and smaller companies could bid on the

snowplows, could bid on the sand, could bid on the salt, and a lot more smaller people could participate. And this government didn't—I don't believe it was this government that changed that; I think it was the government before. It wasn't this one. I can't remember if it was Harris or—but now, they bid on a whole area, so it knocks the little guys out. It has to be a big company that bids on the management, bids on all the plows. It's like a seven-year contract—salt, sand, everything. So all the little guys are out to lunch.

And I will challenge anybody who will tell me—and I've got no offence against the big contractors. They bid on the contracts the government puts out. It's the government that puts out the contracts. But I challenge anyone who is going to tell me that in northern Ontario, highway maintenance has gotten better since they knocked out all the little contractors. I challenge anyone. It's not the big contractors who are causing that; it's the way the government issues the contract.

This, in a way, is the same: the government setting up the process, the government setting out the rules. It's a reverse auction instead of a bidding process, but the rules are all set by the government—which I understand. Understandably, the government is putting a lot of coin in this, Speaker. But where are the guarantees of what the actual service is going to be that people are going to get? Everybody wants broadband. Everybody needs broadband. Everybody needs usable, affordable broadband, just like everybody needs 911.

And do you know what, Speaker? Everybody doesn't have 911. The member of Nickel Belt has put bill after bill, trying to get something simple like, "How about we all just get together and make sure that everybody in Ontario has 911?" And it doesn't happen, right?

Now we're being told this process that we have no access to, have never seen—a first in Canada, or first in North America, I believe—that this is going to make sure that everybody gets broadband. In the last three years, a mere percentage of the money that has been budgeted for broadband has been used. There are probably some legitimate reasons for that, but we've never been given them either. We're being told we can't count. No, we can count. So can the accountability officer. And that's our problem.

The bill to make One Call more responsive, more—obviously, this bill is focused on the areas that are actually going to get fibre optic cable, by far, because the reason you need locates is when you're installing fibre optic cable. It makes sense, right?

1410

But this bill is just a small part of the puzzle, and we're not convinced—I know I'm repeating myself, Speaker, but we are not convinced that Infrastructure Ontario fully understands what it's going to take to get this done and that it will be possible to get it done by the end of 2025. We all want it done as quick as possible, but we all want it done right and we all want it done so it survives in the future, because just getting something that's going to be good for six months or something that was actually already

outdated two years ago is going to keep holding those parts of the province back, and you are going to keep having people who could contribute greatly to our province continuing to be stopped from moving to certain areas, from providing services in those areas, from making the whole of Ontario grow.

They're going to continue to be stopped by lack of access to something that should be an essential service, just like we put forward in 2020 the Broadband is an Essential Service Act. Usable and affordable broadband is an essential service, and the fact this is going ahead—and again, the government is doing what they can to try and get this done, but nobody knows. They know, but they also knew that the rapid tests were going to Sudbury, North Bay and Thunder Bay. They also knew that, right? And for the people in Elk Lake and the people in Gowganda and the people in Holtyre, the people who are moving—we're actually getting a lot of people moving out of the GTA, moving out of southern Ontario because our house prices are much more reasonable and there are actually a lot of jobs in northern Ontario right now. They were there before the government started putting out the ads on our dime.

But some of the restrictions are that we don't have broadband and there's no guarantee that we're going to get it. The government guaranteed 2025, everybody by 2025. You're in Engelhart and there was a period there when you wanted a rapid test: Yes, everybody had access at a liquor store in North Bay, two hours. It's those kinds of things. I know the rapid access is different. The rapid tests are much more—this was COVID.

But this is actually more important for the long term because any mistakes made now are going to cripple that area for years, because once this program is over, it's, "Oh, yeah, that thing's fixed. Next." We know that. We need to make sure that it's done right, and based on what we're looking for, other than the—and again, I'm not out to disparage the minister or disparage the ministry, but we haven't seen anything that shows us that it's going to be done right. We've seen that it's got to be done quick, because the last three years they haven't met their investment goals, so it's going to be done quick. And I'm sure that the major players—"Oh, yeah. We've got this under control. We've got this under control." But if the major players were interested in doing it, they would have maybe done some more things in rural Ontario already. We haven't seen it. We haven't seen it, Speaker. We've seen the smaller players. We've seen the lower-altitude satellite companies; they're kind of breaking out. But we haven't seen the big players really wanting to come to the table. If they wanted to come to the table, they would have offered more access to the trunk lines or whatever you call them, because you need access to the big [*inaudible*].

I can see why they don't like giving access, because why would you give your competitors access? Why would you do that? Does this reverse auction process take that into account? We don't know.

The lots that are getting cable, I'm sure this bill is going to make it go quicker. And maybe some lots are going to get cable and satellite, but we don't know. When you live

where we live—and not just where I live in northern, but throughout rural Ontario and some of urban Ontario. Some of the members, I believe Richmond Hill, talked about how they didn't have—you know what? I'm not restricting this to rural Ontario. But if I know anything about auctions and if I know anything about making a buck, because before I had this job, that was my job: making a dollar as a farmer, and I'm at an auction—and I always have to have cows in my speeches. If I'm at an auction and I'm looking for cows because I'm not filling my quota, I'm going to look for the cows that give the most milk and I'm going to pay more for them. The cows I know, because I can kind of tell cows—the cows that aren't going to be profitable, I don't bid on them. I don't bid on them because it doesn't make me money.

But if you take that to the lots, who is going to bid, and how are you going to guarantee that the folks who live in the lots that aren't profitable are actually going to get service? How are you going to do that?

If this program is relying on subsidizing the private sector to provide that kind of service in places where they're not going to make money in the long term, this program is not going to work. Maybe there is a fail-safe for that, but we haven't seen it. We've seen reverse auctions: "Oh, 2025. Everybody gets to bid," and, "Nothing to see here. Problem solved." No. We need some kind of information, some kind of qualification, some kind of guarantee, or what the government is asking for a guarantee that everyone is actually going to get usable, affordable, reliable broadband. That's what you're saying. You're saying that everyone is going to get it. But what is everybody going to get, and how is it going to be guaranteed that they're going to keep getting it once the program is over? How? We haven't seen it.

The member from Oshawa has done a lot of freedom of information requests on it, and we don't get any answers on that. "Trust us:" That's the answer we're getting. It hasn't worked for us in the past. I hope this time is different.

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

Hon. Kinga Surma: I enjoyed your remarks.

I did just have one question. You presented two motions—one of which was \$1 billion over the next 10 years. What our government has offered to the people of Ontario is \$4 billion in a much shorter time frame. So would you not kindly confirm or agree that we are going above and beyond to make sure that everyone is going to be connected by the end of 2025 and, certainly, above and beyond what your motion asks for in the House?

1420

Mr. John Vanthof: I really appreciate that question from the minister.

Yes, and when we did a motion in 2018, prior to COVID-19, we looked at what Quebec was doing, and we thought that would be a good place to start. At that time, the government thought it was way too much money, but we put it forward.

At no point have I criticized the amount of money that the government is putting forward. The issue is: How are

you showing that what you're putting forward is actually going to bring the results we all want? We keep hearing "billions," but what we're really looking for is the actual results, not just how many billions we can throw out there.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question goes to the member for Niagara Falls.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I appreciate what the minister has done here, with no poison pill in the bill.

I will answer your question on the roads really quickly. The Conservatives privatized it, when it used to be done by public services. The Liberals, if anybody can believe it, awarded contracts to do the roads up north. The company that got the contract—guess what they didn't have? They didn't have any equipment to do it. That's what happened there.

You talked a lot about profit over service. That's a big issue here, because if you're going to go to the north, there's a good chance you're not going to make any profit. We looked at the same thing in long-term care, where 5,000 seniors died with COVID-19 because they put profit over care.

So my question to you is, do you think any company will put services ahead of profits in the north and small communities, to put in private?

Mr. John Vanthof: I'd like to thank the member from Niagara Falls for that question.

That's a really hard question to answer. It depends on, in many cases, the size of the company. A small local company that's already trying—I think if they were given a hand up, they could provide more service. The big players haven't done it yet. They're totally profit-oriented, as big private companies are. I don't see that this model will change that. That has not provided service in rural areas in the past; I don't see why it would now.

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

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you to the member from Timiskaming—Cochrane for your remarks. I have a lot of respect for you.

You're a farmer, and you always talk about farming. You were passionately talking about farmers facing challenges when it comes to broadband and Internet and all sorts of things. Ontario farmers depend on broadband infrastructure, just as they do on highways and railways, to ship food across the country and around the world. They rely on high-speed Internet service to use new and emerging technologies that allow their farming business to be more efficient, environmentally friendly and economical.

I ask you, member—he's a farmer, and he still isn't convinced yet about this wonderful broadband project in the history of Ontario. Why not?

Mr. John Vanthof: I'd like to thank you very much for that question.

That member, lots of times, calls me Farmer John in the hall, and it makes me proud, actually.

Agriculture has been pushing for broadband improvements for a long time. The Ontario Federation of

Agriculture was one of the first ones out of the gate in pushing for this.

Again, I'm not criticizing the government's initiative, but I'm questioning where the proof is that the farmer on the back road in northern Ontario or northwestern Ontario is actually going to get usable broadband out of this. That's what I'm questioning. It very well might be the case, but we haven't seen the proof of it.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for London North Centre has a question.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I'd like to thank the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane for his presentation and mentioning the poison pill and the shady games that were found in Bill 259. I also appreciated him quoting the minister at the time saying, "Pretend it's not there." We all know why it was there. It was there so that the Premier could spend billions on his billionaire buddies to pave over the greenbelt.

I wonder, like the member, how is this government going to ensure service to farms and families up north?

We know the minister and this government like to play pretend. My question is, do you think this government will ask people in the north to pretend that they have broadband?

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you to my colleague. That was a very leading question—but I certainly hope that they don't. Four billion dollars is a lot of coin, and we all want it invested responsibly, but we need to have some kind of assurance that it is actually, at the end of the day, going to provide the services that the government claims. We haven't seen that yet. The auction is going well. We don't even know how big the lots are, and that makes a huge difference.

No, we don't want anybody to pretend. We want this program to work. We need to have qualifications to show that it will.

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

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: I really enjoyed the presentation from the member of the opposition.

He's asking for a lot of detail about the guarantees of the service and how good the service is going to be when we don't know yet even what kind of technology is going to be used. Depending on the small providers you already spoke about in different areas—are they using optical? Are they using copper? Are they using wireless? Every technology has its ins and outs and has costs associated with it. Of course, there will be different fees for different technologies, depending on how they tailor their service.

From that level now, I don't think any government—not this government or any other government—could go down to this kind of detail into the service which will be available after we build the infrastructure. There's no guarantee of anything. I live in Mississauga–Erin Mills, about four kilometres from the CO, and I have very poor service as well—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): You almost got a question in.

The member for Timiskaming–Cochrane to respond.

Mr. John Vanthof: I really appreciate that question from the member across.

I don't think we're asking for every detail of what's provided, but you do need to have a basic idea of what—when you're promising broadband to everyone. "In 2025, all your problems are going to be over." Well, if it's very slow broadband to the people in a certain area, that's not broadband to everyone. We're not asking for all the details.

What I'm hearing is, "Well, depending on when the money runs out"—and then so many people are going to be left behind. That's what I just heard, because I live in an area where people are always left behind.

What I want, what we need is, "This is our minimum level of service for a non-wired area," and we don't see that.

We instinctively know that when you're far away from Mississauga, you're going to be forgotten when this program is over.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We really don't have time, with 20 seconds left, for a question and response, but we do have time for further debate.

Mr. Mike Harris: Before I kick things off here—I wanted to ask a question to the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane, but I'll just phrase it as more of a statement, since I can't ask him a question directly here.

In my more prepared remarks here, I'm going to talk a little bit about some of the benefit that actually already has happened. Granted, it may not be in northern Ontario. But don't forget about southwestern Ontario. I think sometimes it gets overlooked as well, when we're talking about—everything has become very GTA-centric over the last little while. Part of this investment has come to fruition in southwestern Ontario, so I want to thank the Minister of Infrastructure for actually getting homes connected—not just in the future, until 2025, but already connected, in 2022.

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It is really exciting for me to be able to get up and speak to this bit of legislation today, because it is something that I hear about quite a bit in my community. It has become a lot harder, obviously, over the last little while for people to get connected in what is now a pretty digital age, when we've seen what has happened through the pandemic. It has really forced families to pivot, whether that be through their business or whether it be through online learning, or just a lot of the day-to-day activity that takes place online now. Quite frankly, like I said, even in southwestern Ontario, there are still areas that just don't have access to sustainable Internet.

I did want to thank the minister. Obviously, yesterday being International Women's Day—or earlier this week; sorry, Mr. Speaker—it's so great to have so many strong women in leadership roles in this House, including our Minister of Infrastructure. I wanted to congratulate her on putting this bill forward. It's something that's really going to touch people's lives. When we look at everybody around this Legislature and how it's made up, it's really great to see so many strong women leading the way here

in the province of Ontario. So once again, thank you to the minister for introducing this bill.

We'll get into the nuts and bolts of it a little bit here, but really the premise is to bring reliable high-speed Internet to underserved and, quite frankly, unserved communities across Ontario sooner. It's no secret that Ontario is a huge province—and I've had the pleasure of travelling quite a bit of it. It really would take a lifetime to cover all that ground, whether that be us being able to get out and travel the province, or delivering broadband to the province. It's such a large land mass that it can take a while to get things going, and that's why this bill is so important.

We need to really make sure that we get these services to people as soon as we can, so through Bill 93, our government is investing nearly \$4 billion to ensure all communities in Ontario have access to reliable high-speed Internet services by the end of 2025. If passed, this bill would implement changes that would remove barriers and duplications and prevent delays. I think that's really the key when we talk about what's happening with this bill—preventing delays.

Bill 93 will make it easier and faster to build high-speed Internet infrastructure across the province. I know we've already talked a little bit about that today.

Making life easier and more connected and accessible for Ontarians has been at the core of our mandate since we took office, and we're doing just that by investing \$900 million in more than 180 broadband cellular and satellite projects across this province. The Getting Ontario Connected Act would empower our Internet service providers to get shovels in the ground as early as this summer, and that's great news for communities across Ontario.

One more technical note on Bill 93 is, it would also improve Ontario's one-call process of determining the location of ground infrastructure such as telecommunication lines, water mains and gas pipelines. For anyone unfamiliar with Ontario One Call—this is a non-profit organization that acts as a communications link between buried infrastructure owners and operators and individuals who are planning to dig anywhere in the province of Ontario. If I'm not mistaken, I believe it was the member from Sarnia-Lambton, through a private member's bill, who actually got this act to come into law here in Ontario. Since 2012, the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, which was that bill, stipulates that, by law, anyone in the province of Ontario must contact Ontario One Call before they dig. I think many of us in this House have probably had an instance where we've had to call them; maybe we're doing some renovations at home, or maybe we're out on the job site. I worked construction for a few summers when I was younger, and often we would have to interact with Ontario One Call to have them come and check for gas lines, water lines etc. Whether you're a homeowner putting in a pool or a municipality upgrading your sewers, you do have to go through Ontario One Call to ensure that you don't damage or sever any existing infrastructure in place when you're planning to dig. I know from first-hand experience

that sometimes this process can cause delays, so I'm glad Bill 93 aims to improve the process and speed things up for Internet service providers when they're looking to go out and build this infrastructure.

Bill 93 also builds on the progress our government has already made as part of our plan to get Ontario connected. This includes, as I said before, an investment of nearly \$4 billion to provide people and businesses across the province with access to high-speed, reliable Internet.

As I said, Bill 93 builds on previous legislation which our government has already enacted to help speed up the construction of infrastructure projects. I'm referring to the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, 2021, as well as the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021.

In addition, as outlined previously in our Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review—which I will just call the “fiscal review,” rather than calling it by its long title every time—our government has a plan that lays the foundation for economic recovery and prosperity by getting shovels in the ground on critical infrastructure. As part of the fiscal review, our government is prioritizing reliable, high-speed Internet access to all corners of the province by, as I said, the end of 2025.

Speaker, I feel it's also important to note that since July 2019 our government has allocated, as I said, nearly \$4 billion to bring that access to people here in the province in an expedient manner. This represents the single largest investment in high-speed Internet in any province, by any government in Canadian history. To date, we have successfully committed over \$900 million to over 180 broadband cellular and satellite projects. As a result, reliable and faster Internet became available to 375,000 homes and businesses across the province, while significantly improving cellular connectivity through eastern Ontario.

Hon. Nina Tangri: That's a lot of people.

Mr. Mike Harris: That's a lot of people.

Speaker, we've been working hard to fulfill our promise on this issue. In September 2021, we launched a procurement process wherein Internet service providers bid for lots in order to supply high-speed Internet services to designated areas across the province. I understand that this process of procurement is well under way, and I believe the minister was mentioning that earlier, speaking about the reverse auctions. I understand that we're looking forward to hearing the results of those auctions, hopefully in the coming months. I think they're actually set to close very shortly.

I've mentioned projects and funding on a province-wide scale, but I wanted to shine a spotlight on my little corner of Ontario for a little bit, southwestern Ontario, and talk about some of the successful Internet and broadband projects already announced and some that are under way.

Our government has committed more than \$63 million to the \$255-million SWIFT project, the Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology project. SWIFT has moved forward with projects in several counties, which will help connect thousands of households and businesses. All projects are expected to be completed by June 2023. In total, 89 contracts have already been awarded to 19—and

I think this is key. This is one of the things I believe the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane was talking about earlier—not just having the large-scale providers. This is 19 different service providers that have successfully been contracted to build broadband technology in these unserved and underserved areas of southwestern Ontario. This investment is expected to expand access to—and the Associate Minister of Small Business and Red Tape Reduction made a good point earlier about the amount of people that is going to touch. This is 58,000 unserved and underserved homes and businesses in southwestern Ontario. By leveraging the private sector and municipal funding support, an additional 5,000 homes and businesses will be reached through SWIFT's efforts, for a total of over 63,000 premises reached. That is going to make a significant difference to households and businesses across southwestern Ontario.

Waterloo region, which is an interesting mix of urban, rural and, of course, agriculture, has also benefited from our government's action and investment in infrastructure. We have invested almost \$12 million in over a dozen towns and townships in and around Waterloo region, which include New Hamburg, Linwood and Wellesley in my riding, positively affecting almost 2,000 households. We've also invested another \$4 million in another 13 towns and townships, which include, of course—this is through a different project—Wellesley, St. Clements, Elmira, St. Agatha, also in my riding, which is providing access to another 752 households.

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We've been working hard with stakeholders and municipalities to be as transparent as possible about our plans to make good on our promise to advance high-speed Internet projects, and through our extensive work on engagement and our other tools like our broadband guidelines, we're confident that the sector knows what is needed to help Ontario achieve its goal of bringing high-speed Internet to everyone in the province by 2025.

Speaker, our success with critical infrastructure isn't limited to broadband Internet. To support economic recovery while assisting municipalities, our government has provided funding through the Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund to help municipalities address their critical infrastructure project needs, including roads, bridges, waste water treatment sites and municipal water and sewer systems. We're providing an additional investment of \$1 billion over the next five years, starting in 2021-22, to provide these municipalities with certain and predictable funding for their key infrastructure projects. As part of this increase, municipalities receiving the lowest amount of funding can now expect to see their minimum increase from \$50,000, doubling to \$100,000.

The OCIF is already positively impacting the residents of Kitchener–Conestoga. Just last year, the Ontario government announced a total of almost \$4 million to help build and repair local infrastructure in the townships of Wellesley, Wilmot and Woolwich. That investment is part of the government's larger plan to build Ontario by getting shovels in the ground on critical infrastructure projects that support economic recovery, growth and job creation.

That's just one example of smart and targeted local investments that will make huge impacts in municipalities and rural communities across the province.

Removing obstacles to modernization for small towns and remote communities is just one way the Ontario government is supporting Canadians—or supporting Ontarians, and I guess Canadians by proxy, too.

Whenever possible, we want to maximize on possibilities to further provide municipalities with certainty and predictability for their critical infrastructure projects. We are calling on the federal government to provide an additional \$10 billion over the next decade to support these municipalities as they grow and thrive. We remain focused and committed to ensuring that funding is targeted where it is needed most, because these communities contribute so much to the province's economy and, given the uncertain times of the last couple of years, the economic recovery.

Our government never hesitated to invest where investment is required to bring about positive change and support for Ontarians.

Our province is investing over \$148 billion, including \$17.2 billion in 2021-22, towards public infrastructure over the next decade to support recovery and growth of our provincial economy. This includes investments in projects under the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program, which represents up to \$30 billion in combined federal, provincial and partner funding.

This underscores another important point worth noting. We have consistently worked with our partners at every level of government to deliver results for Ontarians. As I've said before, we are always eager to work with our federal and municipal partners to support Ontario's economic growth and prosperity.

Since January 2022 of this year, we have successfully announced over \$6.9 billion in funding towards key infrastructure projects under all program streams of ICIP. Our government is investing in larger strategic community infrastructure projects as well, such as sports and recreation facilities, through the Strategic Priorities and Infrastructure Fund. This investment will provide roughly \$200 million in provincial infrastructure funding for new builds and the expansion of community, culture and recreational infrastructure. There are two substreams under the SPIF as well: the priority local infrastructure stream, which supports new builds and renovations of larger, multi-purpose facilities for community, culture and recreation purposes, and of course the sport and community renewal stream, which provides funding to support the renovation and rehabilitation of sport and community infrastructure. I'm extremely pleased to say that, to date, eight projects have been selected for the PLI substream while 10 projects have been selected for the SCR stream.

I'm sure everyone is feeling relieved, of course, with the gradual lifting of mandates and people getting back to a sense of normalcy, but it's no secret that the last two years have greatly impacted how we live our lives. The global pandemic has emphasized the importance of high-

speed Internet connectivity across our communities. From offices and classrooms to living rooms and dining rooms in our homes across Ontario, countless families and businesses have had to pivot on a dime to continue to keep services available. That includes in our house. Can you imagine having five kids trying to use up your bandwidth at home while, as an MPP, you're still trying to have meetings with constituents and stakeholders? It really put a strain on the system in our house, too. That's even in urban Kitchener, so imagine what it was like for families in more rural areas.

The availability of Internet remains a critical element as we move forward together as a province. Our government is responding to ensure Ontario's economic resilience and flexibility remain steady in the face of any future crisis that may arise. That means we absolutely need to build better infrastructure, and we need to build it faster. We need to strengthen our communities and lay the foundation for growth, renewal and long-term economic recovery, but we can't do that without addressing the barriers to getting shovels in the ground faster on these much-needed infrastructure projects. Too often, it takes much too long, due to delays with municipal permits and getting the necessary information about the location of underground infrastructure, such as telecommunication lines, gas lines or water pipes.

That is exactly why our government, under the leadership of the Premier and the Minister of Infrastructure, has brought forward this great bill. As I have said, Bill 93, the Getting Ontario Connected Act, will help make it much easier to construct high-speed Internet infrastructure across the province. I believe that, right now, this legislation couldn't be more crucial.

We've already made the necessary investments and, as I've mentioned earlier, this legislation would build on the progress that the government has already made as part of its plan to get Ontario connected. We've been working hard to ensure that everyone, no matter where they live, can take part and thrive in our increasingly digital world.

I know some people still prefer an in-person experience. There will always be storefronts and main street businesses, but those businesses and their clients should always have the choice if they want to be able to take their business online. That option should be there for them, and the infrastructure should be there to support them.

Speaker, I'd be more than happy to go on and on about the many merits of Bill 93, but in the interest of time, I just want to summarize my thoughts and say this: I myself, and most of the members here, grew up in a world without the Internet. Now it's everywhere. My kids are using it to learn and socialize, and we are using it to conduct our business here in the Ontario Legislature. The world has never been more connected than it is now. So it's here to stay.

I appreciate so much that Bill 93 will accomplish so much more for the people of Ontario. I fully support this legislation. I don't think it could come at a better time.

Thank you, everyone, for your attention here this afternoon as we've been moving through the debate. I'm looking forward to hearing the questions and comments.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The first member to pose a question to you is the member from London North Centre.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I'd like to thank the member from Kitchener–Conestoga for his presentation.

When you discussed southwestern Ontario, my mind went immediately to the deputy mayor of Thames Centre, Kelly Elliott, who has been a strong and vocal advocate for rural broadband access. She will often talk about having to drive into town to partake in the many virtual meetings she gets in, and also all the organizations she supports.

You talked a lot about merits, but what we'd really like from you are some specifics here. Our infrastructure critic with the NDP has asked Infrastructure Ontario and the minister about specifics regarding this \$4-billion project. It's massive. The opposition has even filed a freedom-of-information request, but all records have been denied to us.

Why are all the specifics about an important and massive project like this being kept from the public? Where is the transparency?

Mr. Mike Harris: Thank you very much to the member from London North Centre. I have to say, I'm enjoying the beard. I think it's a good look. I think you should keep it—not to get sidetracked.

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You're very right, and this is one thing that I've heard multiple times from constituents—having to drive to the local McDonald's or the local Tim Hortons just to be able to get WiFi for their kid to be able to partake in online schooling, or whether it was to attend a business meeting through the pandemic. It has certainly become a challenge. Like I said, southwestern Ontario often gets forgotten in a lot these conversations. Speaker, you'll know full well, too, from being from that neck of the woods.

So there's a lot to do here, obviously. We can't really comment on the specifics of how the auction is going; we don't want to influence anything. But as this program rolls out over the next few months, there will certainly be a lot more information available to you.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member from Mississauga–Lakeshore has a question.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: My question is for the member from Kitchener–Conestoga.

A lot of local municipalities are eager to work with the province to ensure households and businesses in their communities have access to reliable high-speed Internet. With our goal of bringing high-speed Internet to every corner of the province by the end of 2025, I know some municipalities have expressed their concerns that timelines won't be met and their communities won't reap the benefits of these initiatives.

Can the member please explain the resources our government is providing to municipalities to ensure that we do meet these goals?

Mr. Mike Harris: That's another great question. I hope we get a lot of great questions in questions and comments today.

This is one of the things I think this bill really addresses, because when you look at one of the most common of these things being slowed down—quite frankly, it's getting some of these companies that work with Ontario One Call to actually come out and do the scanning, checking for the underground infrastructure. This bill is going to put tools in place that are going to allow municipalities to be able to expedite some of those services and just, quite plainly, get shovels in the ground faster.

I know the municipalities that we work with with SWIFT, as I mentioned earlier in my remarks, are quite eager and ready and have contracts signed to be able to get fibre in the ground.

There are a couple of other things in this bill that are great in regard to timelines for our electrical distribution companies to allow piggybacking on some of the poles and their infrastructure as well—so being able to expedite things, move things along faster. I know municipalities are really looking forward to it.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member from St. Catharines has a question.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: I want to thank the member from Kitchener–Conestoga for his input on this bill.

We're talking about broadband and talking about an important issue here today this afternoon, particularly for the northern communities. Yet I have not seen “rural” mentioned at all in this bill, nor have I seen this government move enough on important issues that affect all communities, especially in Niagara.

Why are we not tackling housing affordability, which is significantly worse today than when you formed government? This government has not done anything to get rent under control or support first-time homebuyers to compete in this market. Do you feel any responsibility in that outcome?

Mr. Mike Harris: Thank you very much to the member for St. Catharines for the question.

We're all collectively responsible for everything that we do here in the Legislature, and that includes the NDP, who have consistently voted against our Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing—I believe we're going to hear from him a little later on this subject today as well. They have consistently voted against the measures that he and this government have put forward to get things like housing under control. I haven't heard anybody say that they're going to vote for this bill yet on the other side of the House, which is going to make broadband access there—not just for people in rural Ontario or northern Ontario, but there are people on the edges of urban boundaries that don't have strong, reliable Internet.

Absolutely, we have a collective responsibility in this House to do the best that we can for the people of Ontario, and I know that our government is doing that.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question goes to the member from Scarborough–Rouge Park.

Mr. Vijay Thanigasalam: My question to the member from Kitchener–Conestoga is regarding how strong, reliable Internet would support small business owners.

As we know, everyone wants a faster and better Internet connection across Ontario. However, this also impacts the betterment of the start-up industries and small business owners. As we've seen during the pandemic, technology has accelerated at least five to 10 years, and there are a lot of e-commerce and other small businesses that have been started in the last two years.

How does faster and better Internet connectivity throughout Ontario help the new business owners and other business owners in his riding?

Mr. Mike Harris: Thank you to my good friend from Scarborough–Rouge Park for bringing that up.

Just plain and simply, it's a game changer. If we want to talk about rural and northern homes and businesses for a minute here—we'll appease the member from St. Catharines—the people I talked to who own farms in my riding, this is something they have been asking for for a long time.

When you look at how the world is interconnected nowadays—you think of a farm being a simple place, but you can run your chicken barn, you can run your dairy barn, you can run your milkers, you can run the air conditioning that we have in barns now or the heat all off your phone, which is incredible. Times have changed. It's not as if you have to just walk out, turn the lights on and do everything by hand anymore.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): You'll run out of time in 10 seconds.

Mr. Mike Harris: All right.

Being able to have this type of broadband infrastructure is a game changer for businesses across this province.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member from Niagara Falls has the final question.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Two things: One, there's no mention of “rural” in this bill at all. On the housing—all I can tell you is that you've had a majority government for four years. In Niagara, housing was \$331,000 four years ago; that same house today is \$731,000. So let's just call that where it is.

On this here: You talk about investment, but I'd like to know, in the budget—in 2020-21, you cut the rural broadband budget by \$207 million. It's interesting that you only spent 0.06% of that reduced budget. The Ford government spent 1.37% of its \$45.7-billion broadband infrastructure budget from 2021. And this is even worse: All under your watch, with a majority government, you spent zero—I'll say that again, zero—of the \$31.8-million broadband budget in 2019-20.

The last point I'd going to make: Why did your government not spend the allocated money in the last three years?

Mr. Mike Harris: There's a lot to unpack there. But I will say this: The member from Niagara Falls has sat in this Legislature for a few terms now—maybe too long, as some would say. He had the opportunity to vote for, as I said, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing's bills that have been brought forward to help reduce home prices here in Ontario and boost supply. He had an opportunity

to vote against failed Liberal policies and ideologies. But no, he decided that he wanted to walk with them hand in hand.

So we won't be taking lessons from them. We will be passing this bill, I hope, and getting shovels in the ground faster to bring broadband infrastructure to the people of this province who need it.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Further debate?

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Order, please. Thank you very much.

Further debate?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I am pleased to rise today to participate in the debate on Bill 93, the Getting Ontario Connected Act, as the member for London West.

Certainly, there are, as all of us who represent urban ridings will be aware, pockets across the province, even in urban areas, where Internet connectivity isn't available or the speeds are too slow to be reliable. However, I am going to focus the majority of my remarks today on the rural and small communities outside of London, and in particular, southwestern Ontario.

1500

Bill 93, the Getting Ontario Connected Act, is really amendments to the government's earlier Building Broadband Faster Act, so it's a straightforward bill with two schedules. It makes some technical tweaks to that earlier bill, the Building Broadband Faster Act. It defines a "Broadband One Window platform," which is a digital platform run by the Ministry of Infrastructure. It sets some new requirements for municipalities to issue permits for municipal service or right-of-way access, with some time-line requirements for municipalities: 10 business days to respond to right-of-way permit applications with distances of up to 30 kilometres and 15 business days to respond to permit applications with distances of 30 kilometres or more. It enables the minister to receive data from municipalities, hydro or gas companies and other owners and operators of underground infrastructure. That's all in schedule 1.

Schedule 2 strengthens the governance of Ontario One Call, which we know is the private corporation that was established to act as a centralized communications hub between excavators and the owners of underground infrastructure like water mains, hydro wires, telecommunication cables, natural gas infrastructure etc. There are a number of governance changes around the composition of the board, the requirement to publish prescribed information, and then there are some monetary fines included for failure to comply with the act.

With that overview, Speaker, I wanted to begin by commenting on this significant investment that the government has announced, this \$4 billion for the Ontario Connects program. Certainly, \$4 billion is a big number, Speaker. That is a big number, but that is the kind of investment that is needed in order to address the connectivity challenges

that, in particular, our small, rural and northern communities face in this province.

But the question is not the size of the number. The question is, will those dollars actually be invested, and how will they be invested? Quite frankly, this government does not have the best track record on investing dollars in broadband infrastructure. We know that, in 2019, there was \$31.8 million allocated for rural broadband infrastructure, but in his review of the 2019 budget, the Financial Accountability Officer pointed out that not a single dollar was actually invested in rural broadband. In the 2020 Conservative budget, there was a \$45.7-million budget allocated for broadband infrastructure, and the FAO revealed that 1.37% of that budget was spent in that budget year.

Speaker, what we know so far in 2022 is that this pattern of the Conservatives being all talk and no action has been repeated. There was another report from the Financial Accountability Officer earlier this month that showed that the Ford government had been sitting on \$5.5 billion in spending that was committed to health care and other vital services in this province. But that \$5.5 billion that the government was sitting on included, once again, the money that had been allocated for broadband expansion, and the FAO report on Q3 expenditures revealed that the Ford government made an in-year cut to the broadband expansion budget, reducing it by more than half, reducing it by \$2.7 million. The FAO also revealed that, so far, the Ford government has spent only 0.6% of the remaining budget. You're not going to be able to expand broadband throughout the province and meet the government's ambitious goal if you are not prepared to spend the dollars that you have allocated to do that. That's the first point I wanted to make about the government's legislation and the related Ontario Connects project.

The second point I wanted to highlight, and this was raised by my colleague the member for Timiskaming-Cochrane, is that this bill, unlike the earlier bill, unlike—was it Bill 247? 274—the government's initial Building Broadband Faster Act, does not include a poison pill. And that poison pill, as my colleague pointed out, was the expansion of the minister's ability to issue ministerial zoning orders, or MZOs, to the detriment of the provincial ability to maintain protected farmland, wetlands and other environmentally sensitive areas in the province.

It's interesting, Speaker, that the Ontario Federation of Agriculture has long identified the need for broadband expansion as essential, as a necessity, in our modern world. The OFA emphasizes the need for farmers in this province to have speed, reliability and bandwidth so that they can be competitive in a digital world, because the reality is that farming has become very much reliant on technology. The OFA just recently conducted a survey where 62% of the respondents said Internet outages are causing an inability to conduct normal business activities, which impacts productivity and profitability. This survey was a repeat of a survey that had been done in 2015—so five years prior—and they noted that the number of

farmers who require stable Internet to run their business had more than doubled over the period. So we are seeing the agricultural community more and more reliant on access to broadband infrastructure.

It was very unfortunate back in 2021 when the government brought in—it was Bill 257, the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, which included schedule 3 around the MZOs. As a result, it's not only the official opposition that was unable to support that bill, but the Ontario Federation of Labour was unable to support that bill. They urged the removal of schedule 3 from Bill 257 because they recognized the harm that those expanded MZOs would cause to protected farmland in the province. So it is refreshing and a welcome change to see this update to the Building Broadband Faster Act that does not include a similar poison pill.

I now want to talk about southwestern Ontario. There are almost 500,000 residents across southwestern Ontario who do not have access to reliable broadband services. The member from Kitchener–Conestoga had talked about SWIFT, and I also want to reference SWIFT in my remarks. SWIFT has been an incredible advocate for expanding broadband services in southwestern Ontario. It was formed in 2011. I think there are 20 upper-tier municipalities across southwestern Ontario, 126 lower-tier municipalities, and SWIFT is owned by that network of municipalities in the southwestern Ontario region. Since it was formed, it has undertaken 95 projects. It has contracted with 19 different ISPs, 80% of which are small and medium ISPs, so it has been very important to SWIFT that the contracts are available to ISPs of many different sizes. They have made a \$268-million investment in broadband improvements and have connected 63,000 households and businesses throughout the region.

1510

I do have to acknowledge that they are also, very importantly, overseeing fibre optic projects in a number of First Nations communities: Delaware Nation Moravian of the Thames, Chippewas of Kettle and Stony Point First Nation, Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation and Six Nations of the Grand River. Those are some of the First Nations communities that SWIFT has undertaken projects in.

SWIFT is very highly regarded, I would say, by municipal leaders across southwestern Ontario. The Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus notes that SWIFT is the only broadband program in the region that has proven to be most both effective and efficient.

I was able to have a conversation with Kelly Elliott, who is the deputy mayor of Thames Centre. She's a councillor on Middlesex county council, and she is a director at the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. She told me that she believes SWIFT's success is in large part due to the fact that they have taken the politics out of these decisions. I asked her what she thought about Bill 93, and one of the reservations, one of the questions, that she raised is, what will be the role of SWIFT? How will Bill 93 and Ontario Connects affect SWIFT's ability to continue to leverage the funding it has leveraged? Again,

like so many people have pointed out, she also emphasized the need to ensure that those last-mile connections are undertaken, and those are the connections, as my colleague said in his lead, that oftentimes are the least profitable for ISPs. So that raises some concerns about a process that relies on for-profit companies to make those vital last-mile connections.

I was also able, helpfully, to talk to Barry Field, who is the executive director of SWIFT, today, to get some of his comments about the bill. One of the things he pointed out is that the requirement to have municipal permits issued in 10 days in some cases and 15 days in other cases may be quite challenging for some of those very, very small 126 lower-tier municipalities that are part of the SWIFT network. Some of them have only a single staff person who is already doing everything for that small municipality, and the process of issuing permits can be time-consuming. So there has to be some recognition of the financial burden that this would create on the very, very small municipalities in terms of their capacity and also their resources to meet those aggressive timelines. I hope that this government will ensure that funding is available to municipalities to get the resources and increase their capacity to be able to meet those timelines.

I also wanted to share some of the comments from Middlesex county. As I said, Kelly Elliott is a councillor in Middlesex county. During COVID, when municipal councils went online in order to avoid in-person meetings, Kelly was one of the many rural municipal leaders who ended up having to go to the McDonald's—well, I don't think she went to McDonald's, but she had to leave her home in order to find a signal so that she could participate in council meetings.

Kelly also has been a strong advocate for rural education and pointed out the difficulty for her kids during all of those days of online schooling. We know that Ontario schools were closed longer than in any other province, so children like Kelly's kids, who live in Thames Centre, a smaller community outside London, were really challenged because of the lack of reliable and fast Internet service.

One of the points that she made to me, which I think is really helpful and I hope the government will consider, is the importance of making better use of existing infrastructure. She noted that school boards are using public dollars to pay for fibre to rural schools, but residents aren't able to connect to that fibre. She really emphasized the value in knowing where this infrastructure exists. One of the challenges is that the county can map its infrastructure out—we know where the school infrastructure is—but big companies like Bell are not forthcoming in where their cables are located. Also, she gave me the example of Bell trucks that were there installing fibre on the road. The fibre was apparently designated for future use, so any residents of the road were unable to connect to that fibre.

I want to talk a little bit about Elgin county. Only 53% of properties in Elgin county are considered fully served using the CRTC definition of 50/10. In some rural municipalities it's as low as 22% of premises and businesses that are served. Elgin county has a "Connected

Elgin” committee that has conducted very useful research to understand the connectivity challenges that people who live in Elgin county face, and has made a commitment to addressing the availability of Internet access in the county. They have really highlighted the fact that affordable connectivity is critical for users to be able to use Internet services, and then speed, again, and then awareness among residents, so that residents can make good decisions when they are selecting an Internet provider.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for questions. The member for—it’s coming—

Mr. Michael Parsa: Don Valley North.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Don Valley North. I’m sorry, Vincent.

Mr. Vincent Ke: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to member for London West for her presentation. During the pandemic, for almost two years, students of all ages turned to their computers to connect with their friends and classmates, access their learning material and complete their studies online. As schools closed their doors to stop the spread of the virus, parents around the province were faced with a new learning challenge: access to a reliable Internet connection, so limited to no access to this essential service in parts of the province. Especially for those in small, rural and remote communities, students struggled to participate in digital learning and often were faced with difficulties when trying to connect with their Zoom call.

1520

Speaker, my question is simple: Will the member from London West support this important bill?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: The member talked about students being forced to learn online during the pandemic, but I want to point out that this has always been an issue for students in small and rural communities.

I remember when I first got to the school board, one of our school board trustees, the trustee for Middlesex county, was unable to access any of the school board documents online because she didn’t have any Internet access at her home. Students in Middlesex county, Elgin county and Oxford county have historically struggled to be able to do research projects, to use Google Docs, to use Zoom, to watch videos, to listen to audio books. These have always been challenges in our small and rural communities.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for St. Catharines has a question.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Thank you to my colleague from London West for her comments in this debate.

Broadband is an important matter to so many communities, because it speaks directly to access to so many markets. I look at the name of this bill, Bill 93, Getting Ontario Connected Act, and I cannot help but notice the missing word: rural.

So \$4 billion sounds like a lot—and I hope that the missing word, “rural,” is not just another oversight from this government. I hope this critical service will be going to all farms and families in northern places, every last mile

and every last inch, including rural areas, to get all and everything out of getting Ontario connected.

The question I have is: The cost is detrimental to communities without sufficient broadband. What does the member from London West see missing in this legislation to support every inch and every mile of northern Ontario?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I really appreciate the question because I can answer with something that I wasn’t able to address in my remarks, and that is transparency.

We know we have this bill, we know that we have the Ontario Connects program, but we have no transparency over the IO procurement process that is going to be undertaken. That will be essential to really understanding whether the procurement process is going to address the needs of small and rural communities.

If the lots that are included in those RFPs are too large, it’s not going to enable small- and medium-sized ISPs to bid on those contracts. And as I said in my remarks, the most profitable projects are those in urban communities, and that has excluded small communities historically.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Mississauga–Malton.

Mr. Deepak Anand: For far too long, northern Ontario communities have suffered from a lack of reliable Internet services. For the last 15 years, if we want to take an account—in fact, from 2007-18, the previous government invested less than \$530 million in broadband infrastructure, only \$530 million.

What I want to talk about is that our government has actively shown that we’re getting shovels in the ground for many of these projects, with areas already connected to better phone and Internet services, including areas in the north. My question to the member from London West is, can you please advise: Are you going to support this important infrastructure? And can you please explain why your party actively votes against legislation that would connect the people of Ontario, to support the services they need?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: If the member had listened to my remarks, he would have heard the concerns I raised about Bill 257, the Building Broadband Faster Act, and its unprecedented expansion of the minister’s power to issue MZOs and the concerns that were expressed by the Ontario Federation of Agriculture and by environmental groups across the province about the impact of this expanded power.

Speaker, we support broadband expansion. It’s been something that my colleague the member for Timiskaming–Cochrane has long called for in this House. But the real issue is committing the money. Saying that you’re going to spend that \$4 billion is a lot different than actually spending it. We need to see how those dollars are going to flow and that they flow.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Niagara Falls.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I just want to start by talking about something; I might not get a chance to talk again today: How important the Internet has been for the Ukrainian people on letting the world know what’s going on over in

Ukraine. It's awful, and I want to send our hearts and our prayers, because we're not here for the next 10, 11 days, to all the Ukrainians. I hope that everybody can support them any way they can.

There are a couple of things I'm concerned about in here. The private company in schedule 2: It talks about strengthening the powers of Ontario One Call, which is always concerning to me, giving more power to a private company. But it also says that government changes include the minister's power to appoint a minority of board members.

My question to you is pretty easy to answer: Do you think that private companies should get more powers, and do you think that the minister should have the power to appoint people to their boards?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: That is an interesting question. Certainly, we have seen, using the example once again of the MZO's, that when ministers have more power, with the experience of this Ford government, it has rarely, if ever, been used in the public interest. And so, when we see legislation that expands ministerial power, it does always raise questions and concerns about how that is going to impact the public and will this new power be exercised in the public good. I appreciate the question, and I think it is a legitimate concern.

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

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: Having a high-speed Internet connection is a basic necessity of all Ontarians, and this pandemic has highlighted the importance of having this basic necessity because our families were relying on a high-speed Internet connection. Our businesses were relying on a high-speed Internet connection. Our education system, our health care system were relying on a high-speed Internet connection.

The opposition have always voted no against these critical infrastructure projects. So my question to the member opposite is: We are investing one of the unprecedented investments by any province, any government in the history of Canada, to make sure that all Ontarians will have access to high-speed Internet by 2025. Will the member opposite and their team support this bill?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Let's find out. Back to the member from London West.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Once again, I have to point out that saying you're going to spend \$4 billion is a lot different than actually spending \$4 billion.

I want to remind the member of their track record in actually getting funds for broadband expansion out the door. In 2019, not a single penny was spent from the allocated \$31 million for broadband expansion. In 2020, only 1.37% of the allocated budget was spent. This year, we have seen that the government has spent so far only 0.6% of the budget, and that budget was cut in half. There was a \$207-million cut to the allocated budget.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate? Who in rotation is next? Okay. I recognize the member for Orléans.

1530

Mr. Stephen Blais: It's a pleasure to be speaking to Bill 93 this afternoon, the Getting Ontario Connected Act. I think it's important to note that this is an amendment to the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021, which is less than—what?—six months old, I think, give or take. To be amending an act so quickly after it was first passed, I think, tells you that perhaps the government didn't pay proper attention to the first bill in the first place.

Now, Ontario's infrastructure needs are not limited to highways, bridges and community centres, as we all know. The lack of access to reliable Internet connectivity has hindered the ability of rural Ontarians to work and learn from home during these last two years of COVID-19. It's hindered economic growth and the ability for businesses big and small to undertake commercial activities in many rural and remote communities, including in Ottawa and eastern Ontario.

COVID-19 has taught us many lessons about both the resilience and the weaknesses in our economy, and broadband access, or the lack thereof, is both a weakness and part of what makes Ontario so resilient. In areas of the province with fast, reliable broadband, many have been able to continue and even expand their business operations. Children have been able to learn from home. But for too many across too many communities, this hasn't been the case.

In the 21st century, I think we can all agree that access to broadband connectivity is as important as access to running water, Mr. Speaker. Access to high-speed Internet and broadband should be made easily accessible and affordable for all Ontarians. Now, nearly 40% of residents in eastern Ontario don't have access to 50 megabits per second download or 10 megabits per second upload speeds. These are the minimum basic service levels recommended by the CRTC to be implemented by the end of 2021.

Of course, we're in 2022 amending the government's act from 2021, because, as others have said, they haven't been able to get the job done. They haven't been able to flow the money that they've been promising. They've been promising and promising and promising lots and lots of money, and it hasn't gone to communities, so here we are.

In the riding that I represent, in Orléans, the village of Carlsbad Springs does not have consistent, reliable and fast Internet access. Carlsbad Springs is only a 20-minute drive to Parliament Hill in our nation's capital, Mr. Speaker. Recent attempts by Rogers to expand broadband to Carlsbad through the government's ICON program were unsuccessful. Now, thankfully, the federal government was there to support Rogers and bolster high-speed in this community.

Earlier tonight, this evening, the member from Kitchener–Conestoga was talking about how south-western Ontario is sometimes forgotten and ignored in all these conversations. Well, the same is true, I think, for eastern Ontario, and so when he mentioned that, I took the opportunity to log on to this government's web tool to

show completed, works in progress and planned infrastructure. This is their GIS map to show Ontarians, to educate Ontarians about the breadth of their investments in infrastructure, both planned projects, projects that are in progress, and completed projects. It's a pretty handy tool.

So I checked it out, and I looked at the city of Ottawa. The big projects for schools and transit that we all know about were there. As I was going through the tabs, I took those all out of the filter and left broadband on the filter, Mr. Speaker. And guess what? In the city of Ottawa, a city that is geographically the largest in the province—the city of Ottawa is 2,758 square kilometres. You can fit Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Toronto and Montreal in the borders of the city of Ottawa, and you have 100 square kilometres left to spare. Think about that: The five biggest cities in the country can fit inside Ottawa and we still have 100 square kilometres left. Most of our geography is rural. So why am I talking about this? I was using that web tool to see all the great progress the government was making about expanding access to rural Ontarians in Ottawa and eastern Ontario, represented overwhelmingly by members of the governing party, and the web tool showed zero projects in the city of Ottawa.

Now, I'm open to the excuse that maybe the tool is out of date, that someone hasn't updated the spreadsheet that's feeding the tool. That's fine. Either way, it's clear that the government isn't paying attention to eastern Ontario and isn't paying attention to the tools they have developed to keep Ontario residents informed of their progress.

As I was mentioning, the city of Ottawa is geographically enormous. It's made up of, obviously, an urban area and the suburbs but, for the purposes of this conversation, it's made up of 26 villages, villages like Navan, Cumberland, Carlsbad Springs, Ashton, Osgoode, Galetta, Vernon and 19 more. Between those villages, there are tens of thousands of acres of countryside where thousands of people have homes and raise their families, and many, if not most, have unreliable or even inaccessible broadband.

I was speaking to one rural city councillor today, and he said even for those who do have broadband—and he agreed that many have some access to it—the options are so limited that they pay exorbitant prices, because there's absolutely no competition.

So within a 30-minute drive of Parliament Hill, we have thousands of Ontarians without access to broadband, and the government's own interactive map to show their investments in broadband show that there has been absolutely no investment in the city of Ottawa.

Investments in digital infrastructure and expanding broadband connectivity will play a critical role in our economic recovery, and ensuring small, rural and remote communities don't fall behind will be critical to that success. That's why we're committed to making the delivery of high-speed, affordable and reliable Internet to all Ontarians an urgent priority. Not just talking about it, not just throwing out big dollar figures, but actually on the ground, delivering it to communities right across Ontario.

If the government really cared about broadband they wouldn't have shortchanged the hard-working residents of

eastern Ontario by underfunding or ignoring the eastern Ontario gig broadband project last summer. Half the MPPs from the city of Ottawa are members of the government and most of them have rural elements in their ridings. In fact, one is almost exclusively rural, the other is about half rural. I did a quick media scan; no one mentioned anything about the failure of the government to invest in rural high-speed activity in their own city, just like they failed to be there for Ottawa during the occupation.

Let's talk about that situation very quickly. This bill would give the minister power to make appointments to the board of Ontario One Call. Well, as we've seen over the last almost four years and recently in Ottawa, the government's history of appointments is not particularly strong. We've got the chief of staff's relatives and friends, sports buddies, being appointed to all sorts of positions. We have every provincial appointee to the Ottawa Police Services Board being resigned—it was the night of the long knives in Ottawa a couple of weeks ago, Mr. Speaker. So I'm not convinced that the government needs any more appointments. I'd like to ask a member of government what the criteria for appointment to this board is going to be. Maybe I'll save that one for a little bit later in the debate.

The government hasn't told us what the criteria for the appointment to the board will be, they haven't really demonstrated that they're actively engaged in delivering high-speed in Ottawa or eastern Ontario, and their own interactive map shows there has been no investment. So there has either been no investment or they haven't bothered to get around to telling anyone that they're doing it.

With that, we really have an opportunity to help Ontarians; we have an opportunity to ensure that everyone has accessible, high-speed and affordable Internet to ensure that business continues and to ensure that kids have opportunities to learn; and, to date, the government has failed to deliver. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'm advised that the member did not indicate he was sharing his time and he has relinquished the floor. I'm sorry.

We go now to questions and answers. Do we have 10 minutes or five minutes? Five minutes of questions and answers. The member for Brampton West.

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: In 2016, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce called on the Liberal government to bring high-speed Internet services province-wide to meet the needs of residents in their day-to-day lives. With over 10 years to invest in broadband infrastructure, the Liberals dedicated less than \$530 million towards broadband infrastructure. Our government is making one of the largest investments, as I mentioned earlier, by any province, by any government in the history of Canada. We are investing \$4 billion to ensure that every household in the province of Ontario will have access to a high-speed Internet connection by 2025. Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, the federal government's commitment to connect every household is 2031, and we are taking it one step further because we

understand that our families rely on high-speed Internet connections, our businesses rely on high-speed Internet connections.

1540

Mr. Speaker, through you, would the member please explain why their government failed to support Ontarians with funding toward broadband infrastructure, despite calls from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce?

Mr. Stephen Blais: As the member rightly knows, I've never been part of a government, so my government hasn't failed to do anything. What his government has failed to do is to actually deliver on any of the announcements they've made for the last four years. They haven't delivered the biggest broadband program in the history of Canada or Ontario, or whatever it is he just said; they've made the biggest announcements. They've written the biggest fake Coroplast cheque that you get printed at the local print shop, but they haven't delivered squat. Certainly they haven't delivered anything in eastern Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Questions?

Mr. Wayne Gates: A \$4-billion investment is a lot of money on Internet. The cost of living is rising fast—6% last month in inflation. ODSP and OW rates are so low. This could be an opportunity to give free Internet access to those living on ODSP and OW. The cost of food, rent and gas is so expensive. Internet in the province of Ontario is a necessity of life.

My question is to that member, but really to the government as well: Do you believe that the Conservative government should include in Bill 93 free Internet access to those on OW and ODSP?

Mr. Stephen Blais: I'm reminded of the saying from Canada's special forces: "facta, non verba"; "deeds, not words." We have in the government a lot of words—they're big words, with big dollars associated with them—but their deeds don't match their words. And so whether it's funding for hospitals and schools during COVID; whether it's \$4 billion for Internet when they haven't delivered anything; whether it's whatever promise they're going to make tomorrow to try to win the election in 80 days, they have repeatedly demonstrated over the last four years that their deeds do not match their words, and I think on June 2 the people of Ontario are going to hold them accountable for that.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Question?

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House we believe that every Ontarian, regardless of how far north they live or how much they earn, deserves equal opportunity to access a stable Internet connection, so that they may work, learn, live and access any vital services necessary.

As I mentioned earlier, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of having a high-speed Internet connection, because this is a basic necessity of all Ontarians, a basic necessity that was denied by the previous Liberal government for far, far too long. Having said that, could the member opposite please tell us why they continue to deny Ontarians the opportunities they need to grow?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Orléans, briefly.

Mr. Stephen Blais: I think the member should be asking his Premier that. He is on the government side of the House. His government has been there for four years. They've made many announcements. This isn't your first piece of high-speed Internet legislation, and so if there are still Ontarians who are denied access to high-speed Internet, he should bring it up at the caucus meeting next week. That's really where it is: They talk a big game, they make lots of announcements, but at the end of the day, they repeatedly fail to deliver.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate—in rotation? The next speaker, then, will be the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Hon. Steve Clark: Thanks very much, Speaker. Good afternoon. I'm glad to see you in the chair. It's always great to see you here for afternoon debate.

I'm really happy that I get a chance to speak on Bill 93, the Getting Ontario Connected Act. This is something that I'm very interested in, not just as Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, but also as the MPP for Leeds–Grenville–Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes. Since I was first elected in 2010—and my anniversary was last Friday; 12 years in the Legislative Assembly. I'm proud to have served the constituents for that long. I hope to get a couple more in, if everything goes well in June.

I wanted to be here this afternoon to talk about the importance of this bill. Regardless of what the opposition parties say, this isn't like housing policy, where they vote against all the time. I think they're going to cause some questions, but I doubt seriously—just like on the minister's Bill 84, the Fewer Fees, Better Services Act. They did the same song and dance during that bill. They raised a few concerns, but when push came to shove, they stood in their place and voted in favour of this. I'm convinced that when it comes to broadband expansion in Ontario, the opposition parties, regardless of what they say in the House this afternoon, are going to stand and support the bill.

Speaker, a lot of people know that I started my career at 22 as a mayor, but a lot of people don't know what was the gap between the time that I got out of office and the time I started to work for my predecessor, Bob Runciman, as his EA—I'll talk a little bit about a program that took place when I worked for Bob—and then when I became a CAO, and then ultimately when I became an MPP. There were 14 years in there where I worked for the Brockville Recorder and Times, our daily newspaper. My wife was a reporter for 25 years. I was there for 14. I had various positions. I started with a weekly newspaper that we had bought, called the Sunday Advantage, which then migrated into being the flyer wrap.

We decided in the mid-1990s to move away from the weekly newspaper. We decided to take the resources that we spent on that newspaper in the mid-1990s and we started our own Internet company. It was an extremely interesting time, in the mid-1990s, to be involved in that. Our company name, Speaker, was called RipNET. We had

a big shark as our logo. We were going to cut through in terms of speed. That was really something that I learned early on, as somebody who didn't have a technology background but was hired to be on the sales side, because there was a lot of competition then. It became very obvious in the world of dial-up in the mid-1990s that speed was the most important thing. I'm going to go back to—some people in this room are going to know this. Obviously, some of my kids might think I'm talking a foreign language, but at the time, the dial-up business was quite competitive, and it was all about speed. Many providers in the mid-1990s started with a basic speed modem, a 14.4 or a 28.8 modem. We were above the curve. And that's what I found in this business, that you always want to build above the curve because things change so much. People's usage changed. The type of pages and the type of use that they had on the Internet changed dramatically.

We cultivated a pretty good business, Speaker, before being purchased by Xplornet, of providing quality customer service and, associated with the newspaper, providing online content—which, again, was something new. People had to pay for a newspaper, and this concept of putting part of your newspaper online for free, at the time in the mid-1990s, was a real foreign concept. There was some pushback within the newspaper industry about wanting to make sure that there was pay-for content as well. I think we all know now, with some of the payroll tries that some newspapers have—I think they've really nestled down to a mixture between online free content and, in some cases, pay content.

But we were a 33.6 speed on our modem, and we had a wall at the back of the business with about 100 modems on it, with all these lights. At the time, our customer service, Speaker—you're not going to believe this—was two of us. Kingsley Grant, the manager—his father, Hunter Grant, owned the Recorder and Times. So Kingsley and I were on technical support, which was code for, "You're going to work 26 weekends a year." At the time, these modems—there are a number of people of the same vintage who would have had a modem like this. They warm up a bit sometimes, Speaker, when they're turned on. There would be periods of time where I would have to go and—I remember normally it was like a Friday or a Saturday night at about midnight. I'd have to go down and reset manually, literally just like you would when you call customer service and they say, "Please unplug the device and keep it for five or six seconds." That's literally what you have to do. You basically stand there on a wall of a hundred modems and basically reboot every single solitary one of them. And in the meantime, the phones are ringing off the wall, and people are saying, "My Internet is not working."

1550

But it was a really interesting business, Speaker, and I have to tell you that the years I spent in this business were really exceptional in terms of the people I met, and then it spurred on to a bit of a side hustle, where I was hired at St. Lawrence College to provide some web page instruction and basically how to access the Internet. Even to this day,

I'll have constituents come up to me and say that I taught them how to navigate the Internet.

The biggest thing at the time—and again, this was part of that particular business in the 1990s—was the fact that you wanted people to have a comfort with computers. I remember talking to a number of seniors who just wanted literally to pick that monitor up and heave it out the window because it was so frustrating. It was such a new thing, all of the different components, whether it be the computer or the modem or the speed. You needed to have a steady hand to be able to calm people down, and I think this is what this bill is trying to accomplish. It's trying to provide that same steady hand that I remember having to have in the mid-1990s in something that was really, really different.

I also want to talk about some things that have happened since then, and I want to do something that I think the member opposite, the opposition House leader, talked about. She talked about SWIFT, which is the agency, the group, in southwestern Ontario. In eastern Ontario, where I am, we had a group through the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus called the Eastern Ontario Regional Network, or EORN. I was aware of this group when I was involved with RipNet, but later on, when I came to work for Bob Runciman, they had a very interesting report that finished in 2014 that provided access in eastern Ontario.

The beauty of it was it had that co-operation between two levels of government. It would have been the McGuinty government provincially and the Harper government federally. I'll always remember this, Speaker, because when we would go to an event celebrating the improvements in those areas, all MPPs, all MPs of all political stripe were there. So if you did an announcement in Leeds–Grenville, which had two Conservative—one, at the time, would have been MP Gord Brown, who would have been a member of the Harper government; Bob Runciman would have been the MPP for our riding, but he was the opposition member. We would have a government member quite often come from either the Ottawa area, or sometimes it would have been Lou Rinaldi from Northumberland, and everybody would be there. Similarly, if it was in a riding that had a Liberal MP or even a New Democrat MP, all the parties were there. That was really the beauty of it, and people remarked about that, that you had governments from all political stripe come together to make a very positive announcement about a service that people wanted. People were excited about this. They were excited that their Internet service was going to be improved.

The same group, EORN, after this 2014 report, lobbied the previous government to have a next version. They wanted to have that co-operation. From 2014 to the time our government came into office, not much happened in that space. There wasn't a Connecting Eastern Ontario to the World phase 2. But what there was, Speaker, was another project, and it was the Cell Gap Project, that EORN wanted to have. It was almost about four years ago that Premier Ford, when he was campaigning—he had not yet taken a seat in this place—went up to the member for

Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke’s riding to have a meeting with the Eastern Ontario Wardens’ Caucus and EORN. I called it the Renfrew handshake, and it become sort of folklore that the Renfrew handshake was when Premier Ford came up and shook the hand of the Eastern Ontario Wardens’ Caucus member and said, “If we get elected, we’re going to support your broadband project,” which was, at the time, \$71 million.

I remember MPP Yakabuski calling me and saying, “Oh, my God, Mr. Ford”—who would then go on to be the Premier—“agreed to the \$71 million,” and I said, “That’s fantastic. Let’s get the campaign brochures ready,” because this was wonderful. But it was one of those things where this group had their i’s dotted and their t’s crossed. It didn’t matter what government was there. I think many of you sitting across who would be eastern Ontarians might even have talked about this project during the last election, but it was great that we were able, early on in our mandate, to be able to deliver this to eastern Ontario, to be able to provide that 5G.

The next realm—and again, I just want to go back to some of the statistics from the 2014 report. In that first EORN report, 39,760 households had access to Internet speeds of 10 megabits per second or higher, about 250 can gain six to 10 and the remaining 2,000 households can have similar speeds through improved satellite packages negotiated by EORN. That was the Leeds–Grenville stats in 2014.

Those stats now, if you walked out, based on the usage of the Internet, people would look at you and say, “It’s not good enough.” We’re all at the 50/10. In fact, part of the reason why EORN was trying to get the feds to go to their one gigabit project is because that was what I was talking about earlier. If you’re going to be in this business, you’ve got to build above the curve, and even though the federal government talked about 50/10 being the standard, those in eastern Ontario were looking at that one gigabit. They were looking at that faster service. Just like we did in the mid-1990s in our little business where we had the 100 modems up on the wall, trying to get that little bit of 33/6 speed, that kilobits per second versus 28/8, that noisy modem that you would connect and it would squeal like there was no tomorrow. The same principle on trying to get that speed is the same principle that they tried with the one gigabit project.

Now, the challenge was, the federal government had already picked the standard. They had already picked the 50/10. In fact, many of us are aware that we’ve got federal-provincial announcements that we’re waiting to make, and I really hope that the federal government does come forward in the next few months and decides to communicate to our constituents all of the projects we’ve been able to fund—not just from our ICON program but from the universal broadband fund that the federal government’s involved in. There’s been a lot of co-operation.

Mr. Speaker, I really wish that we would go back, at least in eastern Ontario, to the way we did when we announced this EORN project where you could have a situation where it didn’t matter who you were, if it was a

federal minister or a provincial minister, no matter what political stripe, we could actually get some of those announcements so we could give people some certainty, and certainty is a really big part of Bill 93.

There has been significant inaction by the previous government. We didn’t see a lot of investment after this 2014 report in eastern Ontario. Really COVID-19, again, has had that watershed change in our usage of the Internet and the need for better broadband, and we’ve seen it; right? I’ve seen it in my riding—libraries that provide public access to the Internet and cars parked there at night accessing the system; businesses that provide service, people using this. This is what we’re at, and because of COVID we’ve had to celebrate so many milestones using our devices and using the Internet: birthdays, anniversaries.

I went to a memorial service for a friend of mine who normally I would have travelled across the province to pay tribute to. My wife and I were there and watched his service at our kitchen table, at our dining room table. I know it was heartbreaking for some. My four-year-old grandson, Georgy, was student of the month a little while ago. We all huddled around the computer to watch him get his certificate after his lunch. The little guy came up with his mask and showed his certificate at the front. He was so proud. Those were the memories that COVID-19 made us share online.

It also showed that we had to take a new approach. I think it was MPP Sandhu from Brampton West who talked about it as the single-largest investment in high-speed Internet in any province by any government in Canadian history. I think that’s an extremely important statement to make as a government, that we value this priority. I have to tell you, I’ve told that story many times about my beginnings in terms of the Internet, how much it has changed and how much we rely on it.

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This bill allows us to work collaboratively. Even the One Call piece to this bill, I think, is so very important. I remember the member for Sarnia–Lambton, when we were over on that side of the House, was my seatmate. We were up in the third row; I guess now it would be the fourth row. It was a big deal at the time for that piece of legislation to come forward, with some of the improvements we were making.

I’m confident that through some of the work in this bill and the resources that are available through our government, like the broadband guidelines, the Internet infrastructure sector is going to be on the right track for us to achieve our goal, that we’re going to bring high-speed Internet to everyone in Ontario by 2025.

We’ve got a number of municipal partners. We just finished the ROMA conference earlier this year and the AMO conference last August. Those two conferences—I have never seen municipal government so engaged on this piece of infrastructure as they are today. It just speaks to the importance of this bill and why, like so many other things, we need to get shovels in the ground faster. We need to make sure that we can improve some of these projects.

Some of the companies obviously have made improvements. I know in 2020 on my street, one summer day in the middle of being basically locked down, Bell came up the street and wired every house. So I know there were companies that made improvements because of business, but we also need to work collaboratively.

The work that Minister Surma has done on the reverse auction: I think that issue alone—and I know the Premier shares my feelings on this—is going to put Ontario in a better place than many of our other jurisdictions. I think engaging people in that way and then putting a bill like this one on the order paper just positions us in terms of whether it's delays in municipal permitting, whether it's getting all the necessary information for a project or the location of underground transmission. I think there are a number of pieces to this that speed up the process that I think we all would like to see.

We'd all like to see our areas, no matter whether we live in urban Ontario or rural Ontario; whether we live in the north, the south, the east or west—we need to make sure that, collaboratively with municipalities and the federal government, as I said earlier, we get to a point where we can get shovels in the ground faster.

You can speak negatively about this bill all you want in debate, but I am convinced that when it comes time to vote, everybody is going to vote for this, because everyone wants to see those improvements in their community. It's frustrating. It was frustrating in the 1990s when we were in this business. It was frustrating in the middle of COVID, when people couldn't talk to their family. They couldn't go and visit them in person; they had to rely on their devices. This is the plan that we could all collaboratively put in place to get things done.

By having such a comprehensive bill on the order paper—I just want to take the opportunity to thank Minister Surma. As somebody who, as I said earlier, was in this business for a few years back in the infancy of people searching on, at the time, the World Wide Web, this is a groundbreaking piece of legislation. It builds upon the Building Broadband Faster Act, which I think is so very important, and it provides us with a great opportunity. Thanks for giving me this chance to reminisce a little bit about a former job of mine, but I'm convinced that Minister Surma has got it right and that we're going to get shovels in the ground. Thank you for giving me this chance.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): It is now time for questions. I'll recognize the member for Algoma-Manitoulin.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I really enjoyed the minister reminiscing on his prior experiences and what brought him into politics. Having the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing coming into the House, I need to inform him that you have been dethroned from your kingship as the youngest mayor-elect, because there's a young gentleman who is now the new mayor of Nairn and Hyman, who continues to finish his schooling over at Ottawa university. His name is Frederic Diebel. He beat you by, I think, a couple of months in regard to being the youngest elected

mayor, so I regret to inform you that you've lost that crown.

Having said that—I enjoy the reminiscing with the minister who came in, but facts speak for themselves. I think the facts were quite clear from the FAO report that came in, where this government spent zero dollars in their \$31.8-million broadband announcement that they had done in 2019-20. Zero—not even \$1, but zero dollars. Then you look at this government—in their 2021-22 rural broadband budget, which was cut in half from \$207 million, they spent 0.6%, not even 1%. You can't disagree with me that a lot of Ontarians are very pessimistic looking at this government, where grandiose announcements are being made but the dollars are not trickling into broadband infrastructure in our communities. I would like to hear some comments from the minister on that, please.

Hon. Steve Clark: First of all, I want to say to the honourable member: I always knew that there would be somebody elected younger than me. I want to congratulate the new mayor. My door is always open. Normally about this time—this is a municipal election year, folks, so normally I'd get a call at some point this year from someone who is in their twenties asking me how they can get elected. The best one was Steve Peters. I ended up sitting here with him. I was retiring from being mayor in 1991. He was running for mayor of St. Thomas, and he would phone me all the time. Finally, I got to the point, saying, "Quit phoning me. Just knock on doors. That's how I got elected." So congratulations to that young mayor.

Infrastructure is such an important part for our government. We've put our money where our mouth is, in terms of putting money in the budget. As I said, it's the largest investment. We need the federal government, as well, to start making some of those announcements. We've got projects that we've approved. We're all ready for the announcements. We know where they are; our mayors know where they are. We just need the feds to stand up. I hope that we collaboratively do it, in a non-partisan way, so that we can all get credit that we've improved Internet for everyone.

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

Mr. Vincent Ke: Thank you for the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing's wonderful presentation. I really liked and enjoyed the story.

Speaker, I am proud to be a part of a government that is committed to bringing high-speed Internet services to every corner of the province by the end of 2025, because high-speed Internet connectivity is an essential service that every Ontarian should have access to, especially in northern Ontario. During the AMO and NOMA meeting, I met lots of delegations, and some of them are from northern Ontario. They come to get our support, to ask for our support. I remember one of their priorities was high-speed Internet, because they told us they rely on libraries most of the time, so that is greatly needed.

I'm very happy to know that our government has been in communication with our municipalities to discuss this issue. Through you, Mr. Speaker, can the Minister of

Municipal Affairs and Housing please explain what our government is doing to ensure that our municipalities' needs are being addressed and supported with infrastructure in their communities.

Hon. Steve Clark: I want to thank the member for the great question. He's a great MPP and I really appreciate his advocacy, not just for this file but for many, many files in Scarborough North. So all the best to you, and thank you for the question.

I also want to say that the PA for infrastructure is here. The PA and Minister Surma have done such a great job. PA Sandhu and Minister Surma have come many, many times to AMO to talk about our improvements to the Internet, and before, Minister Scott, at the time, had come a number of times to AMO to talk about the broadband initiatives.

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We've worked with our stakeholders. We've worked with municipalities to determine their needs and how the government can support you. The proposed Getting Ontario Connected Act is really all about giving the tools to those companies so that they can get shovels in the ground. Municipalities have been really good partners. I know there are some examples in my riding where municipalities have dug deep with dollars that they have received for projects, and they have been able to use them to benefit Internet providers in their community. It shows that real municipal innovation that I think we all expect. Excellent question.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Questions?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Thank you for the presentation. Just listening to the minister talking about how good it will be for Ontario, one of the things that Fort Severn, also known as Wašaho, in Far Northern Ontario—it's the most northerly community in Ontario. How will this bill help the people of Fort Severn?

Hon. Steve Clark: It's a good question—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing to reply.

Hon. Steve Clark: Sorry, I'm just getting excited here. It's a very good question. I think every member of this House can ask that question. How is this bill going to help them? I think what we're trying to accomplish with this is ensuring that we use every measure we can to remove those barriers and delays.

There are some unique challenges in northern Ontario with all pieces of municipal infrastructure. I've been talking to local mayors in his area about some of the challenges with housing. As Minister of Housing, you can't have a one-size-fits-all approach because what might work in southern Ontario just won't work in the north. It's all about flexibility, and I think this bill really provides that flexibility. Regardless of where you live in Ontario, there's an opportunity for these tools to help ensure that Internet is built, it's built to a better standard and it's available to more people. It's all about coverage—just like the story I gave about those modems. It's the same thing as when we moved from that dial-up service into a broadband service. It's all about coverage, and I think this

opportunity will give those ISPs an opportunity to get more coverage.

Minister Surma has also talked about some of the satellite projects that are available. I think there are some really intriguing proposals that I've seen at AMO and ROMA from some northern communities, where smaller ones have grouped together—really good, innovative projects that I think the government can jump in and support. Good question.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member from Markham–Unionville.

Mr. Billy Pang: I'm proud to be a part of a government that is committed to bring high-speed Internet services to every corner of the province by the end of 2025. I can still remember 20 years ago, I worked as an Internet content provider, still using dial-up 56K-per-second Internet services. I think the young people here do not know what this sounds like—EEEEHHHOOOH!—something like that. We are not going back.

Now, our government has been in communication with our municipalities, including some in my own riding of Markham–Unionville. Don't think that every corner of Markham–Unionville has high speed—no, not really. A lot of my constituents—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): One second, we'll try to make sure Hansard gets that correct. Sorry to interrupt the member for Markham–Unionville.

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Can the minister please explain what our government is doing to ensure all our municipalities' needs are being addressed through high-speed Internet?

Hon. Steve Clark: I want to say, Speaker, through you to the member from Markham–Unionville, I, at one point in my speech, was going to give my 33.6 modem imitation that we used to have. He's far braver than I am, Speaker. I think we owe him a big round of applause for the ability to put that into the record.

He's right: There are tremendous pockets in this province where there are gaps, just like I talked about the EORN cell gap process. This bill will help address those gaps. It will ensure that the tools are available to ISPs and our municipal partners. So it's an excellent question and it's being addressed in the bill.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: It's the first time I've heard a modem sound in this House. It's a good one.

It's always an honour to be able to speak on behalf of the people of Kiiwetinoong, and being able to speak on the Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022. I know that this bill speaks to the goals of accelerating the expansion of broadband infrastructure in Ontario. But I know that one thing I would ask the minister is, where is Ontario?

Speaker, this morning the Minister of Infrastructure suggested that members in the north do nothing to improve broadband connectivity but complain, and that the way to address the lack of access to proper broadband in the north is to support this bill. But Speaker, this bill doesn't mention the word "rural." It does not mention "northern"

once. The broadband solutions that work in southern Ontario or for the large telecom operators are not the solutions that will bring equitable, affordable, high-quality broadband to the north.

I know that the proposed act seems to be addressing two issues. One is giving telecom companies easier access to municipal and provincial infrastructure like hydro, telephone poles, rights-of-way to roadways and other public infrastructure. The second one is gathering data on existing telecom infrastructure service and new builds by telecoms. We also know that the proposed act will mainly benefit big telecom companies to expand their service with less red tape at the municipal level. It does not address that the majority of rural and maybe remote Ontario people do not have access to high-speed broadband like there is in urban centres.

I know that affordable high-speed broadband is imperative for people across the north to be able to participate equitably in society and in the economy. For an example, I have two cell phones when I travel. One I was offered as an MPP. They give you a phone, but it's a Bell phone. There is no Bell service in Far Northern Ontario, in the fly-in First Nations. So I use this other one, my personal phone, which I get from Thunder Bay mobility, Thunder Bay telephone service. But it works. Communities have these towers, cell towers, in First Nations, but they don't have any data. It's just phoning, text and voice, and that's it. There is no data. Once I go up north, I don't have any data. I don't have access to my emails. That's just an example of how different it is, how far, when I travel.

I think one of the things that we saw as well during the COVID-19 pandemic is it brought the digital divide between the north, the Far North and the rest of Ontario into focus. The experiences of people across the north, the Far North, whose education and livelihoods became more reliant on the Internet during the pandemic—what it did is it further underscored how the lack of high-speed broadband in the region puts people in the Far North at a disadvantage. I remember when COVID first hit, I remember the fly-in First Nations were utilizing faxes to hand in their assignments. That's what I mean by the divide. It became more apparent when we talk about online learning.

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Broadband connectivity supports educational attainment for our people, but it also spurs up economic development and it can improve the access to services such as health care, especially in our region in Far Northern Ontario where service delivery is challenging at best. The limited availability of broadband in rural and fly-in Ontario places the region at a competitive disadvantage and limits and precludes the use of technologies that rely on high-speed broadband.

Right now, there is only one broadband project in Kiiwetinoong that has been approved as part of the Ontario ICON program, despite the overwhelming need across the region. Many of the First Nation communities in Kiiwetinoong as well should be getting upgrades and new infrastructure funded by the federal program, the ISED Universal Broadband Fund and Connect to Innovate. I also understand that these have been conditionally approved

this past year, but no transfer arrangements or agreements have been signed as of yet. This was funding that we needed many, many years ago and it has been long overdue. We need the ministry to fast track these projects for our region.

The province also has an accelerated high-speed Internet program. The process is a reverse auction bid for telecom companies to serve designated geographical areas. It is geared towards larger telecom companies that have the capital to invest in the telecom infrastructure and get paid back over a 10-year period. I mention that because here is the issue with this plan: Even though the province is throwing a lot of resources at these programs and trying to make it easier for telecom companies to do business, it doesn't hold telecom companies accountable to serve 100% of all high-cost service areas. It is entirely up to telecom companies to decide which areas they want to serve. They will not serve hard-to-reach areas because of the high infrastructure costs, the build costs themselves.

For example, where I live, the municipality of Sioux Lookout, they have high-speed Internet for 90% of its residents since those are all found close to the town centre. The remaining 10% are too far for the telecom companies to build fibre cable wireless infrastructure to. This is the case right across the province. If these hard-to-reach homes, farms, camps, cottages and outposts are not being—it is hard to reach these homes that are not being served by these telecom companies.

Across Ontario, Speaker, it is the smaller Internet providers that are being innovative to be able to provide that service, finding solutions to serve those hard-to-reach areas and high-cost service areas. One of the big challenges for small ISPs is for them to access large networks that are affordable. Since the big telecom companies have a monopoly in the infrastructure across Ontario, they can dictate the prices they want to charge for smaller ISPs.

This fits into the bigger issue that there is no equitable access for the same service for the same price across Ontario. For example, to buy a one-gigabyte circuit in Pikangikum may cost \$6,500 per month, where the same circuit in Toronto may cost only \$900 a month. That means trying to operate an Internet service provider in Pikangikum has a higher cost that has to be passed on to the consumer unless there are provincial or federal subsidies in place.

Also, we currently have subsidies for hydro and food in the north. We need to have similar subsidies for telecommunications as well, because telecommunications is an essential service now and should be treated as such.

To take it a step further, Speaker, the large telecommunications infrastructure should be treated in the same manner as highways and roadways. They should be provincially and municipally owned and then the carriers can lease services on that public infrastructure. Right now, all this public money is being put out into private infrastructure without any public ownership.

As I mentioned earlier when I spoke about some of the challenges that we had during the pandemic when we talk about Internet and online learning—I spoke about that earlier—which became the norm across Ontario during the

pandemic, where in-person classes were not achievable, it was not an option in the north. I remember the Grand Chief of Nishnawbe Aski Nation said that 32 of NAN's 49 communities did not have access to high-speed broadband, making video instruction and other online education tools inaccessible.

Again, Speaker, this issue is widespread across the north. At the beginning of the pandemic, because of the lack of broadband in some communities, they were forced to do—again, I mentioned this—online learning with fax.

According to the most recent stats from the CRTC, just over 40% of rural households and 31% of Indigenous reserves had access to high-speed Internet as of 2018. When you take it down to this level of having Internet at home, and if you live on a First Nation, that number becomes smaller.

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One of the things, too, is that, according to the Auditor General of Ontario, as of last year only 17% of the households on First Nations had access to broadband Internet connectivity. This figure is again significantly less than the 84% of the households nationally who have sufficient broadband coverage according to the CRTC.

I just want to share a comment from an Indigenous educator in a recent report from the Information and Communications Technology Council on e-learning. This is what he said: “Attendance for Indigenous students is a challenge in ideal circumstances, let alone in the midst of a pandemic. Without the support of family and friends and the required resources (like connectivity), things will likely get worse.”

But having broadband infrastructure in place doesn't mean that service is actually being used. Because Indigenous people experience higher rates of poverty, some households on-reserve may not be able to afford high-speed Internet service.

During the pandemic, many school boards loaned computers or tablets to students who did not have their own. This was just one step toward Internet equity, but it does not help households that do not have broadband access. Speaker, broadband is just one piece of the greater infrastructure needs that exist in First Nations in the north.

I know I always bring up the water issue here. It's still something that hopefully—I'm always hopeful that we can get access to clean drinking water for people. There is a massive infrastructure gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities across Ontario, and broadband is one of them. Water is on top of that list. So yes, broadband, but also again, clean drinking water, affordable child care, more housing, more long-term-care beds. I have 21 long-term-care beds in my riding, and I have 14 long-term boil-water advisories. We need access to schools. We don't have high schools in the north, only the bigger communities. We don't have hospitals in the communities. We have very limited service when we talk about airports: gravel airstrips, which are lifelines to communities.

This government is intent on pushing economic development across the north. This needs to be part of all the infrastructure solutions, not just the ones that serve business. I see it happen here. People want our resources;

people want our lands. Governments want our traditional territories. I'm running out of time, but if this government introduced a bill that addressed the concerns, I'd consider supporting it. Meegwetch. Thank you for your time.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Questions to the member for Kiiwetinoong?

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: I want to thank the member for his presentation. I remember just before the pandemic, when the finance committee was travelling, we went to the member's riding and we heard from multiple presenters who expressed the need for having a high-speed Internet connection. That is why we are investing one of the largest investments, investing \$4 billion over the period of the next five years, to make sure that every household in the province will have access to high-speed Internet.

In 2019, our government also announced an investment of \$30 million in the Matawa high-speed Internet project that will benefit more than 670 homes and institutions in northern Ontario. Also, as part of the spring 2021 budget, our government is allocating—we are investing, actually, through joint investments with the federal government, \$1.2 billion towards 58 new projects through ICON and UBF. This joint funding is also bringing Internet accessibility to 67 First Nation communities.

Mr. Speaker, we are leaving no stone unturned when it comes to connecting Ontarians. The member also highlighted that online study is not an option in his community. That is why we're making these investments, because we understand that if we're building hospitals, building highways, we need to connect Ontarians as well. Can the member explain how this investment will benefit his community?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch to the member for the question. I think I outlined some of the infrastructure issues that we see in these communities, the fly-in First Nations. He spoke about Matawa First Nation and some of the First Nations that have been part of the plan. Yes, it will help with access to the Internet, because I know when I travel up there, I'm on a blackout, pretty much, when I travel to these communities that have limited Internet connections. So when I spend a day there, I'm just out; you cannot contact me.

I think it will help, but again, this government needs to start looking at other issues of infrastructure needs. There are 14 boil-water advisories that are long-term. February 1 of this year was the 27th year for Neskantaga's long-term boil-water advisory. I always bring that issue up here. Why are we treated differently? Why are First Nations people being treated differently when we talk about access to clean drinking water as a basic human right?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Questions?

Ms. Jill Andrew: Thank you to the member from Kiiwetinoong for such a powerful presentation.

The thing is, this government simply can't accelerate a broadband expansion if the government is not willing to actually spend the budget to do so. I think this brings me back to what the member was talking about with regard to infrastructure, and I'm wondering what thoughts you may have on the recently revealed FAO report which revealed that the Conservative government cut the 2021-22 rural

broadband budget by \$207 million—practically half of it—and only spent 0.6% of this reduced budget.

I'm wondering if the member feels that this bill is another one of those all-talk, no-action bills. I'm wondering why you think they're saying they want to do this positive thing, but the budgetary spending doesn't reflect that. And of course, it doesn't even mention that broadband is an essential service. I'm just wondering what your thoughts are on that.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch for the question. I've been here about three and a half years, and sometimes good words are spoken and I hear the things that will happen. I think it's important, when we talk about action, we need to be able to take action on whatever is being said. And I am hopeful that what is being said, what is being written in this bill, will have an outcome for the people in Neskantaga, for the people in Fort Severn, for the people in Eabametoong. These are the communities that need this connection, and that will change the lives and the wellness of these children and the residents of these communities.

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The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Scarborough—Agincourt.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Thank you to my colleague from the opposite side for his presentation. It is always interesting to hear the point of view of the north and what they experience over there.

After 15 years in power, the Liberals let Ontario One Call sit on the shelf to collect dust, along with our underserved communities, adding it to their pile of broken promises. Could the member opposite please explain why they don't believe that providing Ontarians with the means to have better and more efficient infrastructure at a faster rate is the best way to bring our province closer to our economic recovery?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: The best way I can put it is that broadband Internet access supports Indigenous self-determination by enabling communities to address priorities, improving access to programs and services, supporting economic participation, and also contributing to the revitalization of Indigenous languages and our ways of life.

You cannot just take our lands. You cannot just take our resources from us. You cannot just take the minerals from our territories. You have to be able to invest back into the infrastructure, such as clean drinking water.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for York South—Weston.

Mr. Faisal Hassan: Thank you to my fine colleague from Kiiwetinoong for his excellent presentation. This bill in front of us this evening is about getting Ontario connected. I see my colleague talked about the lack of infrastructure and lack of support for many, many years with regards to the north, especially the Indigenous communities, and he has been continuously raising those concerns here. I don't see this broadband connection, which is making many urban and, to some extent, rural areas more connected—I want to ask my colleague: I know this

neglect continued over the years, the last 15 years, the last four years. This bill, does it actually improve the lives of Indigenous communities in the north?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: As I said before, many of the First Nation communities in the north do not have access to reliable, affordable broadband Internet. I think it will change a little bit, not a whole lot. But I think it's so important—again, I speak about the issues like clean drinking water. Broadband Internet will not bring us clean drinking water in these communities. Broadband Internet will not bring housing in First Nation communities. Broadband Internet will not bring our ways of life back to our communities. Meegwetch.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate?

Mr. Dave Smith: What I originally thought I would talk about—some of my thunder was stolen by the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing in his historical recount of the Internet. But I'm still going to talk a fair bit about it.

I graduated from Trent University. I first went off to university in 1989. I've got a bachelor of science in computing systems. Because I was a computer student at the university, I was lucky enough to have an email address. The Internet didn't exist when I first went to university, and the only students at university at that point who got access to email were computer science students.

When we see where the Internet has gone over the last 35 years or so, it's amazing how dependent we have become on it. Again, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing talked a little bit about this, but I think back to an early part of my career. In the mid 1990s, I worked for Lindsay Computer Centre. It no longer exists, so it's okay to talk about that company in the House now; I'm not promoting somebody. They had an Internet service provider that was part of it as well. It was called Lindsay Net. We started off with a single 56K feed into Lindsay Net. That was our backbone: 56K. Then we turned around and we sold access. People could use their dial-up modems; 9600 baud is what a lot of people were using at the time. Some still had 1200-baud modems trying to connect to the Internet.

I remember we did our first upgrade to 256K. The big promotion that we did—256K: Wow, that was lightning fast. We had probably 450 to 500 users at the time. Then our next upgrade was to a T1 line. That was 1.56 megs; 24 twisted pair is what we had coming in. I remember it really well, because we had to shut off Internet access for about four hours because a backhoe came to the front of the building and had to dig a trench for them to run the cable from the telephone pole to bring 24 twisted pair in for us to have access to it. We could have 23 outgoing calls simultaneously on that—completely unheard of.

As we expanded, we bought an Internet service provider in Brock township, part of—I was going to say her name; I'm not allowed to say her name—the member from the city of Kawartha Lakes. It was long distance, though, so we had a jumper. All of the phones at that location were call-forwarded to another location that was

in between. It wasn't long distance from Brock township to this spot, and then it wasn't long distance from that spot to Lindsay. They would jump through that, and it would cut their bandwidth in half. They had 32K-baud modems at the time, so they were getting about 15K, 16K, but it was still considered lightning fast.

When we were looking at Internet speeds, nobody thought that we were ever going to have to have anything more than 10 megabits. Like, 10 megabits? Who would need more than that? Then with our internal technology, we ended up with 100-megabit networks. Then we went to a gigabit network. But why would you ever need something faster than that?

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At the time, the Internet was all text-based. You'd go onto the website and it was pure text. The odd person would have some kind of digital sound that would come up, and how cool was that? You come onto an HTML site and somebody's 8-bit music would be played. For those of you who are young enough that you have no idea what I'm talking about with 8-bit, think about standing in the elevator and listening to the elevator music or the Muzak that's played in a grocery store, that generic, no-lyric stuff; the music when you're on hold with somebody, when you pick up the phone, you call a business and you get the on-hold music. It was crap, it was just crap, but that was cool technology at the time.

In 2009, before Netflix existed, almost everything was text-based. Even when we think about our search engines and how that technology changed, there was no such thing as a spider that went out and searched for things. We had search engines like AltaVista, like Northern Light. As a company, you would pay to register with an Internet directory, and that's how your website would be brought up when you did a search on one of those search engines. Google didn't exist.

Where we've gone with it now, we're at a stage when Netflix was first introduced and they had streaming video, streaming audio—what a novel concept. Voice over IP: You could connect with your device and make a telephone call across the world, not going across telephone lines. Well, actually, you were going across telephone lines, but it was data going across the telephone line that got converted to something else so that it would go across the Internet.

We never envisioned needing the bandwidth that we need now. The last statistic I saw on it was in 2018: 35% of Internet traffic was Netflix—one company, 35% of Internet traffic. You buy a package now, 350 gigs worth of data coming across, and they say to you that that's 350 hour-long movies that you can watch. When the Internet was first created, nobody ever thought you would be doing something like that. Dial-up, as has been said, was the standard.

I live in an interesting riding in Ontario. Everybody who is south of the 401 thinks I live in northern Ontario. People who live south of the 401 talk about going up north to the hunt camp, to Apsley, to Bancroft, to Trent Lakes;

they're going up north to where I am. But everybody who is north of the French River says that I live in southern Ontario. I'm kind of in that nowhere land. I've got some prime agriculture areas, but the Canadian Shield also starts in my riding, so it makes for some really interesting challenges.

In the city of Peterborough, for example, we have access to broadband; 20 minutes away, you have dial-up—if you have Internet access. What this bill is going to do for us is actually have a project, an Internet high-speed broadband project come into my riding between Apsley and Lakefield. For those of you who don't know, it's really only a 20-minute drive. It's about 30 kilometres. But access to high-speed Internet is not something that they have in a lot of locations in north Kawartha, and that's something that we're addressing.

My joke is, I can stand on my roof and do something and it could hit Trent University. That's how close I am to Trent University, one of our higher-education institutes. I can see the Trent University campus from my front deck. I'm about a 30-second drive. I've got three cellphones: I've got my personal cellphone, I've got a cellphone with my constituency office and I have a cellphone because I'm parliamentary assistant to a ministry. So I have service with Bell and I have service with Rogers. If I'm standing at the front of my house, my Rogers phone works. If I walk level to the back deck of my house, about 100 feet away, that phone doesn't work, but the other one does. I've got Bell service on one part of my house and I have Rogers service on another part of my house, but I don't have Bell service and Rogers service together anywhere in my home. And I live 30 seconds away from a post-secondary institute.

I moved there just over three years ago, so I haven't lived in this house that long. Three years ago, I did not have access. Thirty seconds from Trent University, I did not have access to broadband. I could connect to a satellite connection, which was really crappy, but I could connect to that. Download speeds were okay. Upload speeds were terrible because it was coming across the phone line.

Now, because of some of the changes that we have made, I actually have access to high-speed Internet. It's wireless, but I do have access to it. My download capability is about 28 megabits; my upload is about four. I'm not at the minimum standard now. But my goodness, was it ever life-changing, having that much of a difference in speed between what I had when I first moved to that house just three and a half years ago and what I have today.

When I look at other parts of my riding—North Kawartha is not a big township. They've got about 5,800 residents when you count the seasonal residents. They've got about 2,800 when you look at full-time residents there. A single school, kindergarten to grade 8—they get bused off to high school in Lakefield when they go off to high school.

When we were going through the pandemic, we had a challenge for a lot of those families. There were times when we had to close the schools because of what was going on with COVID-19. We had transitioned to an

online version of it, but there were a lot of homes that didn't have high-speed Internet, that could not connect to do that. So the community itself had community hot spots. You could go to the school, to the parking lot in the school, and use that as a hot spot for it. And people did the best they could to make it work, but it really disadvantaged the rural part of my riding. And I'm in Peterborough.

I'm not way up north. I'm way up north to some people who live south of the 401; they think I'm in a totally different country. But everybody who is in northern Ontario talks about me being in southern Ontario. I'm 150 kilometres away from Toronto, and my community has been underserved with high-speed Internet for years. This is something that is going to make a massive difference for us.

We recognize, we've seen because of COVID that high-speed Internet is something that we all need to have. You need to be connected to the world. Now, one of the great advantages of it, though, when we come out of COVID, when we're no longer in this crisis, is it's going to be a fantastic opportunity for somebody, because if you can connect to anywhere in the world by high speed, you can have your Zoom meetings. You don't have to be in downtown Toronto anymore.

You could be sitting—I want you to close your eyes and think about this for a moment; just envision it. You're on Stony Lake. You're sitting on the dock. You've got your tablet out there. The sun has just come up. You're in your bathing suit—don't picture me in a bathing suit, because that would be a bad vision to picture. But you're in your bathing suit; you're on the deck at the lake. The sun is rising, you're on your tablet and, of course, your image is going to be blurred because you're in your bathing suit and you don't want to show that to somebody. But you're connected to the rest of the world and you're able to do business. You don't have to be in downtown Toronto. You don't have to be in Waterloo. You don't have to be in Ottawa. You can be in any other rural community in Ontario and be connected to the world.

I've said a number of times that my riding is God's country. We've got everything. I've got sandy beaches. I've got the Canadian Shield. When you're heading up Highway 28 to Apsley, it looks almost identical to Kenora, almost identical to Rainy River. I've been to a lot of different parts of Ontario because of a previous job that I had. I've been to Marathon. I've been to Dryden. I've been to Sioux Lookout as part of my job, and the look and feel of the terrain is no different there than it is in parts of my riding. You can enjoy a quality of life in rural Ontario that you can't have when you're in downtown Toronto.

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I know I've got some members in the House today who are from Toronto. It's a fine city. More power to you if you want to live here. I love the fact that when I get up in the morning and I look outside, there are deer in my yard. There are 20 or 30 turkeys that are in my yard. We've got so much wildlife there. It's a great quality of life, something that if you're in the city you can never experience.

I'm sure that the member from Timmins, because I've seen on Zoom meetings with him that great cottage he's got, the wood background—

Mr. Gilles Bisson: Right on the lake.

Mr. Dave Smith: On the lake—that's the type of thing that high-speed Internet is going to give us access to.

Now, I've spent a lot of time talking about Internet. There are a couple of other parts about the bill that I do want to talk about. One Call is a perfect example. This is something that makes so much sense—common sense. For those of us who have common sense, it's not a blessing. It's more like a curse, because there are so many things that you run into where if common sense was applied, it would just be so much easier. And this is one of those cases where it is. Instead of having to coordinate with multiple different organizations when you want to dig, when you want to run a line, the changes that we're making to One Call—it's one call. You don't have to worry about working it out with the local utility, working it out with the natural gas supplier, working it out with the municipality for water, sewer lines and those types of things. One call: It just makes sense, because it speeds up the process. You don't have to organize a whole bunch of different things to do that one job; it's all done in one.

But we know that there still are barriers when we take a look at what's happening with high-speed Internet. This is moving things forward. It is going to make life better. It's going to open up other opportunities. It's going to be that equalizer.

It's not something, though, that we're able to roll out to everyone in Ontario all at the same time. It has been staged, and we're moving forward with it. This is going to add another 375,000 individuals or homes, to get them on it. It brings that number down. We were at, just a year ago when we made the announcement about the joint universal broadband with the feds—we were talking about 750,000 or 800,000 households. We're chopping that number in half with this.

The reverse auction on how we're going to do this—if you don't know what a reverse auction is, if you've ever had the opportunity to watch the reality TV show *Shipping Wars*, that's what a reverse auction is. You say, "Here's what we need to have done" and different companies have an opportunity to bid on it. The first one may say, "Well, you know, if you want to run that five kilometres' worth of fibre optic here, it's going to cost you a million dollars to do it." And the next company will come in and say, "Yes, I see that they can do it for a million, but we've got a better process. We can do it for \$850,000." A third company will come in and say, "A million? \$850,000? We can do it for \$820,000." What the reverse auction does is it gives all of those organizations, all of those companies, an opportunity then to bid on it and say, "We can do it for X amount of money."

The way it has been done in the past is, governments have said, "Here's how much money we've got to spend on this," and lo and behold, that's exactly how much money it is going to cost when one of those organizations comes in to bid on it. The reverse auction actually does the

reverse of it. We get more service for that same dollar amount, because now those companies are competing against each other and the evaluation is done based on what they can do and how much it's going to cost them to do it. They know what someone else can do it for. Rather than inflate the price, we're bringing the cost down. So the taxpayer is not paying as much for it, and then the end user is not going to be paying as much for it as they move

forward. It cuts the cost for everybody, because high-speed Internet is one of those things that's an equalizer for everyone, and we need to have it available for everyone in Ontario. I can't thank the Minister of Infrastructure enough for the work she's done on this file, because it's going to do that for so many.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you.
Report continues in volume B.

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Mantha, Michael (NDP)	Algoma—Manitoulin	
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Chair / Président: Ernie Hardeman
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Ian Arthur
Ian Arthur, Will Bouma
Stephen Crawford, Catherine Fife
Ernie Hardeman, Mitzie Hunter
Logan Kanapathi, Sol Mamakwa
Jeremy Roberts, Dave Smith
Vijay Thanigasalam
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Michael Bushara

**Standing Committee on General Government / Comité
permanent des affaires gouvernementales**

Chair / Président: Logan Kanapathi
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Mike Schreiner
Jill Andrew, Robert Bailey
Will Bouma, Guy Bourgouin
Chris Glover, Mike Harris
Logan Kanapathi, Sheref Sabawy
Amarjot Sandhu, Mike Schreiner
Daisy Wai
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Isaiah Thorning

**Standing Committee on Government Agencies / Comité
permanent des organismes gouvernementaux**

Chair / Président: Gilles Bisson
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Aris Babikian
Deepak Anand, Aris Babikian
Gilles Bisson, Lorne Coe
Wayne Gates, Robin Martin
Norman Miller, Billy Pang
Amanda Simard, Marit Stiles
John Yakabuski
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Tanzima Khan

**Standing Committee on Justice Policy / Comité permanent de
la justice**

Chair / Président: Daryl Kramp
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Lucille Collard
Lucille Collard, Christine Hogarth
Daryl Kramp, Natalia Kusendova
Jim McDonell, Suze Morrison
Randy Pettapiece, Gurratan Singh
Donna Skelly, Effie J. Triantafilopoulos
Kevin Yarde
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Thushitha Kobikrishna

**Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly / Comité
permanent de l'Assemblée législative**

Chair / Présidente: Laurie Scott
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: France Gélinas
Rima Berns-McGown, France Gélinas
Goldie Ghamari, Mike Harris
Faisal Hassan, Jim McDonell
Sam Oosterhoff, Laurie Scott
Vijay Thanigasalam
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Tanzima Khan

**Standing Committee on Public Accounts / Comité permanent
des comptes publics**

Chair / Président: Taras Natyshak
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Christine Hogarth
Deepak Anand, Toby Barrett
Jessica Bell, Stephen Blais
Stephen Crawford, Rudy Cuzzetto
Christine Hogarth, Michael Mantha
Taras Natyshak, Michael Parsa
Amarjot Sandhu
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Christopher Tyrell

**Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills / Comité
permanent des règlements et des projets de loi d'intérêt privé**

Chair / Président: Aris Babikian
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: John Fraser
Aris Babikian, Lorne Coe
John Fraser, Vincent Ke
Laura Mae Lindo, Paul Miller
Billy Pang, Jeremy Roberts
Dave Smith, Daisy Wai
Jamie West
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Isaiah Thorning

**Standing Committee on Social Policy / Comité permanent de
la politique sociale**

Chair / Présidente: Natalia Kusendova
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Bhutila Karpoche
Aris Babikian, Jeff Burch
Amy Fee, Michael Gravelle
Joel Harden, Mike Harris
Bhutila Karpoche, Natalia Kusendova
Robin Martin, Jim McDonell
Effie J. Triantafilopoulos
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Vanessa Kattar

**Select Committee on Emergency Management Oversight /
Comité spécial de la surveillance de la gestion des situations
d'urgence**

Chair / Président: Daryl Kramp
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Tom Rakocevic
Robert Bailey, Gilles Bisson
John Fraser, Christine Hogarth
Daryl Kramp, Robin Martin
Sam Oosterhoff, Tom Rakocevic
Sara Singh, Donna Skelly
Effie J. Triantafilopoulos
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Christopher Tyrell