

Legislative  
Assembly  
of Ontario



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

IN-10

## **Journal des débats (Hansard)**

IN-10

### **Standing Committee on the Interior**

### **Comité permanent des affaires intérieures**

#### **Estimates**

Ministry of Northern Economic Development  
and Growth

#### **Budget des dépenses**

Ministère du Développement et de la croissance  
économique du Nord

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

Tuesday 4 November 2025

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

Mardi 4 novembre 2025

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Chair: Aris Babikian  
Clerk: Stefan Uguen-Csenge

Président : Aris Babikian  
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## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

## ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE  
ON THE INTERIORCOMITÉ PERMANENT  
DES AFFAIRES INTÉRIEURES

Tuesday 4 November 2025

Mardi 4 novembre 2025

*The committee met at 1500 in committee room 1.*

## ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF NORTHERN ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Good afternoon, everyone. The interior committee is about to begin consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth for a total of two hours.

As a reminder, the ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address. If you wish, you may verify the questions and issues being tracked by the research officer at the end of your appearance.

For any staff appearing today: When you are called on to speak for the first time, please give your name and your title so that the proceedings can be accurately recorded in Hansard.

Are there any questions from the members of the committee before we start?

*Interjection.*

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Just give me one minute. We are subbing for the third party. All good? Okay.

I am now required to call vote 2201, which sets the review process in motion.

We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister of Northern Economic Development and Growth.

Minister Pirie, the floor is yours.

**Hon. George Pirie:** Good afternoon. My name is George Pirie. I'm the Minister of Northern Economic Development and Growth, and MPP from Timmins. It's a pleasure to be here to address the Standing Committee on the Interior. I look forward to speaking about the important work and key initiatives of the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth and to answering questions from the committee about our operations.

I would like to introduce the ministry officials who are here with me today from the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth. Joining me is my deputy minister, Drew Vanderduim. I am also joined by my assistant deputy ministers, each of whom leads a division within the ministry:

—Richard Scott, assistant deputy minister of the northern development division. The northern development division strives to make northern Ontario strong, healthy and prosperous, advancing economic development through collaborative partnerships and solutions that reflect the unique needs of the north;

—Sharmila Pathmanathan, assistant deputy minister of the strategic policy division. The strategic policy division focuses on enhancing capacity and broadening the scope of policy supports with the ministry; and

—Scott Mantle, chief administrator officer and assistant deputy minister of the corporate management division. The corporate management division provides executive direction, as well as strategic business and resource planning services to ensure the efficient and effective delivery of ministry programs. This division supports ministry operations through the provision of services in the areas of human resources, financial planning, facilities management, accounting, public reporting, and administration.

I want to thank my senior officials for joining me today before the committee.

As you know, the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth is the regional ministry of our province's vast north. Our collective vision is to make northern Ontario stronger, healthier and more prosperous by contributing responsible economic development support to communities and businesses and by promoting the region and its assets internationally.

Our mission is to advance economic and community development in northern Ontario through collaborative partnerships and solutions that reflect the unique needs of northerners, while delivering safe and efficient transportation infrastructure services to the public and the industry.

Our ministry's mandate is to build the northern Ontario economy by incentivizing strategic economic opportunities and fuelling transformational change by ensuring northern and Indigenous communities can attract, secure and maximize long-term economic benefits.

The ministry leads and coordinates government initiatives aimed at strengthening the northern economy, building strong northern communities, and creating northern job opportunities. Through a network of offices and strategic program and policy development, we ensure northerners have access to government programs and services and a voice in government decisions affecting northern Ontario. We also work across government to attract new

investors to northern Ontario and help northern businesses explore Canadian and international business opportunities.

The ministry plays a key part in the government's plan to help people and businesses today, while laying a strong fiscal foundation for future generations.

You've heard me say many times that I believe northern Ontario is the most valuable piece of real estate in North America, if not globally. Northern Ontario has incredible untapped potential that will support the province as we overcome the current trade war between Canada and the United States. We have the minerals, the fibre basket, arable land and the manufacturing capacity to be a true economic powerhouse, which is why today, I am happy to share some of the ministry's programs and initiatives that help connect and create strong and healthy communities where hard-working Ontarians can live, work, play, and do business.

I also want to highlight our recent achievements and the actions we have taken to spur growth and create opportunities across northern Ontario—a beautiful, vast, and varied region like no other in our province or our country. It truly is a vast and magnificent land.

Nowhere is the business of economic development more evident in the ministry than in the work of the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp., also known as the NOHFC. When it comes to building a stronger, more competitive northern economy, the NOHFC remains one of our government's key tools. The NOHFC fosters economic growth, job creation and workforce development throughout the north, benefiting communities of all sizes, both rural and urban, including Indigenous communities.

Since June 2018, the NOHFC has invested more than \$978 million in almost 8,000 projects in the north, leveraging more than \$2.9 billion in investment. I am proud to report that through the NOHFC, we have created and sustained more than 12,000 jobs across the north, all since June 2018.

The ministry has supported thousands of jobs in diverse industry sectors such as agriculture, forestry, manufacturing, tourism, and mining supply and services, just to name a few. However, we did not do this alone. It is by working together with northern community and business leaders that we were able to create employment opportunities and achieve this significant milestone.

Some great employment partnership examples announced this past fiscal year include:

- the Carpenters and Joiners Union Local 2486 Building Corp., located in Azilda, using \$2 million in NOHFC funding to transform its current office space into classrooms, as well as build a new facility that will house a training auditorium to double training capacity;

- Dr. Clean Inc., an industrial cleaning business operating out of Sudbury, using \$600,000 in NOHFC funding to establish a permanent presence in Timmins by building a facility and purchasing equipment; and

- Smart Modular Canada, located in Oliver Paipoonge, using \$400,000 in NOHFC funding to purchase equipment and renovate its facility to increase the production capacity

of its residential and commercial modular buildings for rural and First Nation communities.

These are just a few of the many job opportunities created through the NOHFC; together with our northern partners, we will continue to create thousands more.

Our ministry continues to take every opportunity to engage with our northern partners to seek feedback on how we can continue improving and modernizing our NOHFC programs.

**1510**

In previous conversations, we heard from people who wanted the NOHFC programs to better address the unique needs of northern Ontario. As a result, back in 2021, we launched new, improved NOHFC programming. These four new programs support more projects in rural northern communities, make it easier for more people and businesses to apply, target existing and emerging markets, provide more work opportunities for Indigenous people, and address the skilled labour shortage in the north. The Cultural Supports Program showcases northern culture, geography and talent through event partnerships and support for the production of film and television series in northern Ontario. The Community Enhancement Program builds strong, resilient northern communities through targeted investments in critical infrastructure. The Invest North Program boosts economic growth and attracts more investment by supporting northern businesses' development, expansion and innovation. The People and Talent Program creates a strong northern workforce by supporting a wide variety of internships and apprenticeships.

Our improved programming is building prosperous and resilient communities while supporting an environment where businesses can thrive, grow and create good jobs.

The following are just a few of the many NOHFC funding programs we announced this last year:

- \$1 million for Nordic Minesteel, located in North Bay, to expand its facility to increase its manufacturing capacity;

- \$500,000 for Embers Film Inc. to produce, in north-eastern Ontario, *The Embers and the Stars*, a feature film that follows the story of an astrophysicist stationed in the north of Canada who discovers there are two non-human powers positioned to take control of Earth and its inhabitants. No one missed that; I'm sure everybody watched this. You're watching it on repeat—Guy, smile;

- \$500,000 for CircuitIQ, located in Sudbury, for the testing and development of an automated electrical panel power mapping and inspection tool; and

- \$302,000 for the Rainy River Cattleman's Association, in Kenora–Rainy River to renovate and modernize a facility to enhance safety and efficiency when hosting cattle sales events and business activities.

Overall, in the 2024-25 fiscal year, the NOHFC approved more than \$137 million in funding support, leveraging an estimated additional investment of \$360 million, towards 936 projects in northern Ontario.

It's amazing to see the ingenuity of the people in northern Ontario and the great work they are doing to improve their communities and build strong businesses.

I've had the fortunate opportunity to witness in person the difference these NOHFC investments make. The ministry understands the essential role the NOHFC plays in communities across northern Ontario. We are proud of the work we have done to improve its programming, and we will continue to build on its great success.

In fact, this past January, we announced an investment of an additional \$30 million over three years, beginning in 2025-26, bringing the NOHFC's annual budget to a total of \$110 million. This sustained funding increase will encourage continued economic development in the north, addressing the impacts of inflation and supporting the expansion of NOHFC programming eligibility to the district of Muskoka. The expansion of the NOHFC programming eligibility to include the district of Muskoka is providing the opportunity to support communities in the expanded area that face similar economic, social and geographic challenges experienced by other northern Ontario communities. The expansion also aligns with the geographic eligibility boundaries of the federal government's economic development programs, such as FedNor.

This past June, our government announced the refocusing of the NOHFC to prioritize investments that protect northern industries and jobs to mitigate the impacts of the US tariffs and trade disputes and secure new opportunities for the long-term prosperity of northern Ontario. This renewed focus is boosting competitiveness and ensuring the north remains a leader in Ontario's economy. With responsive programming and the recent increases in the initial budget allocation, the NOHFC will continue to serve as a catalyst for economic growth across the north.

Another important economic initiative administered by the ministry is the Northern Ontario Resource Development Support Fund. We understand the unique realities in northern communities and the resource industries that drive their economies. Resource development in sectors such as mining and forestry is critical to achieving economic prosperity in the north. However, resource development may also negatively impact municipal infrastructure. The Northern Ontario Resource Development Support Fund was established to help municipalities offset some of the impacts and costs to support sustained long-term growth and development.

Launched in 2021, NORDS provides \$15 million a year over five years for northern municipalities to support investments in municipal infrastructure projects. Funding allocations are determined by using household accounts in each municipality, with a minimum allocation set at about \$50,000 and a maximum allocation set at \$400,000 in any program year. All 144 municipalities in northern Ontario are eligible to receive funding under this program.

Here are a few of the examples of northern community municipalities advancing key projects with the support of the Northern Ontario Resource Development Support Fund: The city of Timmins received \$400,000 to reconstruct section 13, to complete the reconstruction of the Highway 101 connecting link, which will help mitigate the damage caused by the transportation of resource extraction by forestry and mining operations. The municipality of

Shuniah received over \$260,000 to rehabilitate Lakeshore Drive, a vital roadway utilized by mining and forestry industries in the region. And the town of Smooth Rock Falls received \$384,000 to complete a water main extension project, to increase water pressure to allow for future developments in the community.

Through the Northern Ontario Resource Development Support Fund investments, we are sharing the benefits of resource development with northern municipalities and helping ensure northern communities have the surface and infrastructure necessary to support economic growth in the north.

Another objective for the ministry is removing the barriers that prevent access to affordable energy for our large northern industrial companies. Northern Ontario is the home of many large industrial operations in the mining, forestry and manufacturing sectors, and for them, electricity represents a tremendous portion of their overall costs.

In 2022, the former Ministry of Northern Development, Mines, Natural Resources and Forestry launched the updated Northern Energy Advantage Program.

As mentioned in the previous year's budget, we are expanding the Northern Energy Advantage Program from \$120 million per year to \$206 million into the 2025-26 year and 2026-27 to continue helping northern Ontario businesses grow and flourish. The Northern Energy Advantage Program supports northern Ontario's largest industrial electricity consumers by providing competitive, stable and predictable electricity price rates. The program helps improve their competitiveness and ability to secure investments while continuing to create and sustain good, high-paying jobs in the north. Helping companies better manage their electricity costs provides more opportunities for them to invest in training, new equipment and job creation. Through the expanded program, new mining, forestry and manufacturing operations coming into production in the future will be eligible for assistance. This includes companies associated with critical minerals and the battery electric vehicle supply chain. A new investor class stream was implemented to encourage companies to undertake transformational investments such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions and transitioning to clean technologies.

Currently, under the updated program, 24 mining, forestry and manufacturing companies representing 30 facilities across northern Ontario receive rebates of \$20 per megawatt hour, with individual rebates capped at the 2017-20 average consumption levels. The maximum rebate cap of \$20 million per company per year has been removed, allowing for rebates that more accurately reflect consumption levels for the north's largest industrial facilities.

Since its inception in 2010, the Northern Energy Advantage Program has provided over \$1.76 billion in relief on electricity rates. The ministry's relief efforts are helping our largest industrial electricity consumers in the north become more resilient and prosperous, as we are lowering the risk of these northern companies closing shop or

relocating their facilities, sustaining jobs and economic activity in the north.

**1520**

The Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth continues to make targeted investments that support critical and transportation infrastructure in the north. We know that to grow and prosper, communities in northern Ontario need the right infrastructure to facilitate it. That means upgrading and expanding our road networks, railway lines and seaports.

We remain ambitious on how we connect people, goods and essential services, while making sure that transportation in northern Ontario remains safe and reliable.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** One minute.

**Hon. George Pirie:** Okay.

In 2023, we announced that the ministry was taking another important step to replace the Little Current Swing Bridge on Highway 6 in Northeastern Manitoulin and the Islands. Just last month, I had the pleasure of joining Premier Ford to announce that our government has awarded a design contract to replace the bridge, moving this key project forward. The existing swing bridge was almost 110 years old. Serving the only roadway across Manitoulin Island, the replacement of the Little Current Swing Bridge will improve traffic operations and crossing to and from the island. It will make vehicular and nautical travel easier for residents, businesses, emergency services and tourists alike, while supporting economic growth and job creation in local businesses.

The Berens River bridge and roads project: Last year, we supported another important northern transportation project. On August 24, we announced our commitment to enter the discussions with the Whitefeather Forest—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you, Minister. The time is up.

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 members, and 15 minutes for the government members.

As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair, and please focus your questions on the estimates.

MPP Bourgouin.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Thank you, Minister, for being here.

Through you, Chair: You come from Timmins, so you've seen what the north is going through right now with mill closures. We've seen Terrace Bay losing a paper mill; Espanola; Ear Falls, with 160 layoffs; Kap Paper—I know Kap Paper is running again; Gogama; and Nairn Centre. So we've seen a lot of mill closures. Honestly, I think there will be more coming because of everything that's happening with the tariffs. Hopefully it's not as bad as people are expecting. We're hearing that industries are very concerned.

My question is, how will your ministry protect and address the impact of these mill closures and also the tariffs?

**Hon. George Pirie:** Let's address the question head-on.

The weakness in the forestry sector really is related to the tariffs that are emanating from President Trump. Right now, the tariffs, including the softwood lumber tariff, amount to almost 50%.

As you know, when I took over the ministry, the first file I tackled was Kap Paper. I was there immediately to take a look at that situation. As you know, that was a situation that existed a couple of years before that—looking for money as the markets changed, and as in fact, the dependence on the kraft paper was a weakness in that the market was evident. We worked terribly close with the municipality and ended up with the federal government. We landed at a situation where the province committed—actually, the province by themselves had put over \$66 million into Kap Paper to ensure that it would be sustainable.

We've got more work to do. With the last tranche of funding we had, we finally had the federal government participating with us. As you know, they've got \$1.2 billion that they've announced—\$1.2 billion in the forestry sector, to help the whole forestry sector. And we have to work together. We're talking about Kap Paper—and the stick mills are the same way.

There's \$1.2 billion that the federal government has made available to help the companies and the communities as we struggle through this terrible situation with President Trump. So we're working with all the communities. We're certainly working with all the companies. Some of these announcements have been short-term—as you know, with Gogama.

Ultimately, sir, we have to pivot to the value-added aspect of the forestry sector. We have been too dependent on one source, one market for far too long, and that was the market from out of the US. We need structural timber. We need cross-laminated timbers. We have to develop biodiesel. We have to use aviation fuel from the forestry sector. We have to pivot to the valued-added industries, and then ship them internationally, to reduce our dependence on the US.

President Trump wants to destroy our economy, and a big part of that economy is in the forestry sector. We have to stop him, collectively—every province has to do this.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** I recognize that investment that was done by the province for Kap Paper, to bring back the workers who have been laid off. That was the right thing to do.

Long-term survival is the question that needs to be addressed now with Kap Paper. In fact, it's going to be the whole region that could depend on what's happening with Kap Paper.

You talked about innovations. In your estimates, where have you invested, with these new innovations—and you talk of biofuel. I don't think we have biofuel right now in Ontario. Maybe I'm wrong. Do we have biofuel? There are other products that have been underutilized. And you're right; it has to be coming from different products that forestry has been in. There's a good-grade pulp that



now we see in glasses, we see in television screens. There are all kinds of products out there. So I'd like to hear, from your ministry estimates, where have you invested and how much in all these new innovations that you—well, you mentioned innovations. I'd like to hear from your ministry where that money was invested—and which new innovation products.

**Hon. George Pirie:** Well, let's answer the first question you mentioned about biofuel. There's the success of the pulp and paper mills in Thunder Bay and Dryden. They rely on biofuel for fuel. That's a big part of their success—using biofuel to provide the energy in both Thunder Bay and Dryden. Of course, there are numerous applications through the NOHFC for innovation that involves using chips and/or other biofuel. Biochar is another example—that's being developed. We've got a plan—

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Where have you invested? My question—

**Hon. George Pirie:** Well, there's one right now, in Thunder Bay. That's a pilot project on biodiesel.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** How much was invested?

**Hon. George Pirie:** I don't know. I'd have to check that.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Well, can't you get an answer from—

**Hon. George Pirie:** John, do you have a figure for the biodiesel, or do you have that, Drew, for—

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** And any other innovations. You have said, "Millions here, millions there," which I don't question. But I'd like to know where they were invested, and if they were invested in innovation, what is the future in the forest industry that—we need to diversify. I'm the first one to recognize that. This is why we'd like to know how much was invested from your estimates and where this money was invested, so that we can—it's fine to say there's innovation, but if we're not investing, we're not going anywhere. So I'd like to have these numbers if they're available. We want these numbers, because that does make a difference.

**Hon. George Pirie:** If we've got them available, we'll give them to you.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Drew Vanderduim, Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth.

I'll defer to my ADM to speak to, specifically, some of the investments in northern Ontario through the heritage fund.

1530

Yesterday, MPP, we spoke at length, through MNR's estimates, about the biomass program, which is \$20 million a year that's invested through the Ministry of Natural Resources. Specifically, those projects look at exactly what you're referring to: biofuel, bioenergy, biochar, insulation—those types of different projects. That's partly, I think, the follow-up from yesterday's conversation.

I'll ask Richard to speak to, specifically, some of the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund elements.

**Mr. Richard Scott:** Richard Scott, assistant deputy minister, northern development division, Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth.

Since 2018, the NOHFC has supported 263 projects in the forestry sector with an investment totalling \$54 million and leveraging an additional \$254 million in northern Ontario, helping to create or sustain just about 1,400 jobs.

NOHFC will continue working with forestry stakeholders and partners to meet the challenges and opportunities of this sector, providing relevant and responsive programming designed for northern Ontario's economy.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** But do you have specifics? I like the numbers—but there were investments. You said "investments."

I know that there is a program for biomass, but there are other things than biomass for the forest industry. We talked about biofuel. We talked about biocoal.

Where has there been investment, and what is the investment—so that we see the light and that we are heading in the right direction? We can throw numbers out there, but where was this money invested and to what innovation—so that we can see that the investments will pay off? That's the key for the forest industry—continue doing lumber, but also invest in innovation and diversify their operations, which should have been done a long time ago, to be honest with you. Where, specifically, in the estimates can we see investments in innovation and forestry? We talked about that—one mentioned the insulation. If there wasn't money invested for insulation made of fibre, well, then there must have been some money diverted to that. So what are the numbers? What innovation are we talking about, and how much?

**Hon. George Pirie:** Well, that's actually a question for the Ministry of Natural Resources, really—

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Is it? We're talking about northern economic development and growth, so it's part of your ministry, Minister. There has to be growth, there's got to be investments, and there's got to be development. This is economic development, and this is innovation. This is innovation, so it is part of your ministry.

I might be wrong, but the way I read "northern economic development"—this doesn't exist. A lot of these new projects don't exist right now in Ontario, so they need to be invested in from your ministry, and MNR, and forestry maybe—but there's part that should be coming from northern economic development, which is your ministry.

**Hon. George Pirie:** I think we laid out the amount of money that we put into all of northern Ontario. I think Richard just told you about the amount of money that we've invested in forestry.

If you want a very specific number about the biomass used for energy in Thunder Bay, that's basically a number that I think MNR has.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** I don't knock down the investments, but I'd like to know numbers with this new innovation—because you mentioned innovation, so I want to see where the numbers are. What innovation are we investing in? If there's none, then that's the number; but if there is—because you mentioned them—what are they? If you don't have them now, fine, but then the ministry needs to supply them, so we can have these answers and that can be done. But if there wasn't, then please say so—but if there is, then

tell me that you'll be sending it to us, so that we can move to a different question. But at this time, I don't hear that. I'm questioning if there was any investment in innovation, because that is key for the forest industry moving forward also. In biomass, absolutely, there was investment. But what about the rest?

**Hon. George Pirie:** Drew?

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Thank you for the question, MPP.

We can get you a list of the projects that Richard has mentioned here today. I would say, on page 53 of the estimates in the briefing book you have is the \$70-million annual budget for NOHFC. That's where those projects are funded out of. But to Richard's point on the number and value of those projects—we can get you the details of that, should you need it.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Okay. Well, let's say, just for the sake of argument, that if we did some insulation made out of wood, new innovation so that we can have different products, or fibre for television and screens and such, you'll be able to specifically say, "Send me the information. This is what is invested," or "We invested, so that this is new product—that we can innovate in the forest industry"? We will get that?

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Specific to NOHFC funding, yes.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Thank you.

How much time is left, Chair?

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Two minutes.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Minister, I come from forestry, so of course I want to ask questions on forestry.

We know forestry companies have shed a lot of their forestry operation, especially for owner-operators, and some of these pieces of equipment are quite expensive. Feller bunchers can be worth a million dollars, plus grapples are what, \$800,000? They're quite expensive pieces of equipment. Right now, some of these—my former members—owner-operators are struggling big time.

Has your ministry invested to help these owner-operators go through these hard times right now with the forest industry? If a sawmill closed, there's a domino effect, as you know. Forestry slows down. When a paper mill closes, it's even worse, because of materials paid. There's a whole bunch of parked equipment.

Can you give us any numbers in your estimates that do help these owner-operators—some of them are truck drivers. Is there anything in your estimates that assists them?

**Hon. George Pirie:** There won't be any specific numbers like that in this presentation. Those numbers will come through the Ministry of Labour. They've got a whole program that's designed to help people who have been affected by the forestry program, but it's definitely—those numbers are in the Ministry of Labour.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** So you have given some money also for that, or am I—

**Hon. George Pirie:** Pardon me?

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** There were some monies from your ministry going to these owner-operators, these people who are struggling right now?

**Hon. George Pirie:** No, I didn't say that at all. I said the funds to help those operators come through the Ministry of Labour. They have got a number of programs that are designed to help people who are suffering from the collapse of the forestry sector.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** The forest industry is struggling. We're talking about growth and trying to survive here, and there was no funding coming from your ministry to help these small owner-operators? They're individuals who own these pieces of equipment, who may be losing their pieces of equipment. There has been no help from northern economic development, from your ministry, to help them?

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you, Mr. Bourgouin. Your time is up.

We'll move to the third party. MPP Cerjanec.

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** Through you, Chair: Thank you, Minister, for your presentation, and thank you to all the staff who are here today as well on behalf of your ministry.

As I have conversations with municipalities, mayors, councillors and folks involved in economic development in the north, I hear quite a bit that the Northern Ontario Resource Development Support Fund is a critical source for local infrastructure and economic projects, and the ability of municipalities to be able to stack that funding year over year.

Given that strong local endorsement from municipalities—I'm hearing that they like the program. Will the government be committing to making this program—I believe it's year on year right now, as opposed to a permanent program. Is there any thought to making that funding stream a permanent program?

**Hon. George Pirie:** Well, that's certainly a question. You're quite right—it's a program that's re-evaluated, and we're doing that re-evaluation right now. It is strongly supported by all communities. In my remarks, I didn't mention that it's stackable. If you qualify for \$400,000 a year, it's stackable, so over four years you've got \$1.6 million. Small communities at AMO spoke to us and said how much they appreciated getting a fund—like \$85,000. It's a very important part of the funding model, overall, that the province uses to help these communities out.

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** As well, what I'm hearing from folks is that they'd like to see that program expanded and increased. I know it may not necessarily be directly here in the estimates, but is that something that the ministry is thinking about?

**Hon. George Pirie:** I can honestly say yes to that.

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** As well, in looking through the estimates—you'll have to excuse me just a little bit, being a newer MPP, as I still really dive through and understand a bit more about the specific programs and how the estimates work.

1540

I was recently in northwestern Ontario and had the opportunity to drive a little bit along the highway network. It's definitely a point of agreement that the highway

network is not necessarily up to what it needs to be, I think, from a safety standpoint, with all the trucks and vehicles and folks either traversing through Canada or servicing or supporting the mines in different parts of northern Ontario, or other industries as well.

I'm wondering, within your estimates here, how much right now is allocated for highway expansion and improvement projects.

**Hon. George Pirie:** It's very evident that we're spending a lot of money, if you travel through northern Ontario. We're spending a lot of money on the highway system. If you've driven through northwestern Ontario, you'll see that there's a four-lane system that's being built from the Manitoba border right through, past Kenora. I'm sure you would have seen what's happening from Thunder Bay back up to Nipigon with four-laning. So it's a critical part of what we're trying to do in growing the road infrastructure.

Right now, we're investing over \$528 million in the northern highways program in 2025-26. This includes \$479 million for rehabilitation projects and \$103 million for expansion projects.

Yes, it's a big network. I think there are over 66,000 kilometres of roads in northern Ontario, and I think we're doing a good job on improving—it's really a focus of our government to improve those road networks.

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** Do we know, in kilometres, I guess, how much—let's say this past year—would likely be covered through this estimate of how much we've been able to do, whether it's twinning or other highway road safety improvements?

**Hon. George Pirie:** Well, I don't know the number of kilometres from Thunder Bay up to Nipigon; I think it's probably 120 miles—and from Manitoba past the other Kenora border must be another 60 miles that has been completed.

Do you know exactly what the number is, Richard?

**Mr. Richard Scott:** That's a specific number that we'd have to get back to you on—exactly the number of kilometres that we've funded for this fiscal year.

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** In terms of thinking ahead, year over year, is there any thought to increasing the number of kilometres that the government of Ontario is able to complete to make our northern highways safer?

**Hon. George Pirie:** It's a commitment that the government has made in relation to the 2+1 and the four-lane systems, to improve those highways, especially from North Bay back up—well, all through Highway 11 and Highway 17. It's a commitment that was made by the Premier.

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** My colleague was talking a little bit about pulp and lumber and the current economic situation with tariffs and how the United States continues to be raising them, which is very challenging, I know, for folks in southwestern Ontario with some manufacturing and in the north with some of the industries as well—steel, lumber. I think my colleague spoke quite a bit about some sawmills that are struggling and challenges within the sector. I know that we've got over 128,000 folks currently

employed in the forestry and forest products sector, and what's going on right now is very concerning for everyone.

I look at southern Ontario, where we do have some major housing shortages and housing needs, and a really good product and use for the lumber that's being manufactured, that's being created, essentially, in northern Ontario—it can go towards low-rise or multiplex-type construction in southern Ontario.

So I think to pick up on a little bit of what my colleague was saying—what kind of investments are we making to support the forestry sector? And are we having conversations with other ministries about home-building needs and how we can increase the supply of housing in parts of the province that really desperately need it? I know in the north, as well, there are parts where we do need housing supply. So are those conversations taking place, specifically tied to the forestry sector, and what is your ministry doing around that?

**Hon. George Pirie:** We obviously have a buy-Ontario strategy. If you're talking about conversations with the ministries—that's exactly what happens. Yes, we want those houses to be built with lumber that's made in Ontario. We have the ability to provide that supply, and we're having those conversations almost on a daily basis to ensure that we're helping each other out.

You also mentioned the manufacturing sector. You didn't mention, specifically, Algoma, but there's another situation in Sault Ste. Marie—25% tariffs. It was costing them \$1 million a day at 50%. That's a facility that's—almost impossible to see it survive without the participation of both the provincial and the federal governments. As you know, we put a \$500-million package together to help Algoma survive. One of the biggest assets they have is the fact that they produce Arctic-grade plate. That was about 12% of their sales. Again, working with the federal government—the federal government is looking for and looking at procurement deals to supply that plate that's going to be required to build the icebreakers and the frigates that the federal government is planning to build to supply the ships for the Arctic. That is a very viable solution for Algoma. They, in fact, will have to pivot to, or they're planning to pivot into columns and rails to provide the basic steel, even the pipelines.

Anything that we can produce in Ontario should be produced in Ontario—and it's for every sector, whether it's for the forestry sector, whether it's the manufacturing sector, steel. That's the intent of the government and, quite frankly, I think that's the intent of every province—every party—within the government. If we're going to survive, it's by working together, supporting each other on these issues.

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** As discussions are happening around the cabinet table when it comes to increasing housing supply in the province, my recommendation would be to be thinking about taking the HST off new homes—whether it's up to \$1 million—and doing it for a period of five years. More than just looking at first-time homebuyers, if we really want to get the home building sector

up and running—again, there are really big challenges. We're doing okay on rental, but around ownership housing, right now, it's a really, really big challenge, and continuing to look at things like multiplexes, where you can use more lumber, and also high-rise with timber—you mentioned cross-laminated timber as well.

We've got these really great resources here in Ontario, and it would be a shame if we weren't, as a government, putting everything into ensuring that we can make housing more within reach and increasing the housing supply.

The other recommendation that I would recommend the government to be thinking about—and this will help our forestry sector in northern Ontario—is to even consider the land transfer tax, and potentially removing the land transfer tax on new homes for a period of time as well. Taxes and fees on housing—my background is in housing; that's why I'm talking about it a little bit—are about 15%, 20%, even more, of the cost of a new home. So looking at that and having those discussions around the cabinet table—because if we're not selling any new homes, frankly, the Ministry of Finance won't be collecting any revenue from those homes.

We have construction and skilled trades folks who are out of work already—and more likely in the home building sector. So I'm just trying to make that linkage where I think it could really benefit northern Ontario, as we're trying to keep our forestry sector going, but also serve some other important goals. I wanted to give that suggestion.

1550

**Hon. George Pirie:** I think they're all very good ideas. Certainly, we've got a Minister of Finance who's looking at all of those ideas.

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** How much more time, Chair?

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Almost three minutes.

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** A common theme that I hear in the north is around job vacancies. The unemployment rate is very low in parts of the north. Talking to folks, specifically, in northwestern Ontario recently, they need people. That's the ask that I hear over and over and over again. I'm wondering: Within the estimates, what plans exist right now, and what is that work that your ministry is doing in order to help solve that gap?

**Hon. George Pirie:** You're talking about the skilled trades?

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** I'm talking about pretty much almost the entire gamut—folks in the service sector, for example; restaurants that are struggling to find people to work in them. International students, I think, were covering some of that for the time being, as folks were studying at Confederation College and other satellite campuses throughout the northwest. That drop in international students is really hurting local businesses there. That has been the feedback I've gotten consistently.

**Hon. George Pirie:** The one thing that we specifically have within our ministry is internships, and we understand—and that's across the board—that's a great vehicle to get newcomers involved in any sector. It doesn't matter

if it's doctors, lawyers or individuals who are employed in the service industry—internships. That's one of the avenues we have to use to get people back involved in those industries—all industries. That's what we can do with our ministry.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** One minute.

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** Which industries is your ministry focusing on right now, and how much is it spending on them in order to fill some of the labour market gaps?

**Hon. George Pirie:** Well, again, most of that activity is coming through the Ministry of Labour in relation to attracting the skilled trades. We also have innovative programs with the ministry of universities and colleges.

Again, within our ministry, the one area that we have available to us is internships. We're certainly glad to get you some more information from the Ministry of Labour and all the ministries that are out there, even the Ministry of Health, attracting—we just talked about it.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** We'll move to the government side. MPP Bouma.

**Mr. Will Bouma:** Thank you, Chair, and through you: Thank you for joining us here today, Minister. It's good to see you.

Having been in the Premier's office and in other roles, I have to say how much I appreciate working with you in the north, and just the attitude and the tone that you bring to conversations that we have with First Nations and other groups. It's really, really appreciated.

For the life of me, coming from the south, I could never appreciate what would drive someone to go deep underground looking for things. I think you were born just underneath the mine head—or were you actually born underground, sir?

**Hon. George Pirie:** Right beside the headframe.

**Mr. Will Bouma:** Okay, right beside the headframe.

I would urge all my colleagues, if they have a chance, to talk to the minister about mining and the passion that you bring to that, but also just your passion for the north and, indeed, your passionate belief that the wealth of this province and, indeed, of this country, moving forward, will be coming from the north one way or the other.

Having been up there a few times now, I must confess that it's a strange feeling to realize you're in Timmins and you don't feel like you're up north yet. For most of us in the south, I think once you get past—I don't know—Canada's Wonderland, you feel like you're up in the north. That's not the case—not anymore.

Minister, I wanted to ask you a question about the local service boards. As you know, of course, on August 1, 2025, legislative amendments to modernize the Northern Services Boards Act came into force. I was hoping you could expand on that a little bit and tell us how your ministry supports local service boards and how these amendments to the act are enhancing the delivery of community services in areas in northern Ontario that don't have the same municipal type of organization as we have down here in the south.

**Hon. George Pirie:** Yes, I'll spend a few minutes talking about the local service boards, because they're unique to northern Ontario.

**Mr. Will Bouma:** Oh, take as much time as you want, sir.

**Hon. George Pirie:** It's interesting; if you listen to the dialogue in the Legislature, some questions will be asked about unincorporated territories and unincorporated communities. The individuals who don't know anything about it say, "What is that? We don't have them in southern Ontario." So they're unique to northern Ontario, and the part of this that really makes it unique as well is that they're run by volunteers. The volunteers run those communities. They used to be elected every year. Now they're expanding it—now they've said three years.

How many people in the room know where Gogama is? That's a pretty relevant community right now, because you've got Côté Lake that's just next to them, and they take care of themselves. Specifically, there are eight things that they take care of. They take care of water supply, fire protection, garbage collection, sewage, street or area lighting, recreation, public library service, and emergency telecommunications.

It's interesting to understand how these really developed. Well, a lot of them sit right on the railroads. As you know, these railroads were developed when it was still steam power—so you had to have a station every 10 miles that would provide fuel and water to steam locomotives. That's really why those little communities existed. That's why you have Gogama sitting over there; Oba—all kinds of places like that that sit on the railroad line. And Norembega, just outside of Cochrane, still exists; it's got about five or seven homes around it. So you still have to care for those communities—and that's what the province does.

The act enables residents, via local service boards, to organize and deliver essential services. As I say, they're run by volunteers. Currently, there are 45 of these local service boards in northern Ontario. Again, as part of our Bill 227, Cutting Red Tape, Building Ontario Act, 2024, amendments to modernize the NSBA were enacted in the fall of 2024. The amendments came into force on August 1, 2025.

Again, what do we want to do? Well, we want to be reducing burdensome administrative processes, improving language clarity, allowing LSBs to provide fire protection service outside of their geographical boundaries. It's critical because, as you can understand, a lot of those communities sit right there in the bush—and, again, changing the requirement of an annual financial audit to an annual financial review engagement. The cost of a financial audit is about 10 times the cost of an annual financial review agreement.

It's through these amendments that my ministry is aligning with our government's regulatory modernization efforts. We are ensuring that interactions with government are efficient and straightforward. And, most importantly, through these amendments, we are better supporting the

needs of communities in northern Ontario without municipal organization.

Our ministry provides guidance to LSBs on adding or changing services, boundary expansions, or dissolving boards. The ministry has the discretion to make such orders as the ministry considers appropriate with regard to proposals made by the LSBs, pursuant to the NSBA, to alter the boundaries of LSB areas or to vary LSB powers.

The ministry also has the discretion to dissolve LSBs in certain circumstances set out in the NSBA. LSBs generate revenue to cover the cost of delivering services, through user fees, levies, fundraising, operating grants, and other provincial-federal programs.

**1600**

Perhaps Minister Scott has something to add on the LSBs.

**Mr. Scott Mantle:** I'm Scott Mantle, chief administrative officer, Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth.

Just further to what the minister had to say—it is a very unique construct. They do operate very efficiently.

The one thing I will add is, the due diligence that's applied to ensure value for money for how the work gets conducted—there is a fairly rigorous process with that as well, where there are checks and balances in place.

Certainly, the tool is a very efficient tool to use, with very small overheads, to run and support communities in delivering these small services for themselves, as the minister illustrated.

**Hon. George Pirie:** It's quite unique for northern Ontario. I think it speaks to the innovation and resourcefulness of those citizens who live in those communities.

As I say, some of those communities—and I'll talk about Gogama—are going through change right now. You have the Mattagami First Nation that's just to the east of them and south of them. The Mattagami First Nation is an extraordinary First Nation community. Of course, they benefit from the revenue-sharing agreements and also the IBAs that they have with Côté Lake—Côté Lake gold.

Côté Lake gold, as you know, is very shortly going to be the second-largest gold mine in Ontario; the first, of course, is Detour Lake. Côté Lake sits on a critical resource of 20 million ounces of gold. That's a significant number. If we're talking about a world-class gold mine—it used to be 10 million ounces, and that's when the price of gold was 35 bucks an ounce. As you know, in Timmins, there were three operations. Historically, they produced over 10 million ounces—one was the McIntyre, which produced just over 10 million ounces; the Dome was over 15 million ounces; and the Hollinger produced 20 million ounces of gold, at a price never greater than \$35 an ounce—\$35 an ounce.

Now you have Detour Lake that mines 80,000 tonnes a day of ore, and they move about 80,000 tonnes of waste, at a price of gold that's over C\$5,600—phenomenal. They have free cash flow. Right now, per year, greater—one operation, more than \$2 billion a year.

Côté Lake, through their exploration efforts, will be producing about 600,000 ounces a year, and they'll

expand as they grow. They have a unique deposit there because it's a slightly higher grade than Detour Lake. Detour Lake produces those 80,000 tonnes at about half a gram, and Côté Lake is slightly over a gram.

In the old days, we used to talk about half an ounce—an ounce has 32 grams, so you'd be mining 16 grams. Now we're talking about operations that can mine at half a gram.

When an organization like Côté Lake can mine at a gram, you can imagine how much money they're making. Their fleet is autonomous. They don't have any drivers. So, very shortly, they'll be the second-largest and most profitable gold mine in Canada. Gogama sits right beside them, so we want to do everything possible to ensure that we maximize the number of people who are actually living in Gogama and working at Côté Lake.

We're just incredibly blessed in northern Ontario because we have the gold assets. Timmins is flourishing right now just on exploration based on gold.

As you know, John, east of Matheson, there are three or four projects right now that are very, very busy through exploration—not just McEwen's operation with Black Fox. And that's expanding, as well.

We're also blessed with the fact that we've got rare earth, we got critical minerals, and we have even the phosphates that are required—in combination with the potash that's produced in Saskatchewan—to produce our own fertilizer.

There are no phosphates produced in Canada right now. The phosphates come from the US. Those phosphate deposits come from Florida, and they're going to be mined out within about four years, plus they're also, quite frankly, under attack because their waste piles give off radiation. We have the opportunity to produce the phosphate in northern Ontario—combined with the potash and biochar, quite frankly—to have a sustainable fertilizer industry in Canada based on the minerals that we have in northern Ontario. That's one of the things.

We haven't talked about Canada Nickel. The next drilling round that they finish will have the world's largest resource of nickel globally.

I've said this many, many times: We don't want the nickel from Indonesia. It's powered by coal, it's financed by the Chinese, and the tailings go directly into the ocean.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** One minute.

**Hon. George Pirie:** We want the minerals that we've got right here in northern Ontario, to secure our future. We have what the world wants, and we've got what the world needs, in all of these assets.

I haven't talked about cesium. That's in a lithium deposit that's just west of Lake Abitibi.

I haven't talked about scandium. That's in the waste pile at the Agrium deposit just outside of Kapuskasing. This is phenomenal. Scandium is a strategic metal for the States. They don't have it, and it's absolutely required for national defence.

The lever that we have in the States is with our minerals—and also the agriculture. There are eight billion people in the world, and seven billion of them are hungry. As we modernize the agriculture sector in northern

Ontario, we can feed the world. John, you know that. You can see it happening in New Liskeard. So—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you, Minister. The time is up. We've finished the first round.

We will go to the second round, and we will start with the official opposition. MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you very much, Minister and staff. I know how much work you all do. We really appreciate the ministry of northern development, mines and growth.

I'm not going to ask a question on this, but there are a few other things about unorganized townships that people don't know. We pay our taxes to Thunder Bay. Most of us don't have 911, including in populated areas. That is a pretty big issue. As people come from the south to move to our area, they are shocked by those things. People think that 911 is universal, and it's not, in Ontario.

The minister left off on agriculture. I'd like to thank the ministry. A lot of people don't know how much the ministry of northern development—I keep saying “and mines”—has benefited the agriculture sector over the years, and continues to benefit the agriculture sector, with your investment in tile drainage infrastructure. It's huge—and I mean huge before Donald Trump ruined “huge.” Tile drainage changes the game in northern Ontario; it does in southern Ontario too—but in northern Ontario, it changes the game. And I don't have to educate you, Minister; you know that very well.

You've also invested in individual agricultural operations. Again, we're very appreciative of how you're making the choices. I don't have a conflict of interest anymore, but I was one of those beneficiaries when, years ago, I doubled my operation and the heritage fund was—I was one of the first ones to get the \$50,000 grant, when \$50,000 was a lot of money. It made a huge difference in my operation. On behalf of all of the agriculture sector, I'd like to thank you.

**1610**

There are several factors that are holding northern Ontario back, but one that is—I listened respectfully to the minister talk about bringing professionals and about all the opportunities we have; we do, but transportation is holding us back. Road closures: I talk to owners, managers of mining companies who are super frustrated because their employees can't get to work because Highway 11 is closed. I think a lot of people don't understand that the ministry of northern development and mines is part of the investment process in roads in northern Ontario. I heard and I read in the briefing book that you spent \$500 million, and \$190 million and change on expansion.

Who decides which roads get expanded and which roads are left? Is that the Ministry of Transportation? Is that the ministry of northern development and mines?

I'll give you an example: Highway 11 between Englehart and Kirkland Lake was just rebuilt. It's a very dangerous stretch, for some reason, and it would have been so economical long term to simply add passing lanes. Who decided that we're going to spend millions fixing a road where people have died and people continue to die, and

who decided not to put passing lanes? Is that the ministry of northern development and mines or the MTO?

**Hon. George Pirie:** Well, obviously, the MTO is the lead agency. My role there is to talk about priorities for the highway systems in northern Ontario. Obviously, the highways in northern Ontario are a priority.

You've heard it said many, many times as we've changed—there are a couple of things that have to be realized about the highway systems in northern Ontario. Up until—in fact, it's still the truth. The population in northern Ontario peaked in 1996. Up until about three years ago, it was still declining, and that's something we are changing here in northern Ontario. Now—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** If I could just challenge you for a second, Minister—through the Chair; I try to be respectful—the amount of traffic on the Trans-Canada Highway going through northern Ontario did not decline. The population did, but the amount—our major issue is Trans-Canada traffic, not local traffic.

Again, I understand, you provide a parcel of the funding. It's part of your role to advocate or give a northern lens—I believe I read in the policy book, “Ensure the north's voice is reflected in the policies and priorities of the government, by working in collaboration with various partners, including all orders of government....”

So, again, is it you or is it the MTO? Who decides where the dangerous spots are and where they aren't?

**Hon. George Pirie:** John, you know the population is declining. Where does your voice come in? Where do you get your voice? It's the local population that has to shout and say, “We have to change these highway systems.” And that's what we're doing right now. Because of our policies, we are increasing the population. The local citizens say, “We have to change this. We need more.” That's how that works. Some 70% of northern Ontario's population is in northeastern Ontario; 30% is in northwestern Ontario. That voice gets stronger and stronger as the population increases and says, “Wait, what are you doing? We need better highways.” It starts with our policies that increase our population, and our policies are paying off because the populations are increasing.

I'm very certain Sudbury will shortly be—they had a projection of 200,000 people by about 2036; I think, by the end of this decade, they're going to have 200,000 people. You can see what's happening in New Liskeard. You can see what's happening in Timmins. At one time, the population of Timmins was about 50,000 people; now we're back up to 45,000. Sault Ste. Marie is about 86,000 people, and Thunder Bay is going to reach 130,000 people.

That's where you get your voice for changing things—by increasing the population. It's only going to increase if you're following the right policies.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Through the Chair: I don't disagree. I fully agree with your point that our numbers will increase our voice.

But right now, we'll say that you spend \$190 million on road expansions. That's money you have right now. Who decides where that money is placed—not people coming.

But is it the MTO who decides which roads get improved, or is it your ministry?

**Hon. George Pirie:** Well, John—is it okay to call him John?

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Yes, 100%.

**Hon. George Pirie:** Good. You know when you're designing a road, you design that about three or four years ahead before it's laid out. You're executing on a plan that was designed maybe three or four years ago. That's what has to change. That's through this ministry—as we say, we've got to change our priorities, and the Premier listened to that. You talk about the 2-by-1; FONOM—they've already changed from the 2-by-1 to four-lane, and we will listen to that. That has to happen. But it starts with the voices of the people, and you know that, sir.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'm not disagreeing at all, Minister.

The issue is, you spend \$500 million—you said you spend \$500 million—fixing, both repairing and increasing, the roads.

So who is deciding today which parts of the road are twinned or are 2+1s or are left alone for four years from now? Is it your ministry or is it the MTO?

**Hon. George Pirie:** I'll hand it over to Drew.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** We work very closely with the Ministry of Transportation. MTO will lead all the technical planning and development work. They would provide advice on what and where goes in what location. Northern economic development would influence or provide advice on that, which aligns with regional and economic development goals broadly. We look at supporting resource sector access—so mining roads, forestry etc. We would look at coordinating with MTO—and we do coordinate with MTO on the technical planning leads on the ground. And then we would ensure that supporting resource sectors, including NOHFC and FedNor, actually align some of that enabling infrastructure to ensure that those roads actually get there.

It's maybe a bit of a broader conversation than just the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth, and we certainly would lean on MTO for their technical expertise—your point on, where do you need two lanes, four lanes etc.? That's how it would work.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Through the Chair: I really appreciate that answer, because I expect that MTO would have the technical expertise.

So if I'm hearing this correctly, the louder that we advocate for the roads, the better it is for you as well, right? But you do have a role in advocating for what we should focus on. I think most people in northern Ontario don't even know that it's the MNDM who's doing a lot of the road funding. We all yell at the MTO, so we're going to change our focus now—no.

I fully agree with you, Minister. As the numbers are going up—but you work closely with the MTO. The numbers—the traffic numbers, the accident numbers, the road closure numbers—are also going up significantly. That not only hurts individuals, but that hurts companies.

I've talked to the manager of Alamos Gold, who was almost as excited about road safety as I am, because it's hurting his numbers.

When we talk about wanting to bring doctors to northern Ontario, wanting to keep families in northern Ontario—take one trip up Highway 11, and you're going to second-guess coming to northern Ontario. We all know that. I encourage you, Minister—I do not want to speak for you; I think I'm preaching to the choir, though, because you're a northerner. You live it every day. I get it. It is the one issue that unites us all—that most of the people in southern Ontario do not understand that the Trans-Canada Highway connects this country and all the traffic that moves across this country, yet the folks who live in the north have to contend with that every day. Driving down here is totally different than driving in the north.

1620

I'm done my rant on the roads. I see you smiling, Minister.

I want to get back to agriculture. There is a lot of potential in agriculture—I've heard you speak about it many times; I fully agree. I made my living in agriculture.

One issue that I don't hear brought up a lot—and I think it's worthy of discussion, because there are two competing uses for that land: How are we going to balance the needs of forestry in northern Ontario? They're in a tough spot right now; I get it. I've heard 10 million acres batted around—that's available for agriculture in northern Ontario. Some of that 10 million acres now is under forestry management plans, particularly the crown land.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** One minute.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** When I talk to some forestry companies, they're not as enthusiastic about switching that land to agriculture as some of us may be.

As the advocate for northern Ontario, have you thought about that?

**Hon. George Pirie:** Well, really and truly, John, I don't think there's any conflict. I think if you call up Google Maps—I'm sure you have—and you take a look at the boundary between Quebec and Ontario, you can see the agricultural development on the Quebec side as opposed to the Ontario side. The Quebec side has about—I don't know—double the forestry production out of their side than Ontario. There is no conflict between the agriculture sector and the forestry sector at all.

There is an incredible amount of land in northern Ontario that isn't arable land. That one Clay Belt is 10 million acres; there's no doubt about it. Certainly, you get north and you're out of that arable land; you're into vast tracts of timber. Also, when you go south from New Liskeard and you're in the Precambrian Shield, you're not farming up there either. There is no conflict—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you, Minister. The time is up.

We'll move to the third party. MPP Cerjanec.

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** Through you, Chair: We've heard a little bit about the Workforce Development Program through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp. Would you be able to share with us a little bit more about how that

program works, the evaluation criteria, and its success—or not—at encouraging people to move long-term?

**Hon. George Pirie:** That has been a very successful program for us. If you want the full details—go ahead, Richard.

**Mr. Richard Scott:** The NOHFC People and Talent Program for interns helped to provide opportunities for workers to gain employment access, through supporting employers to hire interns for a variety of different jobs. It helps to support skilled trades, but it also helps to support the service industry. There's also a specific Indigenous workforce participation stream to support the Indigenous population. In 2024-25, we've supported over 600 internships through that program.

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** I don't need to, I think, tell you about the importance of our college and university sectors as well. For many communities, they're a lifeline to help folks locally train for jobs within their community, and they act as economic hubs, in some ways, on their own; as magnets for other industries to be able to set up and also be supported.

I recently had the opportunity to be at Confederation College and really learn about the important work that they're doing around innovation, applied research in helping the manufacturing sector up there as well, and creating parts, whether it's in the forestry sector or elsewhere. It's quite incredible to see the work that they are doing.

I am a little bit concerned, though, about where we're going in the college sector, particularly in the north. I know we have satellite campuses in multiple locations. There's some concern around some of the viability of some of these colleges with less international students—and I acknowledge when the minister responsible for post-secondary mentions that in the House. It's a big problem, and it's a big concern.

I'm curious to know, within your ministry, what conversations, right now, are taking place to help support our college sector and uplift our college sector, so that folks in the north—and folks who might like to come and study, learn, and hopefully stay in the north afterwards—can have opportunities?

**Hon. George Pirie:** You should be aware that I was involved with Northern College for six years—I was the chairman for the last two years—so I'm pretty familiar with the college system. I will tell you that there were some times, before I was the chairman, when I thought the college sector was a 50-year experiment. It was very difficult. The 50th anniversary of the college, I think, was in 2017. We had to prioritize the roofs they were fixing. It was pretty tough. I think part of that was that there hadn't been the emphasis on trades back in the high schools, which was basically tragic.

I don't want to talk about this being a northern Ontario or southern Ontario problem—it's not.

If you're going to go into small towns in the north, quite often, the most successful individuals started off in the trades, and they end up running and operating their own small businesses based on trades. I think a lot of those



students were given a bum steer when they were advised to just blindly go into universities, versus getting a trade. I'll tell you right now, what the kids are getting right now as a starting salary is amazing. You can start off in the resource sector making about \$130,000 a year versus—I don't know—what you would get as a new graduate from universities.

So let's back it up to, how do we get the kids back and involved? Well, you get them back and involved right at high school. You say, "Are you interested in the trades?" And you've got to have programs. Do you know who's good at that right now? The Ontario Mining Association. They're having the conversations all through Ontario—southern Ontario, northern Ontario—back to high schools, talking about the advancements that are out there and the opportunities that are out there and available in our sector.

I'm not pessimistic at all about the future of Ontario. We're under threat in the auto sector. We're losing jobs. I firmly believe that we'll be successful.

We have an opportunity in the north, with everything we've got going on, to ensure that an individual who wants to get employment, and who is losing their employment in southern Ontario through the auto sector or industries associated with this sector, will be able to find jobs in northern Ontario in any area that they want. It starts right there, Rob—with understanding what is available out there to fill the queue that is out there.

The colleges: Yes, without a doubt; in fact, they are—*Interjection.*

**Hon. George Pirie:** Sure, go ahead.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** I'll ask John to speak to some of the work we're doing through NOHFC—specifically, with the colleges—in support of those communities.

**Mr. John Guerard:** My name is John Guerard. I'm the executive director for the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp.

Over the years, we've supported the college systems in many different capital projects, recognizing that construction in northern Ontario is usually much more expensive than in the south. So we partner with the other ministries that are involved in supporting the colleges. And we have focused on making the students' lives more enriched in those colleges and universities. We've invested in broadband technology to do remote learning, and a number of different things over the years.

1630

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** Just picking up on a little bit of the college—and skills training, as well: I'm wondering what initiatives the ministry is supporting right now to help northern workers or folks who want to come to the north in developing skills aligned with emerging industries like critical minerals; clean technology, in particular.

There's a lot of focus and conversation around the Ring of Fire. It's a long way away, I think, as well. I think we all agree that we do need to access the Ring of Fire and develop critical minerals out of there.

Do we see a kind of a purpose for creating almost a second type of hub in the Thunder Bay area or in north-western Ontario around skills training for mining? I know

that right now it's very centred around Sudbury. Is the opinion that it should remain in Sudbury, or should we also be expanding and looking at how we do some of that training in other parts of the province while still supporting what's happening in the Sudbury area?

**Hon. George Pirie:** Yes, that's largely through Cambrian College—that runs the common core there. There's always room to expand.

As you know, Frontier Lithium has just been designated as the first project under the "one project, one permit" process.

Again, we've got gold mines in Red Lake that are expanding. We have gold mines, actually, in Rainy River as well. We've got a hub of lithium deposits that are in and around the Thunder Bay area.

We're meeting the demand right now, through the training facilities. And of course, we're always open to expand as required.

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** I'm really interested in innovation across all sectors and investing in our post-secondary programs and initiatives to enhance innovation.

How much focus, right now, when we look at the estimates, is the ministry undertaking in innovation, whether it's in forestry, whether it's in mining, whether it's in manufacturing that's taking place in the north or otherwise? And do you see that there's more opportunity to increase and enhance innovation taking place right now so that we can increase productivity and have a better standard of living?

**Hon. George Pirie:** Really, it is all about productivity, isn't it? When we talk about Côte Lake and no operators in the haul trucks—of course, that has a huge impact on productivity.

We do have a part of our NOHFC associated with innovation. John, do you want to talk more about that?

**Mr. John Guerard:** Sure. Thank you, Minister.

Innovation is a big part of NOHFC and trying to diversify the economy in the north. We have a number of different streams of programming that we support that with. One is an industrial research chair program. We support higher-level educational facilities, higher research chairs. They find it difficult to access tri-council research dollars, given the competition for those by larger institutions.

We have a program that's dedicated to innovation, and we've supported a number of spinoff companies that have come out of different universities and colleges in the north.

In our People and Talent Program, for the internships, we allow institutions that are conducting research to have more interns than a regular business would each year.

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** This is, I guess, more of a comment, but everywhere I go, whether I'm speaking at universities, colleges, or industry, I always hear that there's more that can be done and that there's more support that can be given to help drive that and grow our economy quicker.

I want to change tracks a little bit and talk about community development and infrastructure. I'm curious about the proportion of northern development program funding that is directed towards non-road infrastructure,

such as community hubs, broadband expansion and public facilities, and how that balance is determined by the ministry.

**Hon. George Pirie:** Well, I've already talked about the fund that we talked about. That's a \$50-million fund that goes into infrastructure.

Again, through our NOHFC, we have programs available so that individuals, through an application process, will be able to participate in those types of activities.

John, do you want to elaborate a bit?

**Mr. John Guerard:** Sure. Thank you, Minister.

Our Community Enhancement Program is the program that is generally accessed for community infrastructure. It does not cover what you would consider regular community infrastructure in the ground, like roads or bridges and that type of thing. It's designed to help communities be more attractive for folks to come and bring their families to live in northern Ontario, which in turn then helps businesses attract folks, attract doctors, all those different things. There isn't a specific amount of money that's set aside for that particular program throughout the year. As the minister said, it's based upon an application process. We process those as they come in and evaluate each of those applications based on their merit and how they fit the programs and the publicly available information about those programs.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** One minute.

**Mr. Rob Cerjanec:** Thank you.

Having indoor spaces is something that I've heard is very important—whether it's turf facilities, sports fields that are indoors—so that folks, especially kids, can have the opportunity to participate in community sport throughout the year. For me, that's something that's very important. I would encourage the ministry to look more at that; on how we also attract more folks to come to the north to set up businesses, to study, to learn and to stay.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** We'll move to the government side. MPP Dowie.

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** Thank you, Minister, so much for being here.

It was a while ago now, during the COVID pandemic, being in a border community—that border was shut. I wanted to leave and find a place to go, so my wife and I headed up the highway and went to the north. I can't think of a better opportunity that I had to explore our own province. And I've returned every single year since, because tourism in northern Ontario is second to none. I would say it rivals places like the California coast, in terms of the road trip possibilities by Lake Superior, or even further north on Highway 11—all kinds of fascinating lakes, lots of industry to see. It's really a place that we can feel proud, as Ontarians, to go see.

Advancing to today, we're keenly aware of the US tariffs—another way to discourage tourism in the United States and encourage tourism within our own borders. Even though the tariffs are posing a threat to industry, particularly in my community, I know that tourism in northern Ontario and the prospects for tourism in northern Ontario remain very strong.

Minister, I'm hoping you might be able to speak to some of the excellent work that I know I've observed. I see some of the advertisements from your ministry that encourage and support and advocate for the northern tourism sector. I am hoping you may be able to elaborate on those efforts.

**Hon. George Pirie:** Yes, tourism, with our ministry—again, it's a four-season activity.

You mentioned the effect of tariffs. Actually, when I am talking in northern Ontario, whether it's Thunder Bay or Sudbury or Sault Ste. Marie, the message is always very strong: We want to encourage US tourists to come to northern Ontario. And we've been successful.

**1640**

I'll talk a little bit about Sudbury and Science North and Dynamic Earth. We've put hundreds of thousands of dollars into that facility. Their tourism from the States into Sudbury at those facilities is up by over 40%. There are two reasons for that. Number one: It is a really good facility. I'm sure everybody has visited; if you haven't, you've got to see Dynamic Earth, and you have to take a look at what they're doing there. So, number one, it's a very, very good facility. Number two: They market extensively to attract the tourism from the States, because there's nothing better than an American coming in, spending US dollars in Canada, and enjoying the very significant benefit of the exchange rate.

The same thing is happening in northwestern Ontario. We're encouraging people—because we have often said, we welcome the Americans coming to see us.

I think we understand the tariff policies are largely driven by one man and a circle of influencers he has around him.

So we want to encourage Americans coming back to Canada. I obviously discourage any Canadian going to the States. But from the other side, Americans coming to Canada—we want to encourage the visits; we want to encourage their dollars.

Quite frankly, I don't think, Andrew, that the average Canadian realizes how absolutely beautiful northern Ontario is.

One of the first trips that I came into when I was appointed the minister of this ministry—it was from Timmins to Sudbury, Sudbury to Elliot Lake, Elliot Lake to Sault Ste. Marie. In Sault Ste. Marie, we visited with Algoma Steel. Then we drove from Sault Ste. Marie back around to Thunder Bay. I've done that many, many times on Highway 17, and I'm sure, Guy, you have, as well. It's absolutely spectacular. It just so happened that I pulled over—because the visitors I was travelling with had never taken that drive. They were amazed by what they saw—majestic. Just outside of Terrace Bay, actually, we pulled over to a lookout. I wanted to show off the vistas.

At that time, one of my nieces was visiting in Ireland. She actually was going to school in Ireland, so she had a couple of other sisters around her, and they showed me a picture of the Irish Sea. So I sent them a picture from Lake Superior. I said, "What do you think is more beautiful?" And it's Lake Superior. We had some visitors, actually,

from eastern Europe. They were looking at the same thing—absolutely magical.

I think our tourism efforts are outstanding when it comes to promoting what we have in northern Ontario—but we have to ensure that that message is reached.

I think if you take a look at northwestern Ontario, around the Kenora area, Lake of the Woods—again, absolutely outstanding, incredible, the beauty of that area. And I'm just talking about the visual beauty of what's around there.

We have incredible snowmobiling systems in northern Ontario that attract people from all across the north and all through the States, because if there's one thing that we have in northern Ontario, it's the winter. There are close to 400 million people who are south of us, and there are probably about 200 million people who want nothing better than to jump on a Ski-Doo or a snow machine. Have you ever been to the States? I've travelled in the States extensively, as you know, with my career. They'll get a dusting of snow in a field—we would wait until it actually snowed—and they're driving across their fields in snow machines. They're hungry to spend their time in northern Ontario, snowmobiling. I think we've got one of the world's best trail systems, in northern Ontario.

Within Timmins, we focus on the four seasons that we have available to us, and that includes the hunting; it includes the fishing, in both the summer and the fall—it talks about everything that we have to offer through sports tourism.

There's a tremendous amount of activity that happens all through northern Ontario both with the junior systems and minor hockey systems, as they travel extensively across northern Ontario.

We have incredible opportunities to experience the local culture that is available. Do you know that Timmins has a symphony orchestra? And they are good. Whether it's Thunder Bay, whether it's Sudbury or Sault Ste. Marie, they have the local theatre groups, and they are good. The symphony orchestra in Timmins, like I said, is good—North Bay has one; so does Sudbury. When you're talking about the availability of those cultural activities and associated—obviously, there's a little bit more where you've got universities, like Thunder Bay and Sudbury and North Bay and Sault Ste. Marie. They are top-notch, and they're available. We get world-class orchestra leaders, conductors, who go in to conduct those symphonies. You don't get that anywhere else—except the small type of city that we have in northern Ontario. You can provide those types of cultural activities, and they're affordable, they're there, they're friendly.

There's incredible camaraderie between the communities, between those facilities all across the north. One part of that that's being developed by the NOHFC is through our fellow ministry. If you take a look at what's happening in Powassan, they're developing, basically, a theme park associated with the film industry—it's all associated, and it's kind of like a northern Ontario western theme, done very, very well.

We've had some very successful films out of northern Ontario—both Sudbury and largely associated with Thunder Bay, North Bay and Sudbury—excellent productions, and the people like to see that. They like to be part of that scene. If there's a movie shoot, people like to come out and take a look at it, especially when it's happening in northern Ontario. They're not used to that.

So we've got basically everything you would want. I'm only talking about the urban attractions right now, and slightly about the rural attractions.

But get up to Moosonee. Take a look at what they have to offer there. Take a look at the might of the Moose River. We were extremely lucky to go. We spent a couple of trips up to Fort Albany—at the mouth of the Albany. They call it the OPG, the Old Post Gathering. And if you have an opportunity to participate in that, there is a site, historical, cultural—the power of the Albany River. The absolute quality—the hosts are so proud of what they have done there, as they celebrate the past and develop their future. Get up to those sites. Go to Moosonee. Take a look at Moose Factory—take a look at the past and see how vibrant it is; see how critical it is to the formation of Canada. Hudson's Bay was formed on May 2, 1670, and it focused on those posts—Moose Factory, Fort Albany. It was the heart of Canada. The fur-trading industry—take a look at the local museums, to see how they used to operate. It will awaken your soul, and it will lighten up your heart. They're fantastic places to go to see. There's nothing better.

Go to Fort William at the head of Lake Superior.

#### 1650

Quite frankly, I think Thunder Bay is the most magnificent city that we have in Ontario, from a physical beauty point of view. You cannot deny that you will be moved by looking at the physical beauty in Thunder Bay. It truly is an incredible place to go.

Go to Sault Ste. Marie—as Lake Superior empties into the river systems that go into Lake Huron.

Visit Manitoulin Island. It's absolutely beautiful there. I didn't get a chance to finish my remarks, but Little Current Swing Bridge—that bridge is over 110 years old. It's phenomenal, and it travels through the island. Go to Gore Bay. Gore Bay is incredible for a couple of things, but it's the home of Manitoulin Transport. That family has built a magnificent enterprise out of that small town called Gore Bay—Manitoulin Transport. Take a look at Manitoulin Island. It's truly beautiful. It has limestone structure. It's an extension of the Niagara Escarpment. It's truly beautiful.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** One minute.

**Hon. George Pirie:** Go to Killarney and visit, and see the spectacular white cliffs—not the White Cliffs of Dover, the white cliffs of Killarney. It's a phenomenal place to go. See it. Enjoy it.

As a kid, I used to go to Lake Nipissing. Our family went to Lake Nipissing. We went south to North Bay, because Lake Nipissing along West Ferris has got the most beautiful beaches you're ever going to see. Bring your kids, small kids. They're safe. You can walk about a mile

out on that beach. Go to Lake Nipissing and West Ferris and enjoy that beach with your kids.

Tourism is unparalleled in northern Ontario. You just have to get out to see it—that everything is there, available at your fingertips—and enjoy the company of the best people in the world. They are the people who want to host the visitors who are coming in—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you very much, Minister. The time is up for the government side.

We have nine minutes left, and that goes to the official opposition. MPP Bourgouin.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Minister, you would be a great Minister of Tourism, because you did a great job.

Thank you for mentioning my riding—Moosonee, Moose Factory, Fort Albany. I've been, also, to those posts. Thank you for that tour.

You didn't even mention the snowmobile trails. The town of Kapuskasing is so amazing for snowmobile trails. Even the truckers think they're highways, because they drive right into them. So that's what we're facing in northern Ontario—when you see truck drivers driving into a Ski-Doo trail. When we talk about the estimates and road issues, I think that needs to be addressed also.

The thing I want to talk about in the estimates is French services—page 23 in the estimates book. The estimates performance results show only 72% of designated bilingual positions are filled with staff who have the requirement level of French proficiency; that is below the 77% target. The vacancies for designated bilingual positions is sitting at 0.84, so it's much higher than your target of 0.6. These results demonstrate that the ministry is not meeting its legal obligation to ensure that Franco-Ontarians can access services in French, and, worse, that the ministry has set a target below their legal obligations.

So the question is, is this an admission that the ministry is knowingly failing to fulfill the requirements of the French Language Services Act?

**Hon. George Pirie:** I would say no. There are francophones and francophiles—and I'm certainly a francophile, as you know.

I was the mayor of Timmins. About 40% of the population is francophone in Timmins. Actually, on Friday, we're opening the Centre de santé, the French-language health care facility in Timmins. I'm very, very proud of the francophone presence—and certainly in northern Ontario.

Go ahead, gentlemen.

**Mr. Scott Mantle:** It's a very fair question.

It's a very challenging issue that we have, to maintain the personnel in those positions, given the rate of movement that we have—people competing for other competitions and moving out of those competitions.

What you're seeing there is actually an objective target based on the number of people we have sitting in those positions at any one time.

As we're trying to manage the vacancies and going through competitions to fill them with people who have qualified French standards, there's a period of time where

the seats do remain vacant. During that time, there's prioritization that occurs, so we try to make sure that we move people into the front-line areas so that, certainly, the client services are not impaired. We'll share resources with other ministries to do that. A big partner, for example, would be MNR. That's the logistical challenge of it.

Certainly, it is not an admission that anything other than 100% personnel in the designated positions is acceptable—but there's a certain reality that we go through with the competing for those positions.

**M. Guy Bourgouin:** Comme vous le savez, moi je suis francophone. Je suis Franco-Ontarien. S'il y a de quoi qui est important pour nous les Franco-Ontariens, c'est de maintenir notre langue et notre culture. Puis quand on voit des chiffres comme ce qu'on voit, comme c'est là dans vos propres chiffres, vous ne répondez même pas à la Loi sur les services en français. Et ça vous met dans une situation légale en plus, dans une position légale où vous pouvez vous faire actionner par les personnes qui ont demandé des services en français. C'est pour ça ma question, puis je demande au ministère—I'll say it in English to be fair, so everybody understands. Why has the ministry chosen not to fund these estimates in a way that would meet its legal obligation to provide French-language services in northern Ontario? We deserve to be served in our official language, in our language. There are two official languages, and we should have the respect to be able at least to get served in French, in our maternal language. Why aren't we able to do that?

I've heard, too many times, these excuses, but excuses do not fulfill your obligation towards the French-language services. So I'd like to have an answer.

**Hon. George Pirie:** Guy, I think it's a fair question.

We certainly provide services in the Legislature. I'm sure that can be worked on, unless there's something that's stopping this.

**M. Richard Scott:** Non. Merci, monsieur. Moi, je comprends très bien le français, moi aussi.

But again, we also have a legal obligation to the individuals who are competing in these roles. In fairness to them, if they're seeking an opportunity for advancement, we do have these gaps and time periods where there are empty seats, and we're filling them as quickly as we can.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** So what about the legal obligation to francophones? You're saying other "competing"—but what about the legal obligation to francophones? Mes droits, mes services auxquels j'ai droit en français. Mes droits sont brimés; mes droits ne sont pas respectés. Puis vous reconnaissez que la réponse que vous venez de me donner là, c'est que vous avouez que vous brisez la loi où vous ne donnez pas les services.

Tu viens juste de confirmer la question que je t'ai demandée auparavant. Pourquoi, pour les obligations aux autres anglophones ou autres, on va mettre les droits des francophones de côté, puis qu'on ne répond pas aux besoins de la communauté franco-ontarienne?

Il y a du monde qui ne parle pas anglais, là. On s'entend. Moi, dans mon comté, il y a 60 % de francophones. Je

peux vous dire qu'il y a du monde qui ne parle même pas en anglais.

Fait que, comment est-ce que tu peux me dire ce que tu viens de me dire là, pour les autres obligations, on va mettre les droits des francophones de côté? Si c'est le cas, c'est encore pire que ce que vous m'avez dit tantôt. C'est—comment est-ce que je pourrais dire ça, le mot que je cherche. C'est que vous faites une admission volontaire que vous mettez les droits des francophones de côté. C'est inacceptable avec les services de la Loi sur les services en français. Je ne suis pas sûr que la ministre des Affaires francophones aimerait entendre ce que tu viens de me dire là.

**1700**

Vous avez une obligation de faire certain que les droits des services en français soient—mes droits, comme francophone. Si j'aime mieux m'exprimer en français, j'ai des services ici à Queen's Park. Je suis content de les avoir parce que ça répond à mes droits—c'est beaucoup plus facile pour moi de parler en français qu'en anglais. Je suis capable de m'exprimer en anglais, et je suis capable de débattre en anglais, mais je peux vous dire que je suis bien plus confortable de discuter puis d'argumenter en français, par exemple.

Mais quand vous m'avez dit que vous mettez nos droits de côté, ça, monsieur, ça ne va pas bien quand j'entends des situations de même, parce que ce sont mes confrères franco-ontariens et français qui n'ont pas les services qu'ils méritent. J'aimerais avoir une réponse là-dessus.

**Mr. Richard Scott:** Perhaps you misunderstood my answer before. We're not filling those positions with English-speaking individuals or individuals who don't have the ability to discuss at an adequate level of French proficiency. The positions are vacant for a short period of time while we recruit the right individuals to make sure they can fulfill that service standard.

**M. Guy Bourgouin:** Écoute, je pense qu'on va aller nulle part avec une question de même. Je peux vous dire qu'il va y avoir des plaintes qui vont se faire au Commissariat aux services en français parce que c'est inacceptable qu'un ministère me dise, comme vous venez de me répondre là, que vous ne remplissez pas vos obligations. Vous savez que vous n'y répondez pas, que vous ne répondez pas aux services en français, que vous ne respectez même pas la Loi sur les services en français—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you, MPP Bourgouin.

That concludes the two hours allotted to the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth.

Thank you very much to the minister, the staff and the deputy ministers for attending.

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 2201, ministry administration program, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. Any opposition? Seeing none, the vote is carried.

Shall vote 2202, the northern development program, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. Any opposition? Seeing none, the vote is carried.

Shall the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition? Seeing none, the vote is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth to the House? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition? Seeing none, the vote is carried.

This concludes our consideration of the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth estimates. There being no further business, this committee—point of order?

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Yes.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** MPP Bourgouin, on a point of order.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** I just want to follow up that we get the information that the ministry said they would provide and ask the Clerk to follow up to make sure we get the information I requested on the estimate.

**Hon. George Pirie:** I have it right now with me here, if you want to hear it.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Satisfied?

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Yes, thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** This concludes our consideration of the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth estimates.

There being no further business, this committee stands adjourned until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, November 12, 2025.

*The committee adjourned at 1705.*





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