

Legislative  
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of Ontario



Assemblée  
législative  
de l'Ontario

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## **Official Report of Debates (Hansard)**

JP-4

## **Journal des débats (Hansard)**

JP-4

### **Standing Committee on Justice Policy**

### **Comité permanent de la justice**

#### **Estimates**

Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery  
and Procurement

Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations  
Economic Reconciliation

#### **Budget des dépenses**

Ministère des Services au public et aux entreprises  
et de l'Approvisionnement

Ministère des Affaires autochtones et de la  
Réconciliation économique avec  
les Premières Nations

1<sup>st</sup> Session  
44<sup>th</sup> Parliament

Thursday 30 October 2025

1<sup>re</sup> session  
44<sup>e</sup> législature

Jeudi 30 octobre 2025

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Chair: Lorne Coe  
Clerk: Isaiah Thorning

Président : Lorne Coe  
Greffier : Isaiah Thorning

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## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

## ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
JUSTICE POLICYCOMITÉ PERMANENT  
DE LA JUSTICE

Thursday 30 October 2025

Jeudi 30 octobre 2025

*The committee met at 1300 in committee room 2.*

## ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF PUBLIC AND BUSINESS  
SERVICE DELIVERY AND PROCUREMENT

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Good afternoon, everyone. The Standing Committee on Justice Policy will now come to order.

The committee is about to begin consideration of the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery and Procurement for a total of two hours. From the ministry, we are joined by the Honourable Stephen Crawford and ministry officials and staff. Welcome.

As a reminder, the ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address. I trust that the deputy minister has arranged to have the hearings closely monitored with respect to questions raised so that the ministry can respond accordingly in writing.

Are there any questions from members before we start? Madam Clerk, I see none.

I am now required to call vote 1801, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement from the minister for up to 20 minutes.

Minister, the floor is yours, please.

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** It's an honour to be here before the Standing Committee on Justice Policy.

I just want to mention that I have the deputy, Samantha Poisson, beside me and a great team of officials here to answer any specific questions, should they come up.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak today. I'm pleased to be here to present the expenditure estimates for the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery and Procurement for 2025-26. I am proud of the many initiatives we've undertaken to serve Ontario. I look forward to updating you on how our ministry is working to fulfill our government's commitments.

Our ministry's purpose is to deliver essential programs, services and products in an efficient, effective manner for the people and businesses of Ontario. Ontarians often interact with our ministry during key milestones in their lives, from the joyful moments, such as buying their first home or welcoming a new child into the family, to the more difficult moments, such as experiencing the loss of a loved one or being subject to fraud. We are the public face

of government, supporting Ontarians when it matters most. We strive for ways to deliver the most efficient services while at the same time managing costs.

While navigating the difficult geopolitical climate, I'm proud that Ontario took swift action in response to trade difficulties. We have not shied away from calling out the unfair trade practices by the United States and President Trump. As Premier Ford emphasized at the Empire Club, these tariffs are not just a tax on Canadians; they're a tax on Americans, costing jobs and raising prices on both sides of the border. Ontario stands firm in defending our workers, businesses and communities against these challenges.

With the introduction of Bill 2, the Protect Ontario Through Free Trade Within Canada Act, a Buy Ontario, Buy Canadian Day has been established, which will be held annually on the last Friday of each June.

Ontarians have an even stronger economic interest in supporting domestic producers to build a stronger, more competitive and resilient economy.

We're investing in Ontario through our programs and resources, which help consumers get information about the options for "made, grown and owned by" companies here at home in Ontario. This does not place any obligation on consumers and businesses.

For example, Ontario has added 24 new grape varieties to Vintners Quality Alliance, or VQA, certified wine. This historic expansion provides grape growers and wineries with new growth opportunities, while making the industry more resilient to economic uncertainty.

Niagara's wineries are not just a source of pride; they are a cornerstone of our communities, supporting local jobs and families. Every bottle sold represents the hard work of Ontario farmers and the vibrancy of our rural economies. In fact, in 2024 alone, more than \$433.6 million in VQA wines were sold worldwide. This means more opportunities for Ontario farmers, communities and families, strengthening local economies and creating jobs across the province.

When Premier Ford mandated the LCBO to remove US products from their shelves, Ontarians stepped up. Ontario wine sales since that date have surged over 60%, creating a renaissance in wineries in Ontario. Chair, that's proof that Ontarians want to buy local and support our economy.

Further, there are steps being taken to help Ontarians receive the best value for money, support local jobs, break down internal trade barriers, and streamline business permit

processes, such as our procurement policy framework, which restrict US businesses from accessing Ontario's public sector procurements. This policy also applies to the broader product public sector, such as schools and hospitals.

In addition to our ministry's work to protect Ontario's economy, I am pleased to share the work we've done in partnership with the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade to introduce the Building a More Competitive Economy Act. Now, more than ever, we need to protect and strengthen Ontario's economy. We are taking the required measures to help build a resilient and self-sustaining economy that can withstand disruption and thrive in a rapidly changing world, while making Ontario the best place in the G7 to invest, do business and create jobs. In addition, we are designing a single window for business, centralizing a digital permitting system, allowing businesses to apply for and monitor permit applications, streamlining approval times, enhancing transparency, and providing the certainty needed to invest and move projects forward at a faster pace. This act is an important step to safeguarding Ontario's prosperity and building a future where our economy can thrive in the face of any challenge.

We know that times are difficult right now, with global economic uncertainty, and many Ontarian families need assistance. To help address this, the government stepped in with ongoing work to keep costs down and help families with affordability.

I'm proud that our ministry worked with the Ministry of Finance to deliver tangible funds to Ontarians. In January of this year, the government began issuing \$200 taxpayer rebates to provincial taxpayers, as well as to each eligible child, to help address the increasing costs that families are facing today. This is just one of the many initiatives our ministry has delivered to serve the good people of Ontario.

ServiceOntario is likely what our province associates with our ministry, as it is the one-window service where Ontarians interact with our government often. ServiceOntario is where Ontarians turn for life's important moments, whether it is registering a birth, renewing a driver's licence, or starting a new business. We're here to make those experiences as smooth and supportive as possible—this includes online, by phone, and in person.

From January through August 2025, individuals and businesses completed more than 17 million transactions through ServiceOntario. More than 1.26 million people have created personalized accounts—a new, secure way to access government services and track your product status.

We know that customers increasingly expect access to government service online and from a digital device of their choosing, anytime, anywhere. That's why we are transforming services, which includes partnering with ministries. This provides an excellent customer service experience where Ontarians can access centralized government support in their preferred format.

I'm pleased to report that we have not only made improvements to wait times, but we've also simplified delivery of various services.

Earlier this year, in February 2025, we launched the seniors' driver's licence renewal program that introduced a more convenient process. With this updated service, drivers aged 80 years and older can complete mandatory screening assessments and renew their drivers' licences in a single visit at more than 270 ServiceOntario locations throughout the province. It eliminates the need for seniors to visit multiple locations, saving them time and effort by offering them choice on how they would like to book an appointment to complete their licensing requirements. I am pleased to report that more than 185,000 seniors' driver's licence renewal transactions have taken place since that launch.

### 1310

Vehicle owners will be familiar with improvements to licence plate renewals. Licence plates in good standing are now automatically renewed. Vehicle owners who need to take action to renew their plates are notified of the steps required to bring their plates up to date. Since the launch on July 1, 2024, more than eight million licence plates have been renewed automatically.

Part of delivering excellent service to Ontarians is offering choice. Whether they are connecting with the government online or in person, they should have an efficient and easy customer service experience.

I have said this before, and I'll say it again: While we focus on digitization, it does not mean digital only.

When a trip to ServiceOntario is needed, Ontarians can rely on the more than 270 in-person locations across this great province. We have been working diligently to strengthen in-person services, including increasing the number of centres that offer extended hours of evenings and weekends. More than 70% of these centres are independent service providers. We have strengthened the process to procure and compensate independent service providers who operate centres in communities throughout Ontario.

Our ministry continues to look for ways to improve access to government services. That's why we're very proud of the recent work in partnership with Peel region. Our government launched a new one-stop integrated service hub at Peel region's headquarters in Brampton, making it easier and more convenient to access provincial and municipal government services at the same time. ServiceOntario continues to explore additional opportunities to roll out convenient service delivery models with community and business partners, including municipalities and other broader public service organizations, Indigenous communities, libraries and retailers.

We are best known for our public-facing entities such as ServiceOntario. However, our ministry serves Ontarians in many other ways. We have the important and unique role of providing essential support to other ministries, provincial agencies, and the broader public sector.

Our ministry operates and continues to modernize Ontario's information technology assets, and provides key resources related to cyber security to the broader public sector.

Earlier this year, we launched our one-government approach to delivering streamlined and modernized platforms and services to all OPS ministries and the public. We also brought together all seven IT clusters under one umbrella in our new IT operating model. This unified approach will help us build a resilient and future-ready IT organization during a time when agility and strategic foresight is absolutely essential.

Last year, at this standing committee, Bill 194 was discussed. I'm pleased to highlight today that the Strengthening Cyber Security and Building Trust in the Public Sector Act received royal assent on November 25, 2024, and established a new statute entitled the Enhancing Digital Security and Trust Act, 2024, known as EDSTA.

In January 2025, EDSTA came into force, building a foundation for the government to strengthen cyber security in the public sector, enhance privacy safeguards for children, and support the responsible use of artificial intelligence, or AI. This prepares the government to prevent and respond to cyber security threats and recover from cyber attacks faster while safeguarding critical public services in our schools, children's aid societies and hospitals.

Enhancing privacy safeguards for children cannot be taken seriously enough. Children are particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of digital technologies. Studies indicate that children are accessing the Internet at a younger age than ever before and that software programs geared towards children can collect information and share it with third-party marketing companies. It's imperative that we establish ways to better protect children from inappropriate data use in schools and children's aid societies.

In this ever-changing digital landscape where technology rapidly evolves, the use of AI has become increasingly popular. There's no argument that it's an exciting, transformative tool with potential to improve efficiencies, productivity and automation.

For example, last year, the AI job sector experienced a remarkable 101% increase from the previous year. With more than 430,000 tech workers across more than 22,000 firms, Ontario is the second-largest tech cluster in North America, something we can all be very proud of in this province.

Leading as a change-maker, the government already safely and effectively leverages AI technology. For example, since 2018, we have been using chatbots and virtual assistants as automated assistants to our workforce to help them find resources and navigate information.

In 2024, the Ministry of Health employed AI scribes to reduce administrative burden for family doctors, while patient health information continues to be protected under the Personal Health Information Protection Act.

Lastly, Copilot Chat, the only generative AI tool approved for use in the OPS, has been helping to streamline workflows and boost productivity while ensuring enterprise-grade security across the OPS.

AI also brings risks of privacy and human rights violations, security vulnerabilities, and the spread of misinformation, making it vital that we support the responsible use

of AI. In December 2024, we began implementing the responsible use of AI directive, as part of our government's trustworthy AI framework and in alignment with the Strengthening Cyber Security and Building Trust in the Public Sector Act.

Our robust approach to modernize service delivery is guided by six fundamental principles to ensure AI is beneficial to Ontarians in a safe, secure and privacy-protective way.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Minister, excuse me. You have two minutes left, sir.

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** Thank you.

I am proud to say that Ontario is one of the first jurisdictions in Canada to adopt an enterprise-wide and public-sector-wide approach to regulating privacy, cyber security and the use of AI.

Cyber security at its core is about protecting people, communities, and the fabric of our digital society. A cyber attack is not just technical; it erodes and disrupts lives.

Cyber safety does not have borders. We know it's a shared responsibility, and Ontario continues to step up to play its part. Ontario stands as a leading jurisdiction in digital innovation and is continually advancing cyber security measures to protect the data entrusted to us by our people and businesses.

Our Cyber Security Operations Centre protects Ontarians around the clock, operating 24/7, 365 days a year.

**1320**

As in previous years, Ontario once again joined international efforts to actively promote Cyber Security Awareness Month.

We are extremely proud of Ontario's 2025 Cyber Security Summit, a two-day event where attendees heard from executives, IT leaders and cyber security professionals from across Ontario's public sector on building a resilient and digitally secure province.

We are committed to "Protect Ontario. Every Click. Every Time."

Our ministry is also committed to protecting consumers from unfair business practices and bad actors. We became aware of the unethical operators that were misusing notices of security interest, or NOSIs, against unsuspecting consumers. In many cases of misuse, bad actors deliberately targeted the most vulnerable citizens of our province, including seniors and newcomers, by registering NOSIs on the title of their property without their knowledge and then charging exorbitant fees to discharge those NOSIs—

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Thank you, Minister. That concludes the time allotted for your presentation.

We'll now begin the question-and-answer segment, with rotations of 15 minutes for the official opposition, 15 minutes for the third party, and 15 minutes for the government members, for the remainder of the allotted time.

The timing of today's proceedings is with the Clerk, so you don't need to time them with your iPhone. It's right up here. We're monitoring it very carefully, as you saw.

As always, please remember, members, to make your comments through the Chair.

As the Chair, if a member seeks to reclaim the floor during the rotation while the minister is responding, please note that I will recognize the member and allow them to reclaim the floor to ask a new question.

For the deputy ministers, assistant deputy ministers, staff who are here: Please state your name and your title the first time that you speak so that we can accurately record in Hansard—to my right, who we have before us today.

I will now start with the official opposition. MPP Rakocevic, please.

**Mr. Tom Rakocevic:** Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you, committee members. Thank you to the minister and the ministry.

I'd like to state that I appreciate the ongoing work relationship I've had with your ministry and, in particular, with many of the members of your staff who are sitting behind you, who I've had the opportunity to meet with and share issues with in that portfolio. As was mentioned with the NOSIs, the notices of security interest, I was very proud that we could all work together and ban them in the province of Ontario.

I appreciate the Chair saying that I have the opportunity to once in a while reclaim the floor. I know that it is often by coincidence that the minister may speak and give quite a long answer, certainly by no ill intent, but I may have to do that a couple of times, and with all respect.

I would like to begin by looking at vote item 1814, item 31. This is with regard to the Motor Vehicle Accident Claims Fund.

Sometimes a ministry will move in a certain direction that may have unintended consequences on other ones.

We've heard that this government is making changes to auto insurance in this province, and one such way is to essentially allow people who will be looking for prospective insurance policies to slash benefits to quite a large amount. What that means is, you may find people living in, let's say, communities where there are front-line workers who might be in a lower-income family or what-not feeling that pressure to buy down.

Why do I raise it here? Because what your ministry has is the Motor Vehicle Accident Claims Fund. It was established as the payer of last resort to compensate people injured in automobile accidents in Ontario that involve an uninsured or unidentified vehicle, when no other automobile or liability insurance is available.

When setting the budget for this particular item, was there any thought or conversation made with the Ministry of Finance as to what that new policy with regard to auto insurance might have as an effect to this fund? Have you budgeted enough money, considering those changes that are coming?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** Thank you for the question. It's good to see you here, my colleague. We've worked together for many years.

With respect to OMVIC, I think it's important to set the stage for everybody here and also the viewers at home who are watching—what their roles and responsibilities are.

Within our ministry, we have 12 administrative authorities that report up to our ministry. OMVIC, the Ontario motor vehicles association, is one of those organizations. They're an organization that deals with automobile sales and automobile purchases in the province.

As it pertains to insurance in the budget, I'm not sure how that impacts our specific ministry.

But what I can say is that OMVIC regulates the automobile industry, and they do a very good job. We've given them more teeth to be able to regulate this particular industry—tougher penalties for automobile dealers that are not selling appropriately, selling illegally. We've been fully supportive of OMVIC in their jurisdiction that they operate in.

**Mr. Tom Rakocevic:** Just to be clear: The ministry is not responsible for any disbursement with regard to this claims fund, you're saying?

This has to do with insurance, whereas OMVIC has to do with secondary auto sales and resales of vehicles.

**Mr. Brian Riddell:** Chair, this question is quite speculative.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** I'm going to allow the question.

Minister, can you please respond to the question?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** Sure.

Again, following up, we're very proud of the great work that OMVIC does in the province. We want to make sure that Ontario consumers can buy with confidence when purchasing big items, like buying a vehicle from a registered auto dealer.

OMVIC, just so everyone is aware, is a self-financing organization—not financed by the government of Ontario—and they are a not-for-profit corporation that has been designated as an administrative authority with responsibility for administering and enforcing the motor vehicles dealers' association.

The MVDA provides consumer protection measures such as mandatory disclosures to consumers by registered motor vehicle dealers and salespersons, and all-inclusive pricing in motor vehicle dealer advertising, so when a consumer goes to purchase a vehicle, they will be able to see the full price; there are no hidden fees.

Claim coverage under the Motor Vehicle Dealers Compensation Fund is up to \$45,000—

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** MPP Rakocevic.

**Mr. Tom Rakocevic:** I'm sorry; perhaps we should move on.

I know that OMVIC is in fact a DAA, and I know that ultimately it's the mandate of the ministry to ensure that the DAAs do their mandate. But it is my understanding that OMVIC is not very affiliated with this particular vehicle accident claims fund. This has to do with insurance, whereas the fund I think you're referring to has to do with issues arising from new vehicles.

Why do I think this is relevant? Because what I'm saying is, if in fact the ministry does budget and assist or pay out this fund, and there are changes happening in finance that could cause many more people to have to ask for money, it is absolutely important and pertinent that it



is budgeted for as part of the ministry. I think it is absolutely relevant.

We're talking about two different things, but in the interests of time, I'm just going to restate—please give this serious consideration. The changes for automobile insurance may result in a lot of people having much less coverage, which means many more people might be looking to this ministry to help and try to access this fund. I think it is imperative that you account for that. It is not speculative; in fact, I think it's very proactive and it's very sensible to be forward-thinking with regard to this. So it is my attempt to assist and give you my thoughts. I think this is something you should consider moving forward.

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** We appreciate that. Perhaps I'll pass it to the deputy, if she has a little more information to add.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Deputy, state your full name, please.

1330

**Ms. Samantha Poisson:** My name is Samantha Poisson. I've had the pleasure of being the deputy minister of our ministry since April of this year. I'm accompanied today by my senior team in order to answer any of the more detailed questions the committee may have.

I believe you were speaking of the Motor Vehicle Accident Claims Fund. The Ministry of Finance is responsible for the statutory accident benefits entitlement. They have determined that uninsured injured parties are entitled only to mandatory benefits.

I could turn it over to Associate Deputy Minister Carr if you want some specific details related to it.

**Mr. Tom Rakocevic:** My interest was to just flag this as something for consideration. I think you've given the answer, and I think that everyone is listening to that. I hope that they will consider this, moving forward.

I would like to move on—

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** To the new question, please.

**Mr. Tom Rakocevic:** —to the new question, yes.

This is with regard to changes that are being made at ServiceOntario. One of the concerns that the official opposition has pointed out is bringing in companies that are actually owned by American private equity firms, like Staples. Though it's called Staples Canada, it is still owned by a private American equity firm. What's happening is they are now taking over the activities of many ServiceOntario locations, so we've seen smaller locations essentially close down. At the time, the FAO had some concerns of what the costs would be and what they would not be. There was, I think, a bit of debate between the ministry and them in terms of what was forecast.

We have seen, with regard to the IRP licences, that responsibilities of the Ministry of Transportation ended up in the hands of your ministry and in the hands of ServiceOntario workers. In fact, we've seen that transactions for ServiceOntario are up 10,000 more transactions, if I understand correctly, from last year.

I wonder how much work has been added to your ministry as a result of some of those changes. The question is, since you are budgeting \$11 million—or at least esti-

imating that. We don't know what it's going to be, I guess, in the end, but you're budgeting for that amount. Seeing that ServiceOntario is taking on more cases and more responsibilities, how can you make this work and still deliver service?

The last point to make is that when we looked at these licences previous—when it was managed by the Ministry of Transportation—these licences could be turned around within a matter of days, and we saw a huge backup and buildup. Of course, your workers are trying their best to manage an absolutely new responsibility. How are you going to account for that with regard to a reduction—or some might say a cut—to ServiceOntario by \$11 million?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** There are, I guess, a lot of questions built into that question. I could certainly talk for quite a while about ServiceOntario—and, again, to give perspective, I just want everyone to be aware of how ServiceOntario operates.

We have multiple service delivery vehicles. We have ServiceOntario mobile units that travel the province and go to remote, Indigenous and northern communities. These are areas that may not, obviously, have a ServiceOntario location. But at the end of the day, people need to get driver's licences, health cards or what have you. We also have ServiceOntario in libraries. We've partnered with municipalities, such as in Peel region, with the region of Peel. We have some that are operating in retail outlets such as Staples Canada, as you mentioned—which has been a phenomenal success, actually, if I might add, and I can certainly talk to that later if you wish. We also have them in Canadian Tire and some other retail operations. And we do have OPS-run operations. So we have multiple service delivery methods.

One piece of good news is that there are more and more people going online as well today. If you look at the number of people who are accessing these critical documents online, there are millions and millions of transactions and interactions online, and we've been able to expand that.

I think, going forward, our objective is to be able to deliver even better service to the people of Ontario more cost-efficiently. So I think, when you're referencing why there is less money—it's finding efficiencies and being able to deliver these services even better than we have to date. We'll continue doing that. I think the team here in our ministry, working with the folks at the various locations across Ontario, has done an incredible job of being able to deliver service more efficiently.

**Mr. Tom Rakocevic:** I appreciate the answer.

It's just that when we look at the case of the IRP, as an example, this was a new responsibility added to your team and to ServiceOntario workers across the province, and the result, in fact, was not that there was a reduction in the amount of time waiting. In fact, people who were waiting three to five days in some cases had to wait for months. I'm just pointing out that if you're forecasting to spend \$11 million less—and if we simply look at the IRP example, we're seeing that there's actually a reduction in service. One of the ways in which you can essentially

stretch less money over more is by lengthening the amount of time that people will have to get the issues they're looking to get help with dealt with. I just wanted to flag that, in light of the IRP situation, it's concerning, and I was a little bit concerned.

I had anticipated that you would say that there were efficiencies—and the issue is, again, with the IRP, we did not see this. We hear that you're spending less money, but now the wait to get these issues resolved has increased. But you've provided an answer to that, and so—

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** Just following up, specifically on the IRPs: We did move that over from MTO, as you mentioned, to ServiceOntario. We want ServiceOntario to be the one front-facing part of government that the people of Ontario are dealing with. There were a few little hitches in that movement a number of months ago, but they've since been resolved, and the feedback more recently has been extremely positive. People are quite happy—

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Thank you, Minister.

New question, please.

**Mr. Tom Rakocvic:** Supply Ontario—and I will continue this on to the next question. In light of the trade relationship, the evolving relationship we're having with our neighbour to the south, one of the things that I believe the Premier and the government has announced was to rely more on Canadian purchasing, and that no new procurement would happen through American companies, if I understood correctly. But, of course, we are dealing with a large number of American companies. Like I said, with regard to Staples now taking over ServiceOntario, they are owned by a private American equity firm.

My question is, how much are we currently spending on procurement and contracts with American companies, and what percentage of the overall money are we spending with those companies? Again, this is not new, but this is existing. Do you have those numbers?

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Minister, you have 37 seconds.

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** I wish I had longer.

What I can say is, the Premier, as you know, has been a leader, across Canada, in fact, for promoting Ontario and Canadian businesses.

We brought in a couple of pieces of legislation—number one, we brought in the Building Ontario Businesses Initiative, which is supporting local Ontario businesses. We've also supported Buy Ontario, Buy Canadian Day—which we passed in the spring, which the opposition did not support.

I think we're probably running low on time, but I'd be happy to answer your questions on this in the next round.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Thank you very much, Minister.

I just want to remind the members, before we move to the third party, as Chair, I allow the members to ask a wide range of questions pertaining to the estimates before the committee, to ensure they're confident that the ministry will spend those dollars appropriately. In the past, those questions have centred on delivery of similar programs in

previous fiscal years, about the policy framework that supports the ministry, or about service delivery or about the confidence of a ministry to spend the money wisely and efficiently.

But it must be noted, before we proceed, that the onus is on the members asking the questions to make the questioning relevant to the estimates under consideration. If that doesn't happen, I will stop the questioning, and we'll pursue and ask for a new question, as I said in my preliminary.

As the Chair, my expectation is that the questions are asked through the Chair and responses come back through the Chair. Everyone got that? Okay.

Third party, please. MPP McCrimmon.

**Mrs. Karen McCrimmon:** Welcome, to the minister and deputy minister. Thank you very much for being here with us today.

My colleagues aren't going to be surprised by the direction I'm going to take my questions, and that is performance metrics, data and evidence.

What kind of programs do you have in place to make sure that we're actually spending the money the way we should be? Tell me a little bit about how you track and what you look for to make sure that we are getting the best value for our money.

1340

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** Thank you for the question. We as a government are certainly very focused on ensuring efficiencies and getting the best deal for government. Are you referring to, for example, government contracts or—

**Mrs. Karen McCrimmon:** That's certainly one of—especially when you see the centralization of contracts, the aggregating of contracts; they get larger and larger. Do we have the right performance metrics and monitoring in place?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** I'll start out on that, and then I'll pass it over to my deputy, Samantha Poisson.

I would start out by saying that this is something we take very seriously. Ontario, as a province, has purchasing power, between the public sector and the broader public sector, of about \$30 billion. It's a large sum of money.

As you are, I'm sure, aware, we created an organization a little over five years ago, around the time of COVID, called Supply Ontario. They are very focused on procurement for Ontarians, for the OPS, for the broader public sector, and even municipalities at this point. Let me give you an example of some of the good work that they've done in terms of where they've been able to save money. Because they are able to aggregate this buying power across the province and the good people who work there, they're able to get better pricing on goods and services. They have a Vendor of Record Program. For example, we have a cellphone contract in the province of Ontario that is saving significant sums of money over any government entity, I would think, across Canada. This has been something that has been utilized through the public service of Ontario. We've had other provinces, actually, knocking on our door saying, "Can we go through Supply

Ontario? The deal you're getting on your mobile phone contract—\$15 a month? That's incredible. We're paying \$45 a month.” That's \$30 a month in savings just on the phone contract. Imagine how many users there are—hundreds of thousands of users. And municipalities are able to tag onto this.

The buying power of aggregating the public sector, the broader public sector, colleges and universities, school boards—and we've just tipped the surface on this. We have much more to do in terms of aggregating this and getting the broader public sector on side, but the power we have as a province now, with the buying power we have, has been astronomical, and the savings are incredible.

Supply Ontario is a major part of that, whether it's IT contracts with major companies, as an example too—where we can aggregate them and get better deals for the province.

I'll pass it over to my deputy for a little more detail on the savings that we are able to show the people of Ontario.

**Ms. Samantha Poisson:** Thank you for the question.

As an Ontario public service, we are vigilant to every taxpayer dollar that we spend, and we make sure that we get value on the return. We have KPIs built into our contracts. We have KPIs built into our oversight of the administrative authorities. And we have KPIs built into our programming.

By way of example, ServiceOntario has many service standards, and we make those service standards public, and we also publicly report on how we're doing against those standards. I feel that our job in doing that is to really continue to strengthen public trust and confidence in the services we're providing.

**Mrs. Karen McCrimmon:** The deputy minister just answered my next question, and it really was about, how do we do that for our front-line service delivery? What are we doing to make sure that we keep improving and that we are meeting the standards we are targeting?

**Ms. Samantha Poisson:** We are on a continuous improvement journey, and we always know that we can do better tomorrow than we did today. Part of how we do that is related to making our performance public. We have the At Your Service Act, and as part of that, we are publishing now, on a quarterly basis, how the Ontario public service is doing against those publicly stated standards.

There is always more work we can do to improve, but being accountable to those performance measures is certainly a priority—from our front-line staff to our senior managers.

**Mrs. Karen McCrimmon:** I would like to know how the ministry approaches maximizing transparency and accountability when it comes these major contracts.

**Ms. Samantha Poisson:** Could you clarify the contract aspect?

**Mrs. Karen McCrimmon:** In order to make sure that major contracts end up being as transparent and fair as we want them, we must have a process to—

**Ms. Samantha Poisson:** Yes, we have a very rigorous procurement process.

Actually, I would like to turn it over to ADM Chris Gonsalves to speak specifically to our procurement process.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Mr. Assistant Deputy Minister, I need your full name, please, for Hansard.

**Mr. Christopher Gonsalves:** My name is Christopher Gonsalves. I am the assistant deputy minister of the supply chain policy and oversight division.

I thank the member for the question.

To build off of the deputy's answer, our ministry—and I think this may be part of your question—in addition to having contracts, is also responsible for the procurement policy framework that drives the rules for how the public sector conducts procurement. That policy framework applies to ministries, agencies, and the broader public sector—so, hospitals, school boards, colleges, universities, and a number of other organizations designated broader public sector organizations. That framework is based on principles of openness, fairness and transparency. It ensures proper controllership and accountability, and it imposes those requirements on these entities as a part of how they govern themselves. So when procurements go through the process—whether it be for a ministry as they are being assessed by, for example, the Treasury Board or by our own ministry controls—they are assessed against these requirements of openness, fairness and transparency. It is baked into our policy framework, and it drives how the process works.

**Mrs. Karen McCrimmon:** We have this framework on how to make sure this happens fairly and transparently.

Who does the vetting of the responses to a request for a proposal? Whose job is it to make sure that these people are who they say they are?

**Mr. Christopher Gonsalves:** To just add a little bit of context—we're talking about procurement that is happening across ministries and across these organizations. An individual ministry or organization would be conducting a procurement, and they would define what they are trying to procure, and they would define transparent and fair criteria that they would use with the marketplace. They would assemble a team of the appropriate experts to help them assess the proposals that come in and, included in that, included in what they would be asking, would be the right due diligence to determine if a bid is capable of meeting the requirements.

These are the things that we govern through the policy framework, and the accountability is on whoever is procuring in the public sector to follow those rules.

**Mrs. Karen McCrimmon:** As fraud becomes more and more complex and more and more sophisticated, how are we updating our processes to make sure that we catch those things?

**Mr. Christopher Gonsalves:** Again, thank you for that question.

I would describe—and the minister mentioned our US restriction policy—our work in the policy space as something we constantly need to assess and evolve to fit with the realities of the moment. For example, with threats from the United States, we introduced policy to address that. I

think your point about the sophistication of fraud is a good point. It would be something that we would—and it isn't just a procurement thing. It would be how we deal with payments—there are a number of facets to your fraud comment, so I'll only speak to the procurement one. I think it would be something that we would continue to assess. We would continue to observe how this is being handled and dealt with in wherever the leading practices exist. We would continue to update our policy framework as the conditions around us evolve and as we try to adapt to a changing reality.

1350

**Mrs. Karen McCrimmon:** Where I'm going now is cyberbullying. The use of AI is just making cyberbullying that much worse. I've had instances of it in my riding, with school-aged children.

What can we do to actually make sure that AI, which can be a very transformative program—or whatever you want to call it—for our future, doesn't end up being a negative for us, especially for our children?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** I can certainly start off with that.

I definitely appreciate your question, because you are absolutely correct with respect to AI, or artificial intelligence. It is going to transform society; there's no question about that. There are some people, if you ask, who think this is going to be the end of humanity, and there are other people who think this is just the beginning of a new golden era. The reality is, it's here. We're at the very infancy of AI.

We are utilizing AI to a limited degree within the public sector right now to improve efficiencies and whatnot. It has the ability to transform, and we've got to transform it in a positive way. That's why we passed Bill 194 in the last Parliament, which sets the responsible use for artificial intelligence across the broader public sector.

When I was at the first ministers' meeting in September, I met your federal colleague from your riding, the parliamentary assistant Jenna Sudds. I met with her, I met with other ministers, and we signed an MOU there in terms of the sharing of information across provinces on cyber attacks, cyber—because you are absolutely correct; this is absolutely essential.

We, as a province, control critical information, critical data, whether it's your health information, your driver's licence—a lot of personal data. We need to ensure that is protected. We need to ensure the schools and the school boards and the hospitals are protected. That is critically important. That's why we also offer the services—because we have a fantastic team down on Jarvis Street that looks after our cyber security throughout the province. We offer the Cyber Security Centre of Excellence to the broader public sector as well, because we know that many municipalities—smaller ones—don't have access to the services that they need to be able to deal with this new issue that we're dealing with as a society. This is critically important.

You also mentioned, for example, cyberbullying as a separate issue, and that's critically important. That's also

addressed in Bill 194, in terms of the information, because the schools today—everyone, let's face it, is online. We want to ensure that organizations that shouldn't get children's data don't get it. That's a critical part of Bill 194.

I can tell you when I was out there, the ministers from other provinces were really looking to Ontario as a leader in this space. But it's evolving; it's changing. We need to keep our eyes on the ball. And we certainly appreciate anybody's input, if they have good ideas in terms of what we can do more on this.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** I will now move to the government side. Parliamentary Assistant Riddell.

**Mr. Brian Riddell:** Minister, in January of this year, the new ServiceOntario and Staples Canada pilot project began in three locations across the province. Since then, a total of seven of these pilot locations have opened, further providing more choices for the people of Ontario when it comes to service delivery in the province. This project builds on retail partners implemented by the previous Liberal government, with the support of the NDP. The Staples Canada partnership allows for more access to the people of Ontario to do things such as renew their licence plates, health cards and birth documents.

Can the minister please tell us why this pilot project with ServiceOntario and Staples is important? And what was the reasoning for the alternative service delivery model with large-scale retail partners? How did the government determine which retailers would partner with ServiceOntario to take on this pilot project?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** Thank you—through you, Chair—to the great member from Cambridge. I appreciate the question. That's a very good question and a very important question.

Making life easier for the people of Ontario is one of our government's top priorities, under Premier Ford.

The new ServiceOntario and Staples Canada plan is part of a pilot program that will evaluate key performance indicators. These indicators, such as wait times, transition accuracy and customer satisfaction, will help us judge the success of this alternative service delivery model, moving forward. There are many benefits that this program provides the people of Ontario with. It expands the way that customers can access government services in the communities they live in and shop in.

The benefits of our pilot with Staples Canada include convenient access to important government services and retail services in a single, central hub; enhanced customer service experience, with convenient locations, extended hours, and ample access to parking; and being a cost-effective partnership to deliver government services to Ontarians. The ServiceOntario pilot project with Staples Canada is anticipated to generate savings of over \$1 million over the duration of the pilot. But most importantly, it's about service delivery and the extended hours. A high percentage of transactions now are occurring during what would be considered off-business hours, where retail locations are open. This is making it much more convenient for the people of Ontario.

Partnerships with private providers date back all the way to 1917. As the member previously mentioned, our government is continuing to build on the alternative service delivery method with retailers, just like the Home Hardware, IDA and Canadian Tire partnerships that were actually started under the Liberals, under Kathleen Wynne, that were supported at the time by the NDP.

As a government, we assessed several key criteria when picking a retail partner to partner with. ServiceOntario completed consultations with potential retailers that have significant province-wide presence. Ministry officials assessed each potential partner on four criteria: customer service excellence, community presence, cost-effectiveness, and scalability. The ServiceOntario and Staples Canada pilot came to fruition as Staples Canada met all of the criteria that were inspected.

Our goal as a government is to make services easy and cost-effective for all Ontarians. By expanding the retail partnership model, we are continuing to provide services that make sense for Ontarians and ensuring that we are continuing our government's mandate. Our government will continue to explore additional options to deliver other convenient service delivery models all over the province, moving forward.

We're very pleased, so far, with the experience. I don't know if any of you have had any experiences at Staples Canada, but I have, and it was absolutely tremendous.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** New question, please, MPP Darouze.

**MPP George Darouze:** Through you Chair: Thank you very much, Minister and Deputy Minister, for being here this afternoon.

I know you touched a little bit on modernization and ServiceOntario and online services, but my question is a little bit in detail.

ServiceOntario provides essential government services to people across the province—those who need to renew their driver's licences, health cards, and other essential documents.

As the Minister of Public and Business Service Delivery and Procurement—we know that your ministry also oversees cyber security safety in the ever-changing and expanding online world.

You have spoken before about the need to make government services accessible and easy for the citizens of the province to access. ServiceOntario has recently made several changes to make services easier to access and more accessible to Ontarians by making products more accessible.

Can the minister please explain what changes have been made to the online services within ServiceOntario and the benefits to Ontario and to our communities, to our ridings, our residents?

1400

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** Thank you to the member for that great question.

You're absolutely right; ServiceOntario is really the front door to the government of Ontario—it's the interaction that everybody in the province of Ontario has with

critical services for businesses and individuals in the province. ServiceOntario has over 100 services and handles more than 15 million interactions annually.

ServiceOntario has long recognized the importance of modernizing their service delivery.

ServiceOntario is focused on expanding its digital capabilities to meet the growing demand for online government services. More than 55 of the highest-volume transactions are now available 24/7 on [serviceontario.ca](https://serviceontario.ca), including driver's licence renewal, health card renewal, birth, marriage and death certificates, and business and property registrations. This digital-first approach offers increased convenience and accessibility for Ontarians.

**Enhancing in-person delivery:** While driving digital transformation, ServiceOntario is also strengthening its community presence and recognizing the continued need for in-person service. The organization is piloting innovative alternative service delivery models, such as integrated community service hubs and mobile service centres, to provide a sustainable and customer-centric, in-person experience.

ServiceOntario is working closely with its government partners, including the Ministries of Transportation and Health, to eliminate regulatory and other barriers that limit the use of online services. This new approach aims to simplify processes and make it easier for people to complete their transactions digitally.

ServiceOntario's online services are designed with robust security measures, following best practices and industry standards, to protect the confidentiality and the privacy of Ontarians' personal information.

By embracing a hybrid approach that combines digital transformation and enhanced in-person service delivery, ServiceOntario is striving to provide Ontarians with a seamless, convenient and secure experience when it comes to accessing government services. This ongoing modernization effort aims to save time and money for both individuals and businesses.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** New question, please, MPP Allsopp.

**Mr. Tyler Allsopp:** Thank you to the minister and the assistant deputy minister for being here, as well as to all of your staff, for participating in this important estimates process.

Minister, your ministry has played a significant role in facilitating online access to services for Ontarians. I understand that your team has been leveraging technology to modernize government services and deliver them in a safe and secure manner. I have also learned about the new pilot program launched in several communities across Ontario that enables individuals to apply for and obtain their marriage licences online.

I'm a married person myself—almost nine years now, most of them happily.

*Interjections.*

**Mr. Tyler Allsopp:** Some married people in the room, I guess.

Could you please provide an overview of this new program and an update on the status of the pilot? Additionally,

how many communities are currently participating in this initiative, and can we expect the program to expand province-wide in the future?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** I'm happy to hear that you've been married happily for almost nine years. ServiceOntario—maybe we can look into providing some certificates of anniversary, of congratulations, for so many years of happy marriage. We'll have to look into that.

My ministry is enhancing accessibility for engaged couples by implementing an online marriage licence application process, as part of a ServiceOntario pilot program in select municipalities across the province, as you mentioned. Our government is committed to ensuring that all Ontarians have access to essential services when they need them. To that end, we are working closely with our municipal partners to create a straightforward and user-friendly online application process enabling couples to complete their applications efficiently.

This initiative allows couples to apply for a marriage licence through a secure portal where they could submit their identification and supporting documents electronically. The participating municipality ensures that the application is accurate and complete before the licence is picked up in person. The online process reduces the risk of errors, increases efficiency, saves time, and minimizes paper usage for both the municipality and applicants.

The pilot program was successfully launched in March 2023 in a select group of municipalities, including Kenora, Cobourg, Kingston, Ingersoll, Uxbridge and Timmins.

This initiative aligns with our government's digital-first yet not digital-only approach to service delivery. Ontarians who prefer the traditional method of obtaining a marriage licence are still welcome to do so, as we have always provided. Our goal is to make the marriage licence application process as easy and stress-free as possible.

We are continually seeking opportunities to expand our services, especially with successful pilots like the Marriage Licence Modernization Program.

At this point, I would like to turn it over to my deputy minister.

**Ms. Samantha Poisson:** The point that I wanted to add is that since March of this year, there are a total of 67 municipalities across Ontario participating in the Marriage Licence Modernization Program. This would be yet another example of our journey on continuous improvements, making our services simpler, faster and better.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** We will go to MPP Sarrazin, s'il vous plaît. Merci beaucoup.

**Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin:** Thank you, Chair. How much time do we have?

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** You have two minutes and 40 seconds.

**Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin:** Okay, so I'll do it really quickly. Thank you, Minister and your team, for being here.

What is the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery and Procurement doing to support the francophone community through ServiceOntario?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** It's a very good question, MPP Sarrazin. I know that you have a large francophone

community in your riding and they are particularly interested in this.

ServiceOntario is committed to delivering the highest-quality customer service to Ontarians in both official languages, to meet the needs of our francophone customers. Franco-Ontarians have broad access to French-language services when they visit 111 of our 276 service centres in 26 designated communities, call the bilingual contact centre, or complete any of the 55 services online, 24/7, in French.

To better serve the francophone community, the government also offers the option of French-language characters, such as accents, on Ontario drivers' licences, Ontario photo cards and Ontario health cards. As you're aware, MPP Sarrazin, it was our government that brought about that change.

Ontario's francophone community can conveniently access vital documents that reflect their unique identity for free through ServiceOntario centres across our province.

In addition, we have introduced a pilot to test the use of 82 translation devices, which are iPads, in service centres across the region to support multiple languages, including French. The pilot aims to use devices across service centres that are equipped with a translation app to support non-English speakers. As we continue to develop this pilot, we will support services in French in non-designated areas, and many other languages that Ontarians speak.

ServiceOntario completes an annual audit of FLS-designated positions to ensure that French-language service standards are met. In public offices, compliance has consistently met or exceeded the ministry service standards. We also work with our private sector providers to ensure that they are meeting their French Language Services Act requirements.

At this time, I'll hand it over to my deputy for the remaining time that we—how much time do we have left, Chair?

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Well, that remaining time is now 10 seconds, sir, so I would suggest that we go next to the official opposition.

MPP Rakocevic, please.

**Mr. Tom Rakocevic:** We left off where I was asking what percentage of existing contracts and procurement are coming from American businesses.

Again, as part of the tariff response, the government is proudly saying that they are not allowing new contracts to American firms and that they want to purchase here in Ontario. That's obviously a departure from their earlier strategy.

As we pointed out, Staples is owned by a private equity American firm, so the money that we are spending to get our services is essentially going to Americans, in this sense.

**1410**

What percentage of existing contracts—and the amount of money—are currently going to American vendors right now?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** This is an important subject that we could talk, I'm sure, a lot more than even 15 minutes on.

One thing that may have come through with the situation south of the border is, I think, Canadians are more united than ever in terms of wanting to stand up and support our province and our country. I think Premier Ford has been a leader, not only in Ontario, but across Canada, in moving that forward.

Let me go back a couple of years—because we've had some turbulence with our relationship with the United States in the past seven, eight, nine months.

We brought about the Building Ontario Businesses Initiative several years ago, which put a preference on Ontario businesses well before our current trade relationship with the US. That was put through several years ago to support Ontario businesses getting an upper hand—smaller businesses, some businesses that did not get approved by the Vendor of Record Program—to give them—

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Sorry, I'm going to go to MPP Rakocovic.

**Mr. Tom Rakocovic:** I appreciate the answer.

Again, I note that even after this policy was put in place, they then elected to go with Staples Canada, which is owned by an American equity firm, in terms of delivering services, and therefore our taxpayer dollars are going there. So, notwithstanding what you're saying, decisions are still being made that are actually the contrary of what you're suggesting.

Again, the question is really a current question, in terms of forecasting: What percentage of the money that this ministry is paying on services and on procurement is going to American companies? If the answer is that you don't have it right now, I will accept the answer. I'm looking for a number and a percentage, to gauge how much we are spending outside of Ontario or how much we are spending to the benefit of the American businesses, especially during this time, and especially when this government is saying they want to take a Team Canada and Team Ontario approach. What percentage, how much, is going to them and not to us?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** Again, I have to provide some context—with Staples Canada, for example.

The generally accepted definition of a Canadian company, for procurement purposes—not just in Ontario, but across Canada, so this is something that is a standard view—is if a company has a minimum of a 250-employee footprint in Canada. I want to make that clear, first of all. It's essential that we have that in place, so that if we are dealing, in some cases, with companies from abroad—we want to see that they have a footprint here and they are benefiting Ontarians and Canadians and they're creating jobs. I think that is very important.

We want to be supportive of Ontario and Canadian businesses. This is absolutely critical.

We've put through the Building Ontario Businesses Initiative, which the opposition did not support, by the way.

We've put through the Buy Ontario, Buy Canadian Day Act, which the opposition did not support.

We also want to ensure that we are open for business. When you travel into Ontario from New York state or Michigan, there's a sign at that border; it says, "Open for business."

We want to encourage business investment in this province. In fact, we've attracted almost \$50 billion in foreign investment in our auto sector over the last seven years, so—

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Thank you, Minister.

We're going to go to MPP Rakocovic, please. I want to hear a new question.

**Mr. Tom Rakocovic:** We don't have an answer to how much money is being spent on American companies, nor a percentage.

What percentage of procurement is actually using existing vendors of record? You are going to have a pool of vendors that would have been created prior to the tariff situation and, of course, they would have the ability to be fast-tracked or whatnot. I understand—but I just want to know the number. We're just looking for numbers, in terms of the forecasting in the future. I know government members will call us out and say, "Think to the future," and so on. I'm asking specific questions about what percentage—again, if the answer is, "That's a very specific question, and we don't have it at this moment," I will accept that and move on, but, I apologize, I will have to interrupt, otherwise.

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** I appreciate your question. I think it's important to understand, though—in the context of how you would even define an Ontario or Canadian business.

Perhaps Chris Gonsalves, our ADM, can give a little more colour on that particular question.

**Mr. Christopher Gonsalves:** I want to connect your question to something I mentioned earlier for MPP McCrimmon's question, which is, we are talking about spending and contracting and procurement that is happening across a number of entities, versus just this particular ministry.

We are also talking about some nuance in terms of how we define, for example, a US business or an Ontario business—I think that's important—and also in terms of the ministries or the organizations, with the ability to say, "This is how much we are spending on this particular contract," versus what our ministry would have centrally.

To answer your question—we are talking about spending that is happening across a broad swath of entities, as opposed to that it's just happening here.

**Mr. Tom Rakocovic:** American companies are going to want to come into Canadian markets. They're going to want to just create a dot-ca website, maybe throw the word "Canada" on the end of a business and then, according to definitions, claim to be a Canadian business. I hope, when you make decisions around procurement, you understand that while they may meet certain definitions, there might be alternatives here that are fully Canadian-owned in every way, shape or form. I hope that you really weigh that when you make those decisions, especially in light of what's happening.

If you don't have those numbers now, perhaps that's a conversation or a question for another day.

Let's move on to vote 1816. How much time is remaining?

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** You have seven minutes and 12 seconds.

**Mr. Tom Rakocevic:** Excellent.

This is with regard to consumer services. As I mentioned before, with regard to this comes your role, where the DAAs, the delegated administrative authorities, are under your umbrella, essentially, under your watch.

Can you confirm that you, as a ministry, collect oversight fees from DAAs in the province of Ontario? Can that be confirmed, and can you tell me what the total amount is for that? If you don't have the total amount, at least can you confirm that they are in fact collected?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** Thank you for the question.

Just so everyone is aware, our ministry, the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery and Procurement, oversees 12 administrative authorities that have the stated goal of looking after each sector—OMVIC in the automobile sector; the BAO, which is the bereavement authority; RECO, in real estate; Tarion etc. All of these independent agencies do flow through this ministry. They do, on an annual basis, provide a ministry oversight fee.

**Mr. Tom Rakocevic:** Those DAAs continue to result in Auditor General reports where they talk about—RECO was in the news recently around a particular brokerage taking money for their own purposes. This was something that was known by RECO and sat on for months. Again, the ministry is collecting money—so this is part of the budget; there's going to be a line item where money is coming in—and they're supposed to provide oversight. It is the mandate of this ministry to ensure these DAAs are following their mandate. But in the case of RECO, that's not happening. So can you tell us how, moving forward, these oversight fees are going to be collected and how they will provide oversight, for instance, to RECO, with regard to this?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** With respect to RECO, which you touched on, yes, they do provide a fee every single year to the ministry. They are independent. They are arm's-length from the government, so we do not and cannot interfere in the way they run their operation. Let's make that extremely clear: They are arm's-length. I as a minister or our staff cannot tell the organization how to run their business. So we need to be very, very clear on that.

We set the administrative framework for the organizations, but we don't run the organizations.

1420

MPP Rakocevic, I'm sure you're aware that RECO has been undergoing an investigation, which I and our ministry initiated, and it's being done right now by Dentons. That report is actually due, coincidentally, today. We are awaiting the results of those recommendations from Dentons on where RECO has had some issues and failings in terms of overseeing the industry. We are awaiting that, and once we get that, we'll be reviewing that and then

providing further comment. We will be, by the way, providing transparency on the findings of that report, as I promised to do in the letter six weeks ago.

**Mr. Tom Rakocevic:** You say that they're independent. But then the government speaks about removing, let's say, speed cameras—as a “cash grab.”

You have, as a ministry, of course, something called oversight fees; you call it that. The words are “oversight”—they could just be called fees, but they're called oversight fees, which suggests that oversight should be happening. You will be collecting that money from this DAA and the others that are mentioned as well, moving forward. That money was collected last year and the year prior, when a lot of these issues were happening. Obviously, these DAAs are not meeting their mandate when problems like this occur. It just seems that money is being collected and the oversight is lacking.

Another example of this is the HCRA. We now have an Auditor General report with regard to the HCRA. It looks like they are rubber-stamping licence requests—situations where, in fact, some builders are under investigation, with numbers of charges against them, and then they continue or proceed to be given a rubber stamp to move forward.

There was a high-profile case where HCRA actually brought a series of charges against a particular builder. That builder collected money from people, then said, “It's going to cost more if you want your house”—in some cases, up to \$300,000. “We're going to take it from you.” The HCRA thought that they had the evidence necessary to show that this was a breach of contract. “Let's move forward.” None of it resulted in any action.

Again, your ministry is collecting an oversight fee from this DAA, but then is not able to provide the oversight that they're paying for to help guide them through what appear to be failures—perhaps it's growing pains. I think as much as you want to say that it's an independent organization—if you collect something called an oversight fee and they're failing on many accounts, I think it's time to step in.

What will you be doing to spend the oversight fees to bring the oversight that's really necessary for these DAAs?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** Thank you very much to the member for the question.

I'll just give you a little bit of a rundown in terms of what those oversight fees cover right now and some perspective on how we see things going forward.

In terms of the ministry—where the oversight fees go right now—they're involved in managing the overall relationship with the authority, developing new legislative and regulatory proposals, managing issues and ongoing communications, monitoring performance of the authorities in administering the delegated legislation, and ensuring authorities meet all performance requirements in their annual reports and whatnot. So that's what those go to.

We don't get into the day-to-day operations in the case of—you mentioned RECO or the HCRA, where they are involved in an issue. We don't get involved in individual cases. We have no knowledge of that beyond what you would know.



With respect to the HCRA—you did bring them up—I do want to mention that, last year, we initiated significant reforms to enhance the regulatory framework governing builders in the province. Those reforms included doubling the maximum fines for developers that unfairly cancel contracts and ensuring they face hundreds of thousands of dollars in potential penalties for each infraction. We've also ensured that the financial penalties imposed on those bad actors—

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Excuse me, sir. That completes the time for questioning from the official opposition.

I will now turn to the third party. MPP McCrimmon, please.

**Mrs. Karen McCrimmon:** I'm going to shamelessly push a couple of local issues that you probably won't have the answer to, but I'm just going to take the opportunity to bring it up to you and put it on your table and ask you to have a look at it.

One of them is the closing of the ServiceOntario centre in Arnprior. It's a growing community. It's not in my riding. My riding goes right up to the boundaries of Arnprior. But now the people who live in Arnprior are either going to have to travel a half an hour to Renfrew or a half an hour to Kanata—and Arnprior is booming. My rural constituents who live on the outskirts of Arnprior now have a much longer journey in order to visit a ServiceOntario outlet.

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** ServiceOntario, as I mentioned in my preamble, is—we really appreciate the organization and appreciate the work they do for the people of Ontario in terms of service delivery. It's critically important. We want people to access it conveniently, efficiently, and to have a seamless experience. When you have millions and millions of interactions every single year, it's critically important that we get it right.

There is a methodology in terms of a process, in terms of where locations are for ServiceOntario. As I say, there are over 270 physical locations in the province right now.

I would invite my associate deputy minister Dafna Carr, who's in charge of ServiceOntario, to walk you through the actual process of how they pick locations and go through that, if it's okay.

**Mr. Brian Riddell:** Chair?

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Yes?

**Mr. Brian Riddell:** Point of order: Could somebody explain how this works with prior questions? I don't know why we're going over it again.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** I find the question is in order. It's service-based.

Minister, did you want your deputy to answer the question?

*Interjection.*

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** I need your full name, please, and your position title.

**Ms. Dafna Carr:** My name is Dafna Carr. I'm the associate deputy minister for ServiceOntario.

I want to let the Chair and the member of Parliament know that Arnprior, right now, is a location that we are

equally committed to. We have issued a request for service to the region, and we're in the middle of procurement. Obviously, I can't predict how that procurement will occur and what the results will be, but we are looking to see how to best serve that community as well.

**Mrs. Karen McCrimmon:** I love that response. It was just closed last month—so I'm hoping. Thank you very much. You made my day.

The next one, another local one—this was brought to me by the member from Kingston. I'll give it to you to take with you. It's about, do we really have a buy-Ontario program? Is it something we take seriously—that we're actually going to buy from Ontario? In this case, the Ottawa Police Service bought two boats, but they bought them from a BC company instead of an Ontario company, and the Ontario company is saying that the BC product isn't compliant with the specifications. You're not going to know about this, but I'm really quite happy just to hand it to you, and if you go have a look and see where it is and if we do have—if we are trying to prioritize buy-Ontario.

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** Thank you very much for the question, MPP McCrimmon. I appreciate that.

We do very much have a buy-Ontario, buy-Canada strategy, and we actually have legislation in the province, with the Building Ontario Businesses Initiative Act, where procurement in the province of Ontario—we do put Ontario businesses higher on the list. They are given extra points, so to speak, so they are given extra preference. We prefer to deal with Ontario businesses.

I signed a procurement directive, in my early days being minister, where the public sector and the broader public sector essentially, with exceptions—obviously, if there is some medical device or medicine that we don't manufacture or build in Ontario or Canada, we, in some cases, do have to go abroad to whichever country. There are exceptions, of course, for health and safety, and sometimes some emergency first responders' vehicles, in some cases. That may be the case here; I don't know. I can't speak to this specific case.

1430

But what I can tell you is that we do have legislation and we have a directive, and we just passed Bill 56 today, which actually favours purchasing Ontario-made vehicles for the public service and the broader public sector in Ontario. Again, there will be exceptions, because not everything is manufactured in Ontario. But I think it's fair to say that where we can, we should be buying Ontario first, Canada second.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** MPP McCrimmon, your line of questioning is straying outside of what we're here to discuss in the estimates. This is an area that, in my reading of the estimates, is not a line item.

Can you come back with your questioning and have it be a little bit more specific to the estimates before us, please?

**Mrs. Karen McCrimmon:** Well, I think it's kind of where I started. It's about, do we have the data, the evidence, the science, the statistics that tell us that we're

doing the right thing—that we are buying from Canada, that we are buying from Ontario and locally?

My riding is Kanata, as you know, the high-tech centre of Ontario, and one of the biggest complaints I get is always about, “How come they don’t buy local?”

So I just wanted to know, what are the kinds of performance measurements, the indicators, that we track to make sure that we are doing our very best to buy local? That’s my question.

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** I could start out with that question—

*Interjection.*

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** What is your objection?

**Mr. Brian Riddell:** It’s still outside the line of questioning.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Well, that’s what I just said, didn’t I?

**Mr. Brian Riddell:** I agree.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Thank you, noted.

Please carry on, Minister.

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** To the member, through the Chair: I had the opportunity to visit your riding, actually, earlier in the year, and what a great part of the country—and province, I might add—it is.

You are right; as I mentioned earlier in my speech, Ontario is the second-largest tech cluster in North America. Between Kanata, the GTA and Waterloo, we have 420,000 tech workers. We have a lot, I know, in Kanata, as an example.

I’ve been touring and talking to a lot of organizations that are based here in Canada. We’ve had incredible growth in the number of tech companies in Ontario.

I’m not sure if you’re familiar with the Vector Institute, which is an organization here in Toronto that helps a lot of our great Canadian start-ups. The government of Ontario has been a sponsor of that. That’s helping a lot of these initial early-stage Canadian and Ontario companies find their footing, not only financially but also with being able to get on as vendors of records.

Ultimately, at the end of the day, a lot of these smaller companies that are maybe Canadian-, Ontario-based need to get on the Vendor of Record Program, so introducing them to our ministry and Supply Ontario, I think, is absolutely critical.

You are 100% correct in that we do want to support Ontario and Canadian businesses where we can. There are cases, as I’m sure you’re aware, where we don’t manufacture certain products here in the province, and, unfortunately, we can’t, but where we can, we’re going to be 100% supportive.

**Mrs. Karen McCrimmon:** I’m going off on a different tangent now: digital identity. That’s something that actually creates a bit of angst in people. I just want to know where you are—if you’re making progress, and what your challenges are as you’re moving that particular issue forward.

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** To the member, through the Chair: It’s interesting that you bring this subject up,

because this is something that I think is growing in interest across the province and across the world.

When I was at the First Ministers meeting back in September, this was an issue that was actually up for discussion. A number of provinces are moving forward in this particular area; for example, the province of Alberta—I believe it’s their health card. Right now, if you’re from Alberta, you actually have a little paper health card and there’s no photo on it. It’s literally falling apart. You can’t even laminate it. At least we have nice health cards here in the province of Ontario, with your photo on them. What the minister in Alberta told me was that there are 400,000 more health cards in the province of Alberta than there are people. That tells me that there’s a problem.

Digital credentials are something that we are actively considering. As any good government would be, we’re always open to suggestions and ideas. Whether it’s health cards, drivers’ licences, or other parts of digital credentials—that’s something we are actively considering.

I’m not sure if my deputy would like to add more on that particular subject.

**Ms. Samantha Poisson:** Might I suggest that we invite Mohammad Qureshi, our corporate chief information officer and associate deputy with the ministry, to speak to this item?

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Welcome, sir. This is your first time at the table. Can you please say your full name and your position?

**Mr. Mohammad Qureshi:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee for having us. I’m Mohammad Qureshi, corporate CIO and associate deputy minister within the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery and Procurement.

Just to the member’s question: The official digital credentials program was officially closed in 2024; there was work that was happening previously. The Treasury Board Secretariat received and approved the project close-out. There are, however, opportunities around, as the minister was mentioning, what are some of the opportunities to enhance better services overall for citizens or even address fraud or other components?

At this point, we are not doing any work on digital identity or digital credentials, but we are assessing the situation as the world evolves and as the federal, provincial and territorial components and conversations happen as well.

**Mrs. Karen McCrimmon:** When we’re looking at this—I know it’s complex and there are a lot of things to consider—how are we connecting across the ministries so that we don’t end up, in this transformation, if we go this direction, with duplication and systems that can’t work together?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** Are you referring to the one-permitting process—permitting that we’re doing right now that we’re actively involved in? That’s not really digital credentials, but that’s another aspect where we are trying to minimize, for example, the permitting.

We all know in Ontario, right now, it can take upwards of 15 years to open a mine. We cannot live in a competitive

world anymore, taking that long. Part of the problem has been all the permits that are required and all the red tape. We are actively involved right now in minimizing that, to a one-window solution. For example, proponents of a mine will be able to go through a one-permit process so that they can actively see where they're at in terms of the processing through government, be constantly up to date, and have much less bureaucracy.

I could pass it over to Mohammad for more detail.

**Mr. Mohammad Qureshi:** As part of the opening remarks from the minister, the minister spoke to the IT operating model work that's happening as part of this ministry.

We have centralized all of the I&IT within this ministry. The centralization of the I&IT model really does support all of the ministries and the outcomes that they look to achieve. So we have all of our IT leadership—we actually have a very well-coordinated approach to IT investments and integrations that need to be considered, all while ensuring that we apply the cyber security lens to ensure we're protecting and securing our data, as well as the privacy elements. We work very closely with our policy partners and the Information and Privacy Commissioner to ensure, when we are connecting data, that we are not jeopardizing any of the privacy of our citizens.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** We'll now move to the government members. MPP Ciriello, please.

**MPP Monica Ciriello:** I want to thank the minister for answering questions on a very important topic here today.

My question is going to be about the vehicle registration process.

As the Minister of Public and Business Service Delivery and Procurement—I appreciate your insight into the government's effort to improve the everyday transactions that all Ontarians rely on.

1440

My constituents in Hamilton Mountain have expressed significant concerns regarding the complexities involved in the vehicle registration process. The numerous forms, supporting documentation requirements and detailed licensing rules can create barriers and frustration for businesses and individuals alike. Additionally, the need to travel to ServiceOntario centres and the long wait times associated with these visits can lead to loss of productivity and a backlog at local dealerships. Even with the initial registration, errors or denials often require further prolonging of the process.

Given these challenges, I would like to understand, so I can explain to my residents, what specific steps your ministry is taking to streamline and modernize the vehicle registration experiences for those in Ontario.

Could you please provide an overview of the incentives and digital transformations mentioned, such as the Digital Dealership Registration Program, the introduction of online renewals for commercial vehicle licence plates, and the continuous addition of high-volume transactions to the ServiceOntario website?

Furthermore—and I know this is a multi-pronged question—I would be interested to hear more about your plans

to maintain a sustainable network of physical ServiceOntario locations, particularly in relation to the pilot projects for integrated community hubs and mobile service centres. This hybrid approach of driving digital transformation while strengthening in-person capability seems to be crucial in ensuring accessibility and convenience for Ontarians.

I appreciate your commitment to improving everyday government transactions, and I look forward to your responses to those questions.

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** To the member: Thank you for that question; I'll have to try to remember every piece of it. I want to thank you for the opportunity to provide more details on our government's efforts to modernize vehicle services and improve the experience for Ontarians through the Digital Dealership Registration Program.

As you mentioned, the DDR program was developed through extensive consultations with automobile associations and car dealerships across the province. This collaborative approach was essential in ensuring the program addresses the specific needs and pain points of the automobile industry.

Ontario is home to over 7,000 new and used car dealerships, and these dealers account for approximately 4.7 million ServiceOntario transactions each year. By digitizing this process through the DDR program, we are aligning with the government's digital-first objective to provide simpler, better and faster services for both the people and businesses of Ontario.

The goal of the DDR program is to provide an end-to-end digital experience for motor vehicle dealerships when registering vehicles with the Ministry of Transportation. This cuts red tape, reduces paperwork, saves time and money, and ultimately makes it easier for customers to buy a car right here in this province.

I'm pleased to share that through the DDR program, the top 10 highest-volume ServiceOntario transactions are now available online. This represents a significant milestone in our digital transformation efforts.

While we're taking a digital-first approach to service delivery, it's important to note once again that this is not digital-only. We understand that digital solutions do not work for everyone, and some customers and dealers still prefer in-person services. As such, in-person services will continue to be an important component in serving Ontarians, including fulfilling dealership registrations.

The government has been clear about protecting front-line services and maintaining a community presence across the province. The DDR program does not change this commitment. We will continue to work closely with our stakeholders to ensure we strike the right balance between digital and in-person service offerings.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** The next question: MPP Darouze, please.

**MPP George Darouze:** Thank you, Chair. Through you: I want to switch a little bit to the construction sector, where we have, throughout, underground infrastructure. Carleton, as much as you know—we have lots of construction, and we have lots in that sector.

I want to talk to you a little bit, Minister, about the unprecedented growth of both Ontario's economy and its population year after year. It becomes increasingly clear that our government must adapt to meet the evolving needs of a dynamic modern economy, to effectively serve the people and businesses of Ontario. We must continue to ensure the efficient delivery of services across all sectors.

By striving to enhance standards and practices within our most crucial industry, we can create an environment that fosters innovation, stimulates job creation, and boosts productivity. This proposed legislation aims to achieve these goals, particularly in the context of our ambitious target to construct 1.5 million new homes by 2031. Meeting this target is vital to the well-being of our communities and the growth of our economy.

With that in mind, I would like to ask the minister to elaborate on the significant role that One Call plays in the construction sector. How will this legislation further support builders as they collaborate with us to create a better and stronger Ontario? Your insights on this are very valuable, and I'm hoping that you can elaborate a little bit more on that one.

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** What a very thoughtful question; I'd be happy to answer that.

Underground infrastructure is prevalent throughout our environment, which is why it is crucial to enhance One Call's capabilities to ensure safe digging practices. Strengthening this system will effectively connect those planning to dig with the vital information necessary to protect both their safety and that of their communities. Through my ministry's comprehensive consultation process, we have garnered unanimous support from builders for expedited locate services, which are essential to keep projects on schedule.

In line with our commitment to bolster economic growth and the infrastructure that underpins it, this legislation introduces several key changes to enhance One Call's effectiveness in our province. Notably, it will prohibit underground infrastructure owners and operators from charging for locate services, while also refining the locate rules to make them more efficient and responsive to project timelines.

Bill 153, the Building Infrastructure Safely Act, 2023, implements a series of changes aimed at significantly improving the safety and efficiency of underground locates. One particularly noteworthy element of this proposed legislation is the expansion of the dedicated locator model. This model allows a single locator to comprehensively search for all potential underground infrastructure at a project site. Currently utilized in broadband development projects, this approach has demonstrating considerable success. By extending this model to other types of projects, we will enhance cost-effectiveness and improve the efficiency of locates, all managed by one skilled, dedicated locator.

Through Bill 153, our government is committed to delivering impactful policies that address construction needs while enhancing safety and affordability across Ontario.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** MPP Riddell, please.

**Mr. Brian Riddell:** Minister, I believe I represent the view of many of my constituents when I express that the legislation contained in Bill 142, the Better for Consumers, Better for Businesses Act, 2024, is not just timely but truly overdue. It brings me great satisfaction to witness our government stepping up to implement such meaningful reforms.

The problems of fraud and unethical business practices are alarmingly high, and it's disheartening to realize that our consumer protection laws have remained stagnant for nearly two decades. This inaction has left many Ontarians exposed to risk, potentially undermining their financial security and trust in the marketplace. If we do not take decisive steps now, we risk perpetrating a cycle of vulnerability among our consumers, hindering our economy, as a lack of confidence in consumer protections can stifle market growth.

1450

Therefore, I would like to ask the minister to provide further insights into the rationale behind our government's decision to pursue these important changes at this particular moment. What are the key motivations driving this initiative, and how do we envision it enhancing the overall consumer landscape in Ontario?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** I appreciate the member's question.

To put it simply, existing consumer protection laws are outdated and disconnected from the realities that Ontarians are facing daily when interacting with businesses. Since the current legislation was enacted in 2005, our economy and the world have undergone significant changes. It is unrealistic to expect that people's experiences with businesses would remain unchanged, particularly given the rapid evolution of our digital economy. Consequently, we cannot expect our consumer protection laws to stay static either.

Rather than being complacent, our government is committed to fulfilling its duty to create a marketplace in Ontario that promotes competition and fairness. This is why we are taking the necessary steps to align the current regulations with the demands of the modern economy.

This act is designed to offer enhanced protection for consumers, especially those in vulnerable positions, while also simplifying compliance for businesses. This way, businesses can continue to serve their customers without inadvertently jeopardizing their own success.

I want to highlight the extensive reach of this legislation. Nearly every Ontarian will engage in transactions that fall under the proposed new laws, impacting more than 15 million people. This is a significant number.

I'm proud that our government, under Premier Ford, is advocating for the working people of Ontario as they spend their hard-earned money.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** MPP Allsopp, please.

**Mr. Tyler Allsopp:** Thank you, Chair, and through you to the minister: In your opening remarks, you mentioned that 24 new varieties of grapes have been added under the

VQA label, which is fantastic, giving consumers more confidence and more choice.

As you may know, Prince Edward county is in my riding. It is one of the top wine regions in our province, and it has become a true source of pride for our province, with local wineries producing award-winning wines and creating vibrant communities across our regions.

I've heard from grape growers and winemakers in Prince Edward county who are excited about the new opportunities to innovate and expand, thanks to the recent changes in provincial regulations.

Minister, could you please share how the government's recent actions are supporting the growth of Ontario's wine industry and what these changes mean for producers, consumers and communities across the province, including in the Bay of Quinte?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** Great question. I know some great wines in your part of Ontario, most definitely.

The good news is that Ontario wineries have been selling incredible volumes this year—they're up 60% year over year—as a result of taking the American wines off the shelves, so that has been definitely a positive impact on the wineries.

Our wineries and growers are really the heartbeats of our community, as you mentioned. You have a lot of wineries in your region; there are a lot in the Niagara region. They support economic growth and local jobs, and they showcase the best of Ontario's agricultural sector.

Our government is proud to champion Ontario's wine industry.

This year, as you mentioned, we expanded the list of grape varieties eligible for a VQA certification, adding 24 new types that are resilient, sustainable and perfect for our climate. These changes empower winemakers to craft exciting new wines, giving consumers a wider selection of premium, local-made products to enjoy.

We've also reinforced the integrity of the VQA label, ensuring that every bottle reflects the highest standards of quality and authenticity.

By supporting these local producers, we're helping small businesses grow, attracting more visitors to our beautiful wine regions, and strengthening Ontario's reputation as a world-class wine destination.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** We'll now move over to the official opposition. You have six minutes and 38 seconds.

**Mr. Tom Rakocevic:** I have very limited time after that series of tough government questions.

I would like to really quickly touch on the oversight, cyber security, and inspections from Consumer Protection Ontario.

Really quickly, about the oversight, before I move on—the ministry are collecting these fees. These fees from the DAAs generally come from consumers, whoever they are. They're generally collecting from the consumers, and they're called oversight fees. These DAAs, though you say are independently governed—when you look at Tarion, this ministry has come in and brought changes to require people purchasing new homes to now be responsible to opt

in to the program. Of course, this is happening—or at least what has been cited as a reason is protecting Tarion's fund. The decisions made by HCRA in how they handled their mandate will have impacts on each other, so oversight is sorely, sorely needed. The money is being collected—it's named that. So if you're going to collect the money, let's spend it on oversight.

What I'd like to move on to is with regard to inspections.

The government has increased fines in many different ways since 2018, but if you are not enforcing, if you are not collecting the money, then what is the use of, in fact, increasing them?

Consumer Protection Ontario will take phone calls through the consumer protection hotline. My question, therefore, is, how many fines—and at what cost—were levied as a result of complaints through Consumer Protection Ontario? As we learned, most of the calls simply result in a consumer being told to get a lawyer. This is part of the ministry. They have investigators, should they choose to use them or not. So how much money is being spent on investigations, and how many fines have been handed out through this ministry as a result of Consumer Protection Ontario and the hotline?

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** Thank you to the member for the question.

For those viewers at home and members: Consumer Protection Ontario falls under our ministry, the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery and Procurement, as a consumer protection arm of the government of Ontario.

As a government, we've put through multiple pieces of legislation in the last few years that support consumers. I'll just highlight a bit of that and then get to the specifics of your questions.

We've put through the Better for Consumers, Better for Businesses Act, 2023, which I'm sure the member is familiar with.

We put through the Homeowner Protection Act, 2024, which banned NOSIs.

We put through the strengthening cyber security act in 2024, which protects young children and the people of Ontario, for cyber security.

We also put through the Building Infrastructure Safely Act, 2023.

We've also modernized the Consumer Protection Act to reflect today's digital marketplace and changing behaviours.

We strengthened enforcement powers, doubled fines for bad actors, and improved remedies for consumers harmed by unfair practices.

To your question: Our enforcement outcomes really speak for themselves. In 2024-25, the ministry obtained 334 convictions, with over \$2.6 million in fines and 48 months of probation levied by the courts. We've also posted 356 businesses on the Consumer Beware List and completed 86 prosecutions over the last five years.

I think it's fair to say that Consumer Protection Ontario is doing its job of protecting the consumers of Ontario.

**Mr. Tom Rakocevic:** There has been evidence and reports in the news that the Consumer Beware List is inaccurate. A lot of stuff that should be appearing there isn't there.

You've mentioned the number of investigations that have occurred. But the ministry will receive thousands and thousands of complaints. During the pandemic, there were 30,000 complaints to the hotline, and not one single fine resulted. So there is evidence to the contrary.

In the limited time we have left, I'd like to move on to cyber security.

Your ministry is responsible for the Cyber Security Strategy of the entire province of Ontario. Of course, we've seen cyber attacks on municipalities that have done everything from snarling to a halt first responder responses—and many different other situations. Of course, as we move into an increasingly online world, this is a very, very, very important part of your ministry, and you've been given an incredibly important responsibility. Your ministry—although it is not talked about as much as finance and the other ones—is, as you say, the front line of everything. So we really need to be putting the money and spending the money in the right places. But what we have seen is that, in fact, if you look at the health services and IT cluster, under vote 1818, there is a nearly \$40-million reduction to them.

**1500**

So the question is, why are we seeing cuts when it comes to cyber security, in these instances that are showing up on the estimates? I think that there needs to be more attention and more funding and more thought spent on this, because you certainly have an important role. We're all counting on the money to be spent and for that strategy to be very strong, to protect our hospitals and to protect the province. Why are we seeing cuts when we should be seeing increased investments in these areas?

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Minister, you have 44 seconds to respond.

**Hon. Stephen Crawford:** To the member: Let me first start out by categorically mentioning that there are no cuts to cyber security. It may be some sort of accounting issue. We can get back to you on that afterwards.

We are actually, on the contrary, investing very heavily in cyber security operations. We have a fantastic cyber operations and cyber security facility on Jarvis Street right here in Toronto, and we serve not only the Ontario public service but the broader public sector. To the contrary—we are investing very, very heavily because we recognize the threat and the importance of keeping the people of Ontario safe and their data safe. That is of critical importance to us.

**The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe):** Thank you, sir. That concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery and Procurement.

Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put without further amendment or debate every question necessary to dispose of the estimates.

Are the members ready to vote?

Shall vote 1801, ministry administration, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It's carried.

Shall vote 1809, policy, archives and data, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It's carried.

Shall vote 1811, enterprise financial and supply chain services, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It's carried.

Shall vote 1814, ServiceOntario, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It's carried.

Shall vote 1816, consumer services, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It's carried.

Shall vote 1818, application and information technology services, carry? All those in favour, raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It's carried.

Shall vote 1821, enterprise information technology services, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It's carried.

Shall the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery and Procurement carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It's carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery and Procurement to the House? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It's carried.

This concludes our consideration of the ministry's estimates. I'd like to thank the minister and everyone here today for their participation.

The committee will now recess until 3:30 p.m.

*The committee recessed from 1505 to 1531.*

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

MPP Ciriello?

**MPP Monica Ciriello:** I would like to nominate MPP Andrew Dowie, please.

**The Clerk pro tem (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna):** Does the member accept the nomination?

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** Yes, I'll accept the nomination.

**The Clerk pro tem (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna):** Are there any further nominations? Great. There being no further nominations, I declare the nominations closed, and MPP Dowie is elected as the Acting Chair of the committee. Thank you.

#### MINISTRY OF INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS AND FIRST NATIONS ECONOMIC RECONCILIATION

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Good afternoon, everyone. The Standing Committee on Justice Policy will now come to order.

The committee is about to begin consideration of the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation for a total of two hours.

From the ministry, we are joined by the Honourable Greg Rickford, ministry officials and staff. Welcome.

As a reminder, the ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions and issues the ministry undertakes to address. I trust the deputy minister has arranged to have the hearings closely monitored with respect to the questions raised so that the ministry can respond accordingly.

Are there any questions from members before we start? Seeing none, I am now required to call vote 2001, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement from the minister for up to 20 minutes.

Minister, the floor is yours.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Good afternoon, colleagues. I appreciate this opportunity, and I thank you for your time today as I address the Standing Committee on Justice Policy.

Folks, I view this experience as an opportunity. It is an opportunity to highlight the work of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation and to set aside some time for my colleagues to raise any questions that you might have.

I want to thank, first off, my parliamentary assistant, Will Bouma, and my deputy minister, Raj Dhir, for being with us today.

If you'll indulge me for just a moment, I would like to look at the history of our government's work with respect to Indigenous communities throughout the province, from redefining the scope of Indigenous reconciliation to our historic announcement yesterday with Webequie First Nation.

As we are aware, reconciliation continues to evolve and take many forms and, with it, so does the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation. Since forming government, we have been steadfast in our commitment to build consensus on legacy infrastructure, community priorities and responsible resource development. We made a commitment to do things differently than previous governments had by prioritizing partnerships and sharpening our focus on economic reconciliation and prosperity. I believe we've charted a new path that empowers communities to lead decisions and engage with Ontario on a nation-to-nation basis.

Under the leadership of Premier Ford, we've been redefining what reconciliation means in the province of Ontario as we have taken our cue from First Nations leaders—both political and business leaders. Across the province and country, First Nations have been organizing their economic capacity and have been leading the charge on generational projects and opportunities. Different provinces and territories, of course, are leading First Nations-led conferences, summits, large infrastructure projects, community growth initiatives, and much, much more.

So moved was the Premier in taking stock of the work being done across this country, including in Ontario, that he said, "Greg, Indigenous opportunities throughout the province need your undivided attention"—so came the first addition to the ministry, with economic reconciliation added to the title.

The growth of my ministry now, I can report, colleagues, is a central agency with a complement of ministry officials to support it to seize this opportunity and make sure that, across government, the interests and opportunities of First Nations—which include the duty to consult and various other duties—are there, front row and centre, to not just advance reconciliation but ensure that the other ministries have the support they need to advance on their activities accordingly.

For the province of Ontario, economic reconciliation has taken many different forms. Overarching, I can say that there are two key pillars: the settlement of historic grievances, and the path forward.

Historical grievances manifest themes in land, flood and treaty claims.

On September 10, I was in Sault Ste. Marie celebrating the 175th year of the Robinson-Huron Treaty and, more importantly, the implementation and the go-forward commitment of that treaty, which put a \$5-billion settlement in play—the largest treaty settlement in the world, actually.

In the past six and a half years, we've settled more flooding and land claims than any other government in the history of Ontario.

On March 7 of this year, during the cabinet swearing-in, we once again double-clicked on the stylization of my ministry. The ministry was expanded to meet the moment with a new title—the Minister Responsible for Ring of Fire Economic and Community Partnerships—as we know that major projects, like that of the Ring of Fire, can't be done without community partnerships with First Nations and/or their businesses, and that advancing community and community development through collaborative partnerships and solutions is what drives the success of major legacy infrastructure and community projects. For me, this is not just a change in title; it's a signal that partnerships, in every way, are central to the work I do every day and to Ontario's economic future.

As I said earlier, we have sharpened our government's focus on true economic partnerships with First Nations, enhancing their participation in major legacy infrastructure, industrial, commercial and resource projects across Ontario.

While my ministry serves as a central agency, it is not siloed work. As a whole of government, we have been writing the next chapter of reconciliation, as we have heard from First Nations political and business leaders, and that is economic reconciliation. In working on a nation-to-nation basis, we have been able to achieve momentous partnerships.

In the fall of 2024, the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation took a leader-

ship role for cross-ministry negotiation, coordination and implementation of government-to-government agreements with First Nations in the Ring of Fire and other major projects across Ontario.

Some of these initiatives include a renewed partnership with AZA, Aroland First Nation, Ginoogaming First Nation and Long Lake #58 to build and improve regional infrastructure critical to communities—through letters of confirmation issued in June 2024. We signed a terms of reference with Ginoogaming First Nation and Indigenous Services Canada governing the tripartite relationship for the Making Ground River Bridge working group. We continue to make progress in negotiating a relationship agreement with Eabametoong First Nation.

**1540**

Earlier this year, we signed a shared prosperity agreement with Aroland First Nation, which is providing support for proposed upgrades to Anaconda Road and Painter Lake Road, while also providing for major new investments in infrastructure and energy transmission in the region, advancing work related to upgrading existing roads in the Anaconda and Painter Lake region that would connect the provincial highway network and proposed all-season roads into the Ring of Fire, and, of course, recognizing that those particular roads splay off into other much-needed winter road networks for other communities. We're working with Aroland to develop a work plan to support \$2.27 million in funding from the province for the Aroland capacity strategy, which is intended to support the development and implementation of their community comprehensive plan.

In September, we announced \$61.8 million for Geraldton's Main Street rehabilitation project. It's a critical road infrastructure project in Greenstone that will be the gateway to the Ring of Fire. And we cannot lose sight of the fact that this is a community partnership agreement and, importantly, a significant portion of those funds are allocated to any and all First Nation businesses on tender priorities for that, including the human resources required to support that rehabilitation project.

And then, of course, yesterday the chief and council of Webequie First Nation and their negotiators came to Queen's Park to sign a historic community partnership agreement that will see the Webequie supply road come to fruition. This road will directly connect the community and province to the Ring of Fire. As part of the agreement, additional transportation options will connect Webequie First Nation to the northern link and potentially other road options. As Chief Wabasse said, "The Webequie supply road is more than a road—it's a pathway to opportunity, access and growth on our terms. This agreement with Ontario is a meaningful step in our ongoing work to lead development that supports our community's well-being, strengthens our infrastructure, upholds Webequie First Nation's way of life and creates lasting economic opportunities for our people."

Colleagues, this is what it is all about—working in true partnership with communities to achieve pathways to

opportunity. We're hopeful that other communities proximal to the Ring of Fire will join us in developing other community partnership agreements based on their local priorities and consensus on legacy infrastructure in the region. By working together, we are laying the foundation for a prosperous future for the north. In particular, when I talk about the Ring of Fire, obviously—an area that has the last half-dozen communities that are on diesel-generated capacity for electricity, and we hope that changes in the coming years. We're laying a foundation that creates sustainable growth, strengthens critical infrastructure, and enhances Ontario's competitiveness on the global stage.

For 2025-26, Ontario is investing \$8 million to help 32 remote First Nations communities and the town of Moosonee build and operate nearly 3,200 kilometres of winter roads. We're investing \$5 million through the bridges and culvert stream of the Winter Roads Program to help remote First Nations communities purchase and install pre-engineered bridges and culverts to repair existing water-crossing structures along the winter road network. These improvements make seasonal routes safer and help keep goods, services and people moving across the north.

With these investments combined, Ontario is increasing its annual funding for the Winter Roads Program to \$13 million, which doubles down on efforts to protect northern families and businesses by investing in the infrastructure they need to build strong and resilient communities. The increased funding for these connections to Ontario's network of roads will help more than 24,000 people living in remote communities to connect to jobs and services and family during the winter months, and will support the transport of essential goods and support local economies on projects they are working on or plan to work on.

Equally important to stable transportation links is access to high-speed, reliable Internet connectivity. This will not only benefit industry and development, but also every community in the area. Ontario is also investing \$11.9 million in 2025-26 to support the advancement of the Matawa broadband project that will provide modern and scalable telecommunications services to five member communities in the central part of northern Ontario; namely, Nibinamik, Neskantaga, Eabametoong, Marten Falls, and Webequie First Nations. The broadband project includes the installation of approximately 800 kilometres of fibre optic telecommunication cables from Wunnumin Lake to Aroland First Nations, connecting each of the five remote Matawa member communities. It will support communities with improved access to education, training, skills development, and business opportunities.

Further to this, work happening across government to increase opportunity for Indigenous participation in these projects, as part of the 2025 provincial budget, includes Ontario tripling the amount of loan guarantees through the Indigenous Opportunities Financing Program to \$3 billion and expanded eligibility beyond the electricity sector to include eligible projects in mining, critical minerals,



resource development, energy pipelines and other sectors, to help support investments and much-needed access to capital by Indigenous communities in Ontario.

Led by the Ministry of Energy and Mines, we are investing \$70 million over four years through the Indigenous Participation Fund to improve capacity for Indigenous communities and organizations in areas of high potential for resource development and their participation in regulatory processes related to mining exploration and mine development specifically. The investment will provide greater capacity support to Indigenous communities to enable meaningful consultation on mineral development projects and better equip Indigenous communities to leverage economic opportunities through increased participation in the mineral and mining sector.

As well, the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security has announced \$10 million over three years to new scholarship opportunities for First Nations post-secondary students invested in pursuing careers in resource development, equipping them with accessing tools to training—and succeed as leaders and innovators.

Colleagues, if you'll indulge me, I'd like to highlight some of the funding portfolios that are actually within my ministry and how they contribute to the work that we're doing.

This year, we're investing \$3.2 million in the Indigenous Economic Development Fund, a terrifically successful fund that provides funding to Indigenous businesses, communities and organizations to help boost economic growth and job creation in Indigenous communities across the province.

In addition to that, last month we launched the annual application intake for the Indigenous Community Capital Grants Program. This program will provide \$6 million for Indigenous communities and organizations to support the—bricks-and-mortar support for community infrastructure projects that promote long-term economic growth, job creation and local prosperity.

As part of this year's provincial budget, the ministry continues to strengthen partnerships with community-based organizations that are at the forefront of providing training and support for Indigenous communities.

*Interruption.*

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Sorry. I'm just checking—my little girl gave out a stress call from school today. We checked; she's fine, and I just want to make sure that that continues to be the case.

As part of this year's provincial budget, we are increasing funding by \$4 million per year for Indigenous financial institutions to deliver low-interest loans and grants to Indigenous-owned small businesses, and an additional \$1 million per year to support e-commerce expansion—those are computer-based economic opportunities for Indigenous businesses—and so finally, \$4 million per year for Indigenous financial institutions to deliver low-interest loans and grants, as well.

One of the other exciting things that we're doing in my ministry is supporting the Ontario First Nations Economic Developers Association—their short form is OFNEDA. This is neat and cool. It's \$8.4 million over three years to deliver training, mentorship and professional networks for First Nations economic development officers and entrepreneurs. It includes enhanced support for business development and Indigenous procurement opportunities.

**1550**

Over the next three years, we will invest more than \$500,000 annually with the Chiefs of Ontario for the First Nations Economic Growth and Prosperity Table to enhance dialogue and provide guidance on Indigenous economic development.

We're enhancing the Indigenous Procurement Program to support resilient Indigenous—actual—businesses and foster productive economic sectors aligned with reconciliation goals. The program diversifies Ontario's supplier base by strengthening domestic supply chains, reducing reliance on global channels, and connecting Indigenous businesses to Ontario's and Canada's economies. This will help buffer Ontario against trade risks amid the ongoing tariff and global market volatility. Since 2015, the program has supported more than 390 Indigenous procurements across 11 ministries, valued at over \$210 million.

The Chiefs of Ontario, in partnership with my ministry, have launched Ontario's first Indigenous-led-and-certified First Nations business directory. The directory provides a centralized, trusted resource connecting government buyers and industry with verified First Nations-owned businesses across multiple sectors. Obviously, in the wake of the federal government's challenges with what constituted or was meant to be an actual First Nations-owned businesses, we will not make the same mistakes together with Chiefs of Ontario. This certification process means that if it says it's a First Nations-owned-and-operated business, it is actually a First Nations-owned-and-operated business.

Having said all these things, I just want to close by thanking you. It will be a privilege and honour to serve in this role each and every day and to answer your questions and respond to your comments.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Thank you so much, Minister, for your presentation.

We will now begin the question-and-answer segment, in rotations of 15 minutes for the official opposition members, 15 minutes for the third party member, and 15 minutes for the government members, for the remainder of the allotted time.

As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair.

As the Chair, if a member seeks to reclaim the floor during their rotation while the minister is responding, I will recognize the member and allow them to reclaim the floor to ask a new question.

Deputy Minister, please state your name and title the first time you speak so we can actually record in Hansard who we have.

I will start with the official opposition.



More pointedly to his question, Mr. Chair, I can report that Aroland First Nation—we have a shared prosperity agreement with them. That was before my ministry was stylized as an economic partnership function—it would otherwise be called a partnership agreement.

And, of course, I mentioned in my remarks the community partnership agreement with Geraldton, or Greenstone municipality, to rehabilitate Main Street, which obviously serves as the road immediately off of the Trans-Canada—

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:** My question is how many—and then you mentioned two.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I think I mentioned three: Webequie, Aroland, and Greenstone.

We are in discussions, with a memorandum of understanding, with Eabametoong to advance to a community partnership agreement.

As I said, with Marten Falls, we're looking very forward to reopening discussions now that, apparently, the Ring of Fire is not included in their statement of claims and their election is advancing. And other communities proximal to the Ring of Fire, including the community that you mentioned earlier, Neskantaga—

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:** That answers my question, then. So it's three agreements that have been reached, and one is being engaged.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Also, because the community and economic partnership is so new, after the last election, there are other agreements that we have with communities—I alluded to them in my remarks—that would otherwise be called community or economic partnership agreements, but that terminology wasn't around back then. That would add a couple more, technically.

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:** How many community well-being agreements is the ministry currently engaged in?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Do you mean community partnership agreements or community well-being?

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:** Community well-being.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Well, the community well-being component of the Webequie agreement was part of their community partnership agreement. It's intended to address mental health and mental health well-being.

My ministry supports a number of activities in other communities across northern Ontario, particularly in the isolated and remote communities.

But they are not called “community well-being agreements.”

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:** What are they called?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** They're program-driven from other ministries. You may not see all of them in line items in my estimates, but obviously they're very important. The one that comes to mind is Pikangikum.

There has been a recent call from Grand Chief Fiddler for a technology platform that's delivering very effective mental health supports for NAN communities, and I'm hopeful to acknowledge receipt of that letter and embark on discussions with the grand chief and other community leaders on how effective those particular services and programs are.

But they are not called “community well-being agreements.”

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:** How much time do I have?

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** You have three minutes.

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:** Okay.

The ministry's briefing book states that some of the ministry's key functions are “directly supporting the Premier's office and other provincial ministers” and “assisting with the delivery of key government priorities”—so you must know what's being involved.

I know that Neskantaga needs \$50 million to replace their nursing station, a vital resource for any community, but they haven't received it. Can the community expect the \$50 million for their nursing station in 2025-26?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Mr. Chair, the member would know that that wouldn't ever form part of my estimates. I hear him, loud and clear, on his ongoing efforts for the province to be involved in the bricks-and-mortar and service and program elements of health on-reserve. Those have historically been the purview of the federal government and would not form any part of my estimates per se, or of the provincial government.

That said, we certainly understand our responsibility with respect to hospitals that primarily serve First Nations communities. As the member would know, historically, both the federal government and provincial government were involved in, for example, the Meno Ya Win hospital in Sioux Lookout and the recent announcements, farther north, for the James Bay, Hudson Bay communities.

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:** Neskantaga also needs \$52 million to bring online a new water treatment plant, after 30-plus years of boil-water advisories. Can the community expect a provincial amount or for the minister to partner and coordinate with the federal government, as part of the estimated budget of the government in 2025-26? What do they have to do to receive this money immediately?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I understand the link he's trying to make to our government's priorities. Obviously, those priorities remain squarely—just like in the example I gave with health, on the things that we're responsible for.

We do and have supported water and waste water treatment program delivery, but not so much—

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Thank you, Minister.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I think it's an important question to answer, but I'll stop there.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Just a reminder: Please remember to make your comments through the Chair.

We'll move to the third party.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I was trying to talk directly to him because he's got moose meat and I want to soften him up a bit so he'll share a roast with me.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Absolutely.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** That's completely out of line, Mr. Chair. I'm sorry.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Go ahead.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Through the Chair: Minister, I'd like to acknowledge your hard work and thank you for joining us today to allow us to review the estimates.

I actually just wanted to start out by checking and making sure your daughter is okay. I hope that's an okay situation.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I got a call from my wife. She had called from the school, and the school has reassured me moments before that she's okay and we'll see her later on. Thank you for asking.

And thank you for your service to First Nations communities, as a physician. It's much appreciated and adds to the richness of our discussion today.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Absolutely. It's great that we can share those experiences, certainly.

I wanted to just situate my questions a little bit, because I'm not sure that I fully understand how the expenses go through the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation, just because the issues that matter to Indigenous communities touch on so many other ministries. For example, when it comes to issues such as funding health care and mental health and those kinds of things for, specifically, Indigenous communities, do any of those expenses show up in the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs—or how do those get reconciled between those ministries and your work?

1610

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** It's a great question, and it's fair game. Obviously, I mentioned a lot of things in my remarks that our ministry is working on, but most, if not all, of the resources that support them come from other ministries or contingency programs that are writ large across government—the treasury, more specifically.

I mentioned in my remarks that we're in the process of repatriating, certainly, the duty to consult. It was decentralized and causing some challenges.

So we've now become a central agency, and I suspect that this will be a work in progress—to answer your question more squarely—and that you'll see this ministry with more line items on specific services and programs.

We do have some responsibilities with respect to entering into agreements and flowing funding from my ministry, for example, in areas of mental health, but it remains—the lion's share of it—the responsibility of the Ministry of Health.

I'm hopeful that because we're playing more of—to the member's questions earlier—a central agency profile within the government, we'll have more capacity to support those activities and inform them better, based on the relationships and the day-to-day contact that we have with the First Nations communities. Is that fair?

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Yes, absolutely.

Later on, I'll have some questions around mental health and addictions, and I'll appreciate any insight that you can provide around that.

But before I get to that, I wanted to touch on, yes, this week's announcement regarding the community partnership deal for the establishment of that supply road related to Webequie First Nation; I understand that's for \$39.5

million. Is that something that will come from your ministry's funding, or will that come from somewhere else?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** It will mostly come from other ministries or, in the case of this agreement and the other ones, come from the treasury—I take that to the Treasury Board for those funds. It's not something that you would see—obviously, you didn't see it in the accounts.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** No.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** We do a lot, and we get our resources on the strength of the agreements that we negotiate.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Yes. I noted the total operating estimate is about \$143 million. There's not a lot of space in there for \$39.5 million for a supply road—

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** No, sir, there's not.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** —so I totally understand that.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** That's just for the partnership agreement. The supply road is in the order of significantly more money.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** I imagine, then, that your ministry, more likely than not, actually played more of a leadership role in the terms of that agreement and what that means for the communities.

Could I ask you to elaborate just a little bit and confirm how much of the planning and decision-making operations will be controlled by Webequie First Nation, as opposed to the Ontario government?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Nearly all of it—in fact, the transfer payment agreements are to provide the resources. Almost all of the elements of that agreement are committed to shovel-ready projects and the supplies and materials that they would require, with one exception—and that was to the previous member's question around community well-being. We have not insisted on a proposal-driven process for that. We've simply asked to have a partnership function in how we can support them, with an emphasis on a couple of areas which we notionally agreed to, but obviously we'll take the lead from the community on that.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Of course, you would know better than anyone, really, that the government's work around the Ring of Fire impacts many different First Nations—Webequie, of course, is one of them; Neskantaga and Marten Falls are others.

Could you update us a little bit on the state of any sort of consultations or negotiations that are taking place for those communities as well?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Sure.

A couple of quick points on Neskantaga: Like any other community, there have been environmental assessment processes, both federal and provincial, where they have plenty of opportunity to be engaged and, formally and technically, consulted with. And, obviously, my office has put out invitations to the leadership of Neskantaga to set up some meetings for discussions on a variety of different topics. We remain hopeful that the chief, in particular, will be open to those and respond to those invitations.

With respect to Marten Falls, I mentioned a draft statement of claim that was filed by them for a couple of

different features. It has since been amended, and we're reviewing that. There was an election that we obviously wanted to stay out of, and that just ended a couple of weeks ago. So we're hopeful to initiate discussions with the leadership there.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** This sort of dovetails now into some of the questions that I have around the impact of Bill 5 around the Ring of Fire and a number of Indigenous communities.

From your ministry's estimation, what impact do you think that the special economic zones will have for your ministry, specifically?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Well, because we're repatriating the lion's share of consultation, we'll be involved in the duty to consult.

There were two consultation exercises envisioned. One was a general consultation and engagement by the province and ministers, including the Premier. That's more of a political engagement; that's not the technical duty to consult. Then, there's the bill itself—and the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade has engaged in a robust outreach and technical consultation exercise. One might say that that might not be required, but out of an abundance of caution, we wanted to make sure that the communities were well-informed about it.

Any application of Bill 5 would then involve specific, technical duties to consult by two scenarios: that a First Nations community or groups of communities actually asked for something like a special economic zone—there's still a residual duty to consult—or another stakeholder or partner asked for an application of Bill 5, and that would require any First Nations impacted by that to be consulted as well.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** My read of Bill 5 is that it was enabling legislation that would allow for special economic zones. It certainly wasn't legislating any specific special economic zones.

Is your ministry currently working to establish any special economic zones at this time or doing any preliminary work?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** We're involved in supporting the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade. That's not to suggest that we have not been approached by partners and/or stakeholders inquiring about things in Bill 5, like special economic zones. And while I can't give you the specifics, I can tell you that, informally and formally, we have been approached by, in a critical mass, First Nations businesses and/or communities to try to understand more about how they might benefit from the application of a special economic zone. We have obviously directed them to the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, but also informed them that any consultations on that would be specific to a formally written request for that.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Just to be explicit: Has any work begun on establishing any special economic zones at this time?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** My ministry is not involved in any specific special economic zone requests or support thereof. We're still consulting on what a special economic zone is through the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade. So, no.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** From your conversations with that other ministry, are you aware that they have plans for any special economic zones at this time?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I think if the ministry does, it would be driven by specific stakeholders and partners. All I can tell you is, I'm aware, through outreach to me, about the idea of it, and my response is as I've told you before.

1620

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** I understand. Thank you.

It will come as no surprise that even if there are members in this room here who may disagree on Bill 5, objectively—there was quite a significant amount of criticism that came up in regard to the special economic zones that it legislated. Has that changed the way in which your ministry is moving forward in the implementation of special economic zones?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Yes.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** May I ask you to elaborate a little bit on that?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I did earlier—I attempted to. If I haven't satisfied it—it is simply that we have, out of an abundance of deference to the response, taken the additional step of a consultation on Bill 5 to all First Nations communities. That has nothing to do with the application or implementation of an aspect of it. The legal requirement or the standard, obviously, is for the application of the legislation. But we've heard loud and clear that there was an opportunity to work with communities on the bill, more broadly speaking, through a consultation process. While that has been led by the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, we obviously support those efforts.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Two minutes left.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Understood.

I'll thank you for your thoughtful responses on the Ring of Fire.

You'll be relieved to know that I only have one last question related to the special economic zones, which is, do we have a timeline for when we may see the first special economic zones established, to your knowledge?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** To my knowledge, no. The only thing that I can say is that there appear to be First Nation political groups and business groups that have an interest in it. To that end, I would obviously be more directly involved. The only other connection I would have with this as it stands is, as I said to you earlier, our role in supporting and, in some situations, meeting the duty to consult on the implementation of a given bill from another ministry.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** It's a special time for all of us in Canada right now, with us all watching baseball and cheering on the Toronto Blue Jays, and as we do so, it's hard not to notice the Ring of Fire advertisements that are

coming on during the World Series. May I ask how much that is costing your government?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I'm not aware of how much it costs—the specific amount. It's not in my estimates; I can guarantee you that. I try to answer every question, Mr. Chair, about it.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** You can only answer what you know, Minister. So I appreciate that.

*Interjection.*

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Yes, I know. I'm just trying to decide how to use my remaining 30 seconds.

I'll give the rest of my time now, and I'll return to another line of questioning in the next round.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Thank you, MPP Shamji.

Just a reminder to make your comments through the Chair. We'll go to the government side. MPP Bouma.

**Mr. Will Bouma:** Chair, through you: These are exciting times in Ontario, Minister. We've known about the Ring of Fire and the potential for other things in the north for almost 20 years. It's very exciting to be a part of seeing some of those things come to fruition and to be part of a government that is actually taking action on some of these files to making this a reality, not just because the future for the province of Ontario resides in the north—but just to be a part of the change that you see with First Nations.

One of the most exciting pieces for me about having been able to work with you in your ministry and other ministries is just to see your passion for the north, for the people of the north, for the communities up there, for the needs that they have, and how you have worked so tirelessly to bring these agreements to fruition. I find that very, very exciting.

Yesterday was a really big day—to see this agreement with Webequie move forward, to see the excitement of the elders and the knowledge-keeper; the way that the knowledge-keeper opened that also.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Breathtaking.

**Mr. Will Bouma:** I was wondering if you could share some of that—because, coming from the south, it's a pretty crazy thing, when you get to Kenora or you get to Timmins and you're like, "Oh, I'm not really north yet." For most of us, I think—the way that I grew up, once you were past Canada's Wonderland, you felt that you were in the north. The north doesn't even really begin until the roads end.

I was wondering if you could expand a little bit, for my colleagues and for Hansard, on exactly what—if you could walk us through a little bit about the community partnership agreement that was signed yesterday with Webequie First Nation and the significance of that agreement and this announcement for those people there and for the province of Ontario.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** First of all, thank you for working in the capacity we have—working together in recognizing, of course, the First Nations communities in southern Ontario, including the largest one in Canada, which is situated in your riding.

Colleagues, the community partnership agreements serve two overarching purposes. There is more to say about it, for sure, but, as a general matter, it is a consensus-driven process, overall, that endeavours to align community priorities—in the community. I might add, these are places that would otherwise be uncommon for the province to be involved in. We have the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, which inserts itself into some community infrastructure but is largely confined to recreational infrastructure and the like. But those are community priorities that serve the community and put them in a better position for their other priority, and that is, obviously, in this case—the community partnership agreements in and around the Ring of Fire—to support legacy infrastructure, to drive that process, create capacity. They're good public policy options for the province to exercise, in my respectful view.

The only thing that's really missing is—where are the feds? So far, they haven't—I was asked earlier about nursing stations and waste water treatment plants. I would note that airports are exclusive matters of the federal government anywhere in Canada. Their terminal burned down. Where are the feds?

*Interruption.*

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Obviously, I'm getting excited; I just karate-chopped the microphone there.

So I want to join not just our colleagues here but other members of the provincial Legislature in a clarion call to the federal government to come to the table and enhance, for example, things like these community partnership agreements and live up to their responsibilities on-reserve for some of the bricks-and-mortar assets that communities require just for basic functioning: water, waste water treatment, and health.

We are involved in other areas, but we're talking about a corridor to prosperity that is roughly the distance of Toronto to Montreal and is a road that has a capacity for industrial, commercial and personal travel. It has got to be safe. It has got to address the shrinking winter roads that those communities and others across the remote or isolated parts of northern Ontario are asking us to be involved in. Those community partnership agreements, if I can humbly say, reflect a desire by the communities to drive their priorities and, to the extent that they contemplate things like the Webequie supply road, to do it their way. We think that's a hell of an idea.

**Mr. Will Bouma:** I want to ask more, but I want—

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Go ahead.

Colleagues, take an opportunity, please. I could go all day.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** MPP Ciriello, go ahead.

**MPP Monica Ciriello:** Thank you to the minister for being here today, along with the ADM. Thank you, not only for answering the questions in such great detail, but for your leadership in growing partnerships right across this province.

I'm going to start by echoing a little bit about what my colleague said: that we are in such an exciting time, and our government is taking bold steps.

Just recently, we announced a forward-looking budget focused on investing in infrastructure, critical minerals and responsible resource development to strengthen and grow our economy. At the heart of our work across the province are investments that advance economic reconciliation and support Indigenous community priorities and responsible development of our shared resources.

1630

Minister, could you please outline how this budget supports your ministry and the important work that you continue to lead?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Well, thank you for the question and the work that you do.

As was pointed out earlier by a colleague across the way here, our allocation—in the range, I think—for 2025-26 is in the order of \$145 million. That would seem small to most, given the fairly large responsibilities that the ministry has. I described it as a central agency. Actually, it was the secretary of cabinet who has asked it to be considered as a central agency, particularly with respect to things like duty to consult and policy support for initiatives across government. The money that is allocated for my ministry is deliberate and focused. It is an overall increase of about 4% from the 2024-25 budget—which I think was \$138 million.

Some of the allocations include, as I mentioned in my remarks, business supports for businesses and entrepreneurs and communities.

We have a robust relationship with Chiefs of Ontario in supply chain mapping.

I mentioned certification of First Nations businesses, so that, especially when it comes to procurement, we're not confused about what constitutes a First Nations business. You'll recall that the federal government got into some sketchy affairs with respect to what might constitute a First Nations-owned-and-operated business.

Some of those resources go out to Indigenous financial institutions, to not just support things like e-commerce, but also loan grant formulas for Indigenous businesses to grow and expand.

Of course, importantly, one that's near and dear to mine is the regional social economic manager program, which supports the management of social emergencies in remote Indigenous communities. In many cases, there's a designated worker in the community for that, and that's what those resources, importantly, go to.

Those are just some highlights of what my ministry is involved in. While we may seem small from a financial perspective, we punch well above our weight in how we serve other ministries.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** MPP Allsopp.

**Mr. Tyler Allsopp:** Thank you very much, Chair, and through you to the minister and the associate deputy minister: Thank you both for being here today and participating in this estimates process. I have to say, so far, I've really appreciated your candour. We're really laying out

the groundwork for how the ministry works. This isn't a file that I've had a lot of contact with, so it has been very interesting to learn how your ministry works in partnership with other ministries and in partnership with First Nations.

What I want to ask you about is the ongoing trade pressures and global economic uncertainty that we're facing right now. We know that it is essential for Ontario to stay competitive by fostering the right conditions for continued economic growth, while strengthening partnerships with Indigenous communities and businesses across the province.

Could you share how the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation's spending plan is creating economic and social opportunities for Indigenous people, communities and organizations throughout Ontario?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** First, Mr. Chair, let me just say that when President Trump started these, one might call them, shenanigans—unfortunately, they're having the kind of impact on our communities and on our province that is affecting real jobs, real families in real communities—it was actually First Nations leadership that came to us and asked how they could help, how they could support. I recall more than a few conversations with regional chiefs and grand chiefs around their full-throated support for our fight and the initiatives that we would take up. I think we all have a collective interest in that. They included proposals for things like buying locally, and an emphasis on how First Nations businesses could be a part of that. So that gave us a great idea: Many of our pre-existing programs could focus precisely on that.

There was one glaring challenge, and that was the disparity between some communities' ability to actually proceed with economic development initiatives, because they didn't have an economic development plan and they didn't have economic development officers.

It's why we set to task to work with the Ontario First Nations Economic Developers Association—OFNEDA, they're called. This is an extraordinary group of people who are not just committed to business leadership in their own communities, but also to supporting other communities that don't have it—sharing an economic development officer in one community so that the other one can have access to that kind of service and train a local person to develop that, and also for business that's happening now, to help facilitate and support that. That's \$2.8 million a year, I think, in the forecast for 2025-26; it amounts to \$8.4 million over three years. This has historically been an annualized piece. I'm a real believer that there are certain programs that require certainty so that First Nation communities, particularly when it comes to business, can count on future resources. So we've championed that with our friends in the Ministry of Finance and at the Treasury Board—

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Two minutes.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** —to include those in our outlook so that we can signal loud and clear that we intend to support those, moving forward.

The other important thing—and I realize, Mr. Chair, there are just a couple of minutes left for this member—is the work we do with the Chiefs of Ontario. I know sometimes the news frames a different story, and that's fair enough, but on the ground we have a very effective relationship, going back to Regional Chief Archibald, Regional Chief Hare and now Regional Chief Benedict, on a resource that they largely oversee, that's focused on business development, supply chain mapping, as I mentioned, and other economic initiatives that they see, as a branch of the Assembly of First Nations, makes sense—how to align with other jurisdictions in Canada. We've participated in a number of business activities in other provinces to see who's doing what the best and to see if we can do better. We don't do that unless we're working in full lockstep with the Chiefs of Ontario.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** You have 26 seconds.

**MPP George Darouze:** I'll skip to the next round.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Okay.

*Interjection.*

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Understood.

We'll now go back to the official opposition. MPP Mamakwa, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:** Meegwetch, Chair. Just hearing, around the table, how excited people are with regard to the announcement, it's easy to get excited when you don't really understand what's going on in our communities, in our nations, in the First Nations communities.

I know one of the unique things about being a rights holder is, the people who live in these homelands have something that this government does not have, and that is title and rights.

One of the things I thought about when I heard the announcement was, what about the other surrounding communities, neighbouring communities?

You can see the approach that governments continue to do, with the divide-and-conquer approach, where First Nations start fighting—or, not fighting, but don't agree with each other.

In saying that, there was some discussion with regard to Bill 5. I know one of the things the ministry makes clear is that one of its functions is addressing Ontario's legal obligations on Indigenous-related matters.

1640

I'm just wondering, Minister: Does your ministry have an estimate as to how much will be required to defend against the legal actions brought by First Nations in light of passage of Bill 5?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** First of all, Mr. Chair, the partnership agreement that the member prefaced his question with, like the other agreements, is at the request or invitation of those communities. We look forward to others. I would submit respectfully that the persistence of identifying communities that may be opposed to it is a divide-and-conquer strategy and that it's not helpful or effective in the process we're trying to advance. It's at the request of these communities—local priorities, and their desire to participate in legacy infrastructure projects. When we

have the conversation that way, we have full alignment, including with the communities the member opposite has mentioned.

With respect to a specific amount of funds required to support legal actions against Bill 5, that would not be anything within the purview of my ministry or anything that would be reflected in the estimates here today.

We're hopeful that those communities, through the consultation exercises that we're engaged in, will understand that elements of this bill and this bill in its totality could serve their interests, especially when it comes to large-scale projects.

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:** He's not really answering my question. He's clearly dodging the question.

I know there are a number of legal actions—suits being brought by rights holders, First Nations, against this government—due to the lack of free, prior, informed consent, due to a lack of consultation on Bill 5. Correct?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** No, Mr. Chair.

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:** I know that means that you haven't coordinated any dialogue with MAG, Treasury Board or the cabinet about what this might entail.

How much might it cost to defend or to settle these?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Mr. Chair, while I'm technically a non-practising member of the Law Society of Ontario and have practised, I can't speculate on costs associated with any litigation against the province of Ontario.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** MPP Mamakwa, just go through the Chair for questions. Thank you.

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:** I know that.

I'm just saying that I know that's something that's coming up. I think for these to come up—I guess there is no proper consultation on your part and your government's part with respect to Bill 5. That is very clear.

Let me get this: How much did you spend on resources on doing consultation on Bill 5?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** There are two elements to it, Mr. Chair. Obviously, there's a political engagement, where I and some of my counterparts, including the Premier, have met with different First Nations leadership. On the technical duty to consult—that is being done. It's being done in a very thorough manner. There isn't one First Nation community in this province that has not been contacted, and contacted repeatedly, for any level of consultation that they would require or have about Bill 5, broadly speaking. We've been very careful and deliberate in our efforts to carry out that duty to consult. Then, of course, what would follow is—any aspects of the implementation of Bill 5 would require more technical duties to consult on the impact of any element of Bill 5.

We've gone above and beyond what other governments have or would otherwise be required to do—I look to our federal counterparts hosting a national meeting, for example.

To the credit of the Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, their dogged persistence on ensuring that First Nations communities can and will be consulted, if they so desire, is something that we take very



seriously and something that my ministry supports and is supportive of.

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:** I've seen those letters. Writing a letter to First Nations about Bill 5 is not consultation. When you say all First Nations have had the opportunity—and you're doing this after the fact, that that is done.

Before Bill 5 was tabled, we were sitting around the committee and all that—there were some very good recommendations. And the government just proceeded with Bill 5.

Again, is there a number, a set amount that this government spent on consultation on Bill 5?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Mr. Chair, they're not reflected in anything that I would speak about at this committee. They are, from a financial perspective, the responsibilities of another ministry.

I'm not aware of the member being a lawyer; he certainly talks like one, so I want to be real careful—but say to him that we take the duty to consult as a top priority. It's why my ministry is being mobilized as a central agency.

Those letters are not info letters on Bill 5. They, amongst others, are letters saying, "We can coordinate a consultation meeting with ministry officials. We can have other ones, if you have more questions." That has happened for a number of First Nations communities. This is a matter of forming a record. We've been very deliberate in those efforts to ensure that First Nations communities have all the access they need about questions they might have with respect to Bill 5.

The member opposite, then, with his apparently extensive knowledge of how the law works—I would turn his mind to *Mikisew Cree First Nation v. Canada*. The Supreme Court set out clearly a legislative ability for governments to table legislation, to have it go through committees just like this—but a *prima facie*, as we would say, responsibility for consultation to any and all communities affected by that bill generally and technically speaking. We're following that to the letter of the law, as it's set out by the Supreme Court of Canada. I'm guessing the member has a thorough knowledge of the Supreme Court's position on that and the government of Ontario's compliance with that, particularly as it pertains to Bill 5.

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:** Chair, it is very disrespectful of this minister to question my background. He's talking down to me just because I don't have the legal background. But for one thing, I'm First Nations—I'm a rights holder, and that's something that he cannot take away from me. He speaks as if he's from the north, but he's not one of us.

You cannot talk to me like that—where I speak like that. I just want to be clear on that.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Mr. Chair, if an apology is in order—I actually don't know the member's background. All I know is that most of the questions have been framed around rights and legal costs. I would never make an assumption on his background—other than to say that if you're going to talk about legal issues and legal costs, I have an obligation, as the minister, to speak to them.

I think this member has known me long enough that obviously it would never be the intention to do as he might suggest—so thank you for that.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** My ask of all committee members is, ultimately, for your questions and answers—they reflect the content of the estimates, which is what we're here to discuss today.

Would you like the floor back?

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:** I'm done.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** We will move to the third party. MPP Shamji.

1650

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** I too am not a lawyer, but I did want to pick up where my colleague left off. I don't think his line of questioning requires a legal background.

As members here in the House, yes, we read law, we write law—we may not be the ones to adjudicate law.

In regard to litigation—out of fairness to you as well—I don't think it's reasonable to ask you to predict the future. But I do think that it's fair to ask how much money the ministry has spent on litigation, currently, in relation to Bill 5 and special economic zones, and whether there are any estimates or contingencies that have been set aside for future litigation.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Again, Mr. Chair, it wouldn't be anything that—mechanically, my ministry, and financially—would be reflected in the statements. I'm not trying to get out of the question.

The previous member had a lot of legal questions and legal cost questions, and I think I, with persistence, pointed out that we don't deal with that. That's a matter for the Attorney General. But we certainly, obviously, take any technical responsibilities that the government has, particularly legal ones, like the duty to consult—a more prominent role in those. And that's really all I can speak to.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Understood.

It is within the public sphere that there is litigation that has been brought forward as a result of Bill 5. Have you been asked to provide any testimony on that?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I'm sorry—on Bill 5?

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** In any sort of legal proceedings that are related to Bill 5. Have you been involved in any—

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I have not, no.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Okay. Let's move on, then.

As we discussed, the operating estimates is about \$143 million, obviously placing this as one of the smaller ministries in our provincial government. There's no shortage of work for you to do. We all see how hard you work as well, of course.

With special economic zones coming down the pipeline; Bill 5; so many concerns around mental health, addictions, that kind of thing, how do you view the adequacy of the amount of funding that you have right now? Do you see yourself personally involved in advocating for more funding for your ministry?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** It's a great question.

First of all, the costs, per se, of mental health and community well-being drivers are evolving and innovating,

particularly when it comes to isolated and remote communities.

I can tell the member that, for example—I think it's with Ginoogaming First Nation—we have a more specific and focused agreement in the works on mental health and addiction.

I can tell the member that I mentioned in my remarks groups of communities—or did I?—that are developing a commercial plaza right off the Trans-Canada. They said to us, “We love all these other economic parts, but frankly, if there's not an accommodation for bricks and mortar and mental health services and programs, we don't see how this can go ahead.”

So those costs are going to be manifestly clear as communities say, “Yes, we want to participate in this given activity”—a resource development or legacy infrastructure—“but a component of that funding has to be for mental health.” So it's evolving, it's manifesting itself, it's being driven.

I can only speak to my ministry. We make best efforts to stay within the mandate that my ministry has, but as I said, we negotiate these agreements, and they have mental health supports embedded in them. So it's our responsibility to be involved in how those services and programs can be delivered. There are some great programs out there that are serving First Nations communities.

The mental health and addiction minister—you might want to double-click on their efforts to invest in land-based healing models.

I'll stop there.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** My question perhaps belies my inexperience in this world—because I've never actually been on the government side, and I don't actually know how these decisions get made.

Your total operating expense is \$143,500,000 and some change. You have a lot of work to do. How did the government arrive at that number? Were you asking for more money for your ministry? And what would be the ideal number to help you fulfill your mandate to your satisfaction?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Finally, an estimates question, about estimating.

We're at a critical juncture. I've thrown this term out: “central agency.” And I want to be perfectly clear that our line items now and in the future will reflect growth of more capacity, more people actually serving us, particularly in the area of the duty to consult. So that's one aspect of it.

We did get an increase of 4%, which obviously exceeds an inflationary rate.

As we take on more of these responsibilities, I think we'll have to not just have the resources for human resource—so, actual people to deliver those services and programs. But like you, I'm a big advocate of health and mental health and other services and programs that the province offers other places—to be delivered in First Nations communities, where the federal government would otherwise have exclusive jurisdiction. Because to the extent that those community members—and this member knows a lot about that, as a doctor; he can see them in the

community. A good portion of them get sent out to other communities that are not First Nations, that the province is nearly squarely responsible for funding.

Being in the community with certain services and programs is a good way for us to understand what's coming and how we can support, for example, the federal government and the community in their efforts to provide better services and programs in the community.

I hope that answers his question.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** It does. It actually dovetails quite nicely with my next question. I know you'll share this concern as well in regard to mental health and addictions, which we've started to talk about.

The government passed legislation, in the last session, to essentially bring an end to safe consumption sites. One of the communities in which it was most desperately needed was Thunder Bay, and there was a proposal to replace that with a HART hub, which I believe exists, but in a very immature state—immature as in still being developed.

What efforts are you engaged in, or what does your advocacy look like, to address the inadequacy of mental health and addiction supports in the Thunder Bay area, which obviously serves a disproportionately Indigenous—

**Mr. Will Bouma:** Point of order.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** MPP Bouma.

**Mr. Will Bouma:** I would ask that we not get into the Ministry of Health estimates and that we stick to the estimates before us, with the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** I'll let the minister respond. I suspect I know what his answer will be.

Resume.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I have a HART hub in my riding, situated in Treaty 3. I can't speak to any specific details about the status of Thunder Bay, in particular. I know ours, at least, has now been open a long time. It's having some very positive and lasting impacts.

I would just one raise cautionary tale that is related to his question, and that is how Jordan's Principle operates with service and program support. This is something very alarming. The federal government has cut back the program, and many of those programs support some of the activities that the member is contemplating in his question. We're working, I would say, nearly feverishly on some days, particularly with the minister of child and youth services, around shoring up resources for some of these kinds of supports, in the absence or a vacuum of federal government spending. It's probably one of the more important pieces on social crises and mental health and addiction that we're dealing with right now.

1700

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** I appreciate that. Thank you.

And just to point out, in regard to sticking to Indigenous Affairs—the Chiefs of Ontario just put out a release, approximately two weeks ago, highlighting their concerns in the Thunder Bay area, which, I think, therefore justifies this as an Indigenous affair.

In any case, we move on.

Your job title is minister of Indigenous affairs and advancing economic reconciliation, if I recall that correctly—part of that, no doubt, is making sure that we've got Indigenous people well-trained and empowered for the jobs of the next generation.

To your knowledge, how many Indigenous applications were there for skills development funding?

**Mr. Will Bouma:** Again, point of order, Chair: We're not dealing with the Ministry of Labour. We are dealing with the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation. I would ask you, through a point of order, to encourage the member to stick to these estimates.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Thank you, MPP Bouma. I do concur.

The Minister of Labour would be the most appropriate person to be asking about the Skills Development Fund.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** I really do have to emphasize that economic reconciliation is about making sure that we've got all of the economic opportunities—which includes jobs and being well-trained for those jobs.

One of the flagship programs of this government for economic development is the Skills Development Fund, and I think it actually fits, in theory, quite well—in theory, it should fit well with the work that the Minister of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation is doing.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Because we're reviewing the estimates of what is funded directly by the ministry, I would say it's not within scope of the estimates document.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** That's your judgment?

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Yes.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Okay.

*Interjection.*

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** It's not funny. It's just a question.

Minister, would you help me understand what steps you're taking to address the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the welfare system?

**Mr. Will Bouma:** Again, point of order, Mr. Chair: We're dealing with estimates for the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation, not the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. So I would ask you to ask the member to stick to the estimates before us today.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** What funds have been set aside by the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs to address the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the welfare system?

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** So, basically, your question is, does the minister have an account within the estimates related to that particular activity?

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** I'm sorry?

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Your question is, is there funding available for that purpose in the minister's estimates?

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Absolutely.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Minister?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** There is not, per se. Obviously, whether it's negotiating agreements like some of the ones that we've discussed today, supporting social emergency workers for interventions in the communities—it falls within my ministry. But child welfare does not fall into my ministry, so I can't speak to a specific allocation reflected in my accounts.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** There's a minute and 20 seconds remaining. Go ahead.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Okay.

No doubt, Minister, your work requires a lot of travel. How often do you charter helicopters for your travel, and how much does that cost the ministry?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I can't recall that we've taken a helicopter for ministry business. I'm not aware of any. We do charter planes to the isolated, remote communities from time to time, but we don't—I've not been in a helicopter on ministry business, that I'm aware of.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Fair enough.

Finally, within your role, on the economic reconciliation part—is there anything in your estimates that directly relates to job creation or training for jobs?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** The programs that I mentioned, particularly in co-operation with the Chiefs of Ontario, are involved in capacity building and training—

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Time is completed. Thank you, Minister.

We will now move to the government side. MPP Darouze.

**MPP George Darouze:** Thank you to the minister and deputy minister for being here this afternoon.

I want to bring back the question to the topic that we're talking about, concerning the estimates. I want to admit that I am not an expert in that field. I really appreciate all the work you've been doing on that file. I joined the Legislature eight months ago, and I've learned so much in those eight months. Seeing how you work and deal with the northern community, I really appreciate—and kudos to you, Minister, and to your ministry.

From the very beginning, we have been clear that driving legacy infrastructure projects depends on strong partnerships with First Nations communities. As we implement our plan for responsible development across Ontario, we are increasing capacity funding to ensure First Nations are equal partners in our shared growth and legacy projects.

Minister, could you please explain how your ministry is supporting capacity for First Nations and why these investments are so critical for their communities?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I would just start out by saying that the kind of legacy infrastructure that communities are approaching us for—let's use the corridor to prosperity or converting winter roads into all-season roads, and actually, while I think of it, developing mines—involves a certain critical mass of professional people to do the work, engineering in particular. We want to be sure that we create opportunities for First Nations to have access to

that, through various tuition programs; I think I mentioned some in my remarks earlier. But, man, if you're going to build a road—I'm no road builder, but I have a sense of the staggering costs that are associated with it. I also know that we have a responsibility to understand how we can support the First Nations to participate in that. To that end, we have the capacity and growth fund and the New Relationship Fund, which create jobs and new business partnerships. These are important pieces that ensure that First Nation communities and/or a member of their community is actively involved in it—so they're at a different table as a given project evolves.

The New Relationship Fund is actually an annualized piece that supports a person in their efforts to support any and all processes that they are involved with with government and/or business.

The capacity and growth fund focuses on projects of interest to a First Nation or a group of First Nations. One of the things that I'm big on that has been driven by First Nations is food security and food sovereignty—wealth creation and career-training projects.

Again, to the member opposite's question earlier—these are supports, often, for more informal, non-certificate-driven training. But my ministry will take up, in the coming fiscal years, the responsibility for funding required to support a community member to participate in regulatory processes and resource development projects that the community may be involved in, to ensure that they're at the table.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** MPP Sarrazin.

**Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin:** Through you, Chair: I would like to thank the minister and his team for the presentation. Like some of my colleagues said, it's always a good opportunity for us to learn more about what your ministry is doing and our government is doing when it comes to working with First Nations. Reconciliation is at the heart of our ministry, and our government has been working through partnerships to advance shared priorities.

1710

I know you mentioned it earlier—you said that reconciliation takes many forms. You mentioned all of the different initiatives in your opening statement. But I would like you to share more of the key investment initiatives that we've made and continue to make to keep moving reconciliation forward.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Hopefully, it continues to grow.

Within my ministry, the supports are generally targeted—that is the estimates themselves—in smaller businesses. Obviously, the Indigenous financial institutes do a significant amount of work with First Nations businesses.

I have asked more recently that the ministry stay out of the business of banking but be involved in and aware of the kinds of agreements that evolve from those institutes, to see how we can further support them and whether there are any residual capacity issues that we can turn into opportunities.

On the larger-scale agreements that my ministry is often tasked with negotiating or being a partner with another

ministry in negotiating—these are big, big projects, like the one in St. Thomas, or the Ring of Fire has been mentioned.

Yesterday, the Minister of Energy and Mines spoke about Frontier Lithium's project in my neck of the woods, or northwestern Ontario—significant involvement with First Nations, not just in the opportunity that exists within the critical mineral extraction and processing capacity, but the infrastructure required to support it. Last year, my ministry announced—when I was the Minister of Northern Development—together with the Ministry of Transportation, funding for a bridge that is going to cost about \$75 million, across the Berens River. That will provide an opportunity to build a road network to provide, for more than 10,000 people who are currently living in isolated communities, access to Frontier Lithium's mine site, and, for the benefit of Pikangikum First Nation, which is actually leading on the processes associated with building that bridge, access to the Whitefeather Forest, which of course is a UNESCO heritage site that they have managed very well and have some very sustainable proposals for harvesting, to keep that forest safe and not overly exposed to some things like forest fires—to harvest merchantable timber.

We obviously support, directly and indirectly, some fairly big-ticket items. But my ministry, whether it's through our relationship with the Chiefs of Ontario or within my ministry solidly—an emphasis on small business development in the communities.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** MPP Bouma.

**Mr. Will Bouma:** Thank you, Chair. Through you: I think that's a great segue, Minister.

One of the most amazing things that I've seen in our travels is the entrepreneurship in First Nations and the opportunities for economic development.

How much time do we have?

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** You have six minutes.

**Mr. Will Bouma:** Perfect. He can use that up talking about this—because I get really, really excited.

As an example of that, in the territories in my riding, the Six Nations economic development corporation and Mississauga's economic development corporation have done incredible work in what was, at the time, I believe, the largest battery storage facility in the province of Ontario, with the Oneida project, which is a partnership with the federal government.

In travelling across the province and meeting with First Nations, and when we went to First Nations-led projects, in financing, when we were in the UK, in London—how much interest there is in the world in First Nations-led projects.

I can't help but think about OFNEDA, which is the Ontario First Nations Economic Developers Association. That plays a critical role in supporting Indigenous economic development across the province. They do this through training, through mentorship and capacity-building initiatives. OFNEDA is helping First Nations com-

munities unlock new opportunities and strengthen local communities. It's such an incredible organization.

I was wondering if you could take the time—as much time as you'd like, until we run out of time—just talking about how our government is supporting the work of OFNEDA and the broader impact that this partnership has on First Nations communities.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** It feels like a two-part question, and it's a good one.

Just to your point earlier about some of the travels that you and I have made, and they have indeed been international, and certainly pan-Canadian, there's an incredible amount of interest around how First Nations can be involved in any and all projects—my representations that I make, as a minister, are all of them. I can't really see, where I stand, any economic project—large or small, but particularly large—going on in this province that should not require a substantial involvement with First Nations-owned-and-operated businesses.

You mentioned the battery storage plant. The Six Nations economic development corporation did a fantastic job. They partnered with some of the most sophisticated business leaders we have in this country, and it will play a significant role in one of the newest and best technologies that we have out there in the electricity transmission and storage space.

The London Stock Exchange's curiosity was around—we heard things like an Indigenous sovereign wealth fund, something that the private sector could drive. One of the reasons that the Indigenous opportunities fund tripled and extended beyond electric transmission projects was for precisely that purpose—to provide private equity and markets with reassurance that the government was as serious about access to capital for First Nations as they were, “they” being the First Nations.

I was in New York a week or so ago; I had an invitation to speak to investors around how they could leverage those kinds of programs that our government is offering—because they're without comparison in Canada. You can say the federal government has a \$10-billion fund, sure, but that's for the entire country. We appreciate that initiative, but thinking that ours is just under a third of that, for one province—I think it's pretty special and pretty significant.

OFNEDA—to the second part of your question: These are people with real expertise in economic development initiatives, with a keen sense to understand the sort of two-pronged opportunity that is economic reconciliation—first of all, the very local—

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** One minute and 30 seconds left.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** —capacity-driven business opportunities—this is things like buying a business that exists in a city so that they can provide those goods or services to their communities, like a butcher shop, or some other kind of supply chain—and then, of course, the more sophisticated business partnerships that evolve, and OFNEDA's got in spades.

Real leadership is often about putting other people in the best position possible to do that, so that they can say they did it themselves—and in fact did. I think, increasingly, that's the way our ministry and this government is approaching economic opportunity for First Nations communities.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** You have 42 seconds left.

**Mr. Will Bouma:** I will just finish by saying thank you for that, sir. It's not a story that's often heard.

Again, travelling with the minister of northern economic development—the ability that we have to support, and seeing First Nations building business parks and how that brings wealth into the community. I think that really brings home the theme of First Nations economic reconciliation.

1720

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** We have 13 minutes left, so it will go to MPP Shamji from the third party.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** In the estimates that have been brought before us—an actual question about the estimates. I was just curious to ask if you could elaborate on any risks that your ministry has identified for 2025-26 and how you've structured your funding and the estimates to mitigate those risks. Allow me to provide some examples of what those risks could be. It could be delays in claim settlements, cost overruns in community infrastructure that you may be supporting, capacity limitations in Indigenous communities. What plans are in place around that?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** It's a great question.

I would say you identified it—and that would be community-based capacity. It's a very serious one I've heard from chiefs, who have said, even in matters of the duty to consult, which is increasingly, as I've said—forms part of the expense component of our accounts under scrutiny today, and in the future—are aimed at. I think it's reflected in program announcements that we've made that recognize that—so, participation funds and social emergency workers—that involve hiring specific people to make sure that that capacity or the person is there for it. Then, the next important step is the capacity for that person to carry out those responsibilities.

I will say to you that as our government evolves, like anyone—I would speak to the previous one as well. They, too, recognized increasingly that if there's no capacity funding as a component of a given initiative, the objective of the project or what have you may be in serious jeopardy.

In fairness to the communities, some people say, “Well, there are delays for this or delays for that”—it pretty consistently comes back to the capacity at the community level.

It's a fair question, and it's one that, as I said, previous governments and our government have to continue to include, and increase resources earmarked for that specific piece.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** I want to zero in on one particular area. Your government has said that it's investing \$6 million to launch funding applications under the Indigen-

ous Community Capital Grants Program. The program, I understand, says it will support Indigenous communities and organizations in building important community infrastructure projects that promote long-term economic growth, job creation and local prosperity. It sounds great.

At this point in time, which Indigenous-led projects have been funded, and how many in total, through the program's annual intake?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I can get you a list of those.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** That will be fantastic.

Do you foresee this being long-term funding, moving forward, into the future?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I do.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Okay.

Previously funded projects have included a new recreation centre in Webequie First Nation, a new community and business centre in Anishinabe of—

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Wauzhushk Onigum, yes.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Thank you. That must be why you're the minister.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** It's in my riding.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** And a new multi-use facility in—out of respect, I can't pronounce this name, so I won't. I don't want to butcher it.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Would it be AZA, maybe? We use the acronym.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** No. It's okay—in any case, a number of community-funded projects. They have been funded by this Indigenous Community Capital Grants Program.

Do you have a sense of what benefits have come to the community as a result of these?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Absolutely. I can only speak to the ones that I'm intimately familiar with, either because I've gone to announce them or I've checked back on their success.

In the case of Wauzhushk Onigum, obviously, they own and operate several businesses. One of them is a marina on Lake of the Woods. It is the largest, most active marina in and on that lake—and it's these small business centres that provide business space, bricks-and-mortar space for them to administer this.

Obviously, there's a tighter connection in First Nations communities between political and business—the pursuit of business interests—and so that's where a lot of these concepts evolve.

A small business centre in Webequie First Nation: We would be involved in the support for a piece of recreational infrastructure—that says it's an arena, but it's actually a multi-purpose building. Since there's only ice on the surface a couple of months of the year, that surface is used for other things.

Increasingly, additional rooms, like the one that's in Lac Seul First Nation, are actually used more for business conferences and training than for anything else.

So they have tremendous success.

If your next question would be, should there be more funding allocated to this, I would say yes, and I would

make best efforts to persuade our minister—and he has been very open to business and economic development.

We'll take our signals from their successes and hopefully grow them.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** You'll have to forgive me for asking this, but I can't help but wonder.

Obviously, lobbying is a fact of life. When done in the right way, it's entirely appropriate.

We have a lobbyist registry, obviously, for a reason. In consulting that lobbyist registry, it's clear to me that one particular firm lobbies your ministry quite frequently; that is Rubicon. How often do you meet with this firm and any of its principals?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** I can't recall—me, personally.

**Mr. Will Bouma:** Point of order.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Mr. Bouma.

**Mr. Will Bouma:** Chair, is this part of estimates?

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Since the estimates are speaking, effectively, to financial transactions and the existence of a meeting would not constitute such a thing, I would say it is out of order.

Please continue.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** My only comment would be, these meetings inform the financial decisions that you make and, therefore, what we're seeing in the estimates. I would respectfully ask you to—

*Interjection.*

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** I certainly am not doing that, either.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Okay. I know you have some great questions related to the estimates, so I'd love to hear you. Go ahead, please.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** Absolutely.

To what degree do you feel your financial estimates have been informed by the work of outside stakeholders, such as lobbyists like Rubicon Strategy?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Nicely done—I don't think any. My own approach is to meet directly with stakeholders. But I mostly meet with partners—because they're First Nations. It's up to them if they want to hire a firm to do work for them. They may or may not be in attendance for the meeting.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** That's an entirely fair answer.

Some of those Indigenous partners have engaged some of these firms, including Rubicon. So, just reflecting specifically on that, how has that informed your decision-making?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** It hasn't. I make decisions on the merits of what the partner is saying to me. That's the only measuring stick that I have. I'm only persuaded by their arguments and the resources I have or their positions.

**Mr. Adil Shamji:** We shall move on, then. Thank you.

There have been discussions by the government that a lack of funding may suspend an Indigenous language revitalization program in Thunder Bay. Do you have any thoughts on how your ministry intends to address that in its duty to advance reconciliation with tangible investments?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** It's a fair question, Mr. Chair, because we're talking about Indigenous languages.

We make best efforts to ensure—for example, in the Indian residential school program and whatever—that we have the translation capacity so that First Nation languages can be used as much as possible in those programs. That would be my most direct connection to it.

I have provided counsel, if you will, to, for example, the Ministry of Education around the availability of First Nation language instruction in certain schools in certain locations—but not a direct connection that you would see reflected in my accounts.

1730

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** With two minutes and 45 seconds left, the government will have the floor. MPP Ciriello.

**MPP Monica Ciriello:** Minister, our government is supporting Indigenous-led agri-food initiatives across Ontario.

Food security remains a pressing issue, particularly in remote and northern communities, where access to affordable, nutritious food is increasingly challenged by inflation, climate change and supply chain disruptions. Can you please share how the ministry is addressing this challenge and provide examples of the type of projects that are currently being supported?

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** You have two minutes and 10 seconds.

**Hon. Greg Rickford:** Oh, man.

Let me just say that this is personal for me. Like one of the members here, I have provided health care services to communities.

We've seen serious nutrition deficiencies that are born from costs of some of the healthier foods just being too expensive. There have been efforts, through my ministry, especially in the small business space, to look at the acquisition of businesses in cities, for example, to supply better-quality food.

Food security and food sovereignty is the next big thing—pay attention, everybody—especially for the isolated and remote First Nations communities, whether it's acquiring food supply chain businesses or growing locally in their communities, community gardens.

In Treaty 3, we announced some funding through my ministry which supported them acquiring a farm—it's not in Treaty 3, but we're hopeful that's the next big step. They now process beef products. It happens to be some of the best steak and hamburger I've ever eaten. I'll tell you this much: It comes at a reduced cost, because it's not motivated by profit; it's motivated by supplying communities in Treaty 3 with affordable meat products.

We now have an allocation—specifically, \$3 million, through our capacity growth fund—that has led to more than 30 projects. Colleagues, if you're more than just curious about this, we're happy to provide the list of those. They're fantastic.

Frankly, to my deputy minister here—get to work on getting us more money for these programs.

It's the next big thing, and we hope—

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Thank you, Minister.

This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation.

Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put without further amendment or debate every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are the members ready to vote? Okay.

Shall vote 2001, Indigenous affairs, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. Carried.

Shall the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. Carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation to the House? All those in favour, please raise your hand. Carried.

This concludes our consideration of this ministry's estimates.

I would like to thank the minister and everyone here today for their participation.

Seeing as there is no other committee business, the committee will now adjourn until 3 o'clock on Wednesday, November 5, 2025.

*The committee adjourned at 1735.*

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