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Standing Committee on Heritage, Infrastructure and Cultural Policy

Comité permanent du patrimoine, de l'infrastructure et de la culture

Estimates

Ministry of Transportation

Budget des dépenses

Ministère des Transports

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Wednesday 18 September 2024

1re session
43e législature

Mercredi 18 septembre 2024

Chair: Laurie Scott
Clerk: Isaiah Thorning

Présidente : Laurie Scott
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HERITAGE, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CULTURAL POLICY

COMITÉ PERMANENT DU PATRIMOINE, DE L'INFRASTRUCTURE ET DE LA CULTURE

Wednesday 18 September 2024

Mercredi 18 septembre 2024

The committee met at 1302 in committee room 1.

ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF TRANSPORTATION

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): Good afternoon, everyone. The Standing Committee on Heritage, Infrastructure and Cultural Policy will now come to order. We are joined by staff from legislative research, Hansard, and broadcast and recording.

Please wait until I recognize you before starting to speak. As always, all comments should go through the Chair. Are there any questions before we begin? None?

We will now commence consideration of the 2024-25 expenditure estimates referred to this committee. As a reminder, members may ask a wide range of questions pertaining to the estimates before the committee, however, the onus is on the members asking the questions to ensure the question is relevant to the current estimates under consideration.

The ministries are required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that they undertake to address. If you wish, you may, at the end of your appearance, verify the questions and issues being tracked with the legislative research officer.

Today, we will consider the Ministry of Transportation. I'm required to call vote 2701, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the minister.

Minister, you may begin when you're ready.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: I'm pleased to be here today with all of you discussing the important work the Ministry of Transportation is doing to keep this province moving and to keep our economy growing.

Over the next 10 years, we are investing almost $100 billion to build highways and public transit that will allow this province to thrive for generations to come. We continue to take a balanced approach, investing in both our highway network and public transit across the province.

Each year, our government continues to increase investments in Ontario's transportation network. Public transit spending represents 66% of the 2024-25 ministry budget. We are increasing capital spending for public transit by over $1.8 billion. This means more progress on two-way, all-day GO, more trains and more major station improvements.

For years, the previous government failed to expand our transportation network, leaving people crowded on trains and our highways in gridlock. We need to act quickly to get shovels in the ground on highways and public transit, otherwise, the gridlock suffocating our roadways will only get worse in the years ahead.

That's why we're moving forward to build generational projects such as Highway 413. The 52-kilometre 400-series highway will provide vital connections to the region of Peel, York and Halton. Highway 413 will run from Highway 400 in the east to the Highway 401 and 407 interchange in the west, saving drivers as much as 30 minutes per trip. Imagine having those five hours back each week to spend with your family and friends, doing the things you love. The dream will become a reality for drivers across the greater Toronto area.

In April, I'm proud to say, our government reached an agreement with the federal government allowing work on Highway 413 to proceed under the provincial environmental assessment process, with strong environmental protections in place. We are moving forward to get this highway built as quickly as possible and without compromising any environmental oversight. Field work for this project is ongoing. Our ministry has consulted with the private sector and municipalities to determine the best path forward for building Highway 413, and we are moving full steam ahead as we plan to get shovels in the ground as soon as possible.

Building Highway 413 isn't only essential for reducing gridlock, it is essential for the economy and job creation, as it will create thousands of well-paying jobs and unleash businesses across the region. In fact, during construction, Highway 413 will support approximately 3,000 well-paying jobs, including heavy equipment operators, drilling and pouring contractors, concrete and steel workers, utility contractors, environmental specialists, laboratory technologists, safety inspectors and much more. These are good, meaningful jobs which will help countless men and women buy a home or start a family. Construction is expected to contribute $350 million to our province's real GDP each year.

No matter how you look at it, building Highway 413 is a no-brainer. It will slash commute times across the GTA,

it will attract investment in our province and it will spur economic growth during construction.

But it doesn't end there. Highway 413 isn't our only plan to tackle gridlock in the GTA. We're continuing to make steady progress to build the Bradford Bypass, a 16.3-kilometre, four-lane freeway that will connect Highway 404 in the east to Highway 400 in the west. Once complete, the Bradford Bypass will save drivers up to 35 minutes in travel time. Earlier this year, we awarded the detailed design contract for the west section of the Bradford Bypass, which will run from Highway 400 to Simcoe County Road 4. And in June, we awarded a contract to begin working on an auxiliary lane that will connect Highway 400 to the Bradford Bypass.

During construction, the Bradford Bypass will contribute up to $286 million to our GDP each year, turbocharging the local economy. It will support up to 2,000 local jobs per year, and when the highway is complete, it will provide immense relief to one of the most congested corridors in North America. Congestion is only getting worse. Unlike the opposition, our government knows we simply cannot afford to not invest in building new highways, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Our plan to keep this province moving goes beyond building highways, it also means we must make what we have even better. That is why we have also made strides to rehabilitate and expand our existing highway infrastructure. Our government widened an 18-kilometre stretch of Highway 401 west of Toronto that was among the slowest sections of all 400-series highways in the province. Thanks to these efforts, more than 250,000 drivers are now spending less time in traffic and more time with their families each night.

In Cambridge, we added eight kilometres of new lanes to Highway 401, from Highway 8 to Townline Road. In the north, we widened an 8.6-kilometre stretch of the Trans-Canada Highway between Ouimet and the Dorian East Loop. We'll soon have close to 80 kilometres of four-lane highway running between Thunder Bay and Nipigon, and our visions of highway expansion extend well beyond that.

The Ontario highways program features an online interactive map providing the latest information on 650 highway projects across the province. In this year alone, we have invested almost $3.9 billion to repair and expand highways and bridges. We have more than 450 projects in the planning stage, including almost 30 expansion projects.

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We recently completed a $63-million rehabilitation of the Bay of Quinte Skyway Bridge, which connects Highway 401 to Prince Edward county and carries thousands of tourists to wine country each year.

In April, we issued a request for proposals to twin the Garden City Skyway bridge on the Queen Elizabeth Way. This is a critical project that will improve traffic flow and strengthen a crucial link between Ontario's international border crossings.

We are investing $5 million to build a new interchange at Highway 416 and Barnsdale Road in Ottawa, providing much-needed relief to an increasingly busy artery in our nation's capital.

We're investing more than $12 million to support the preliminary design and environmental assessment work to widen Highway 7 through Pickering's innovation corridor.

We are advancing construction on the Frederick Street bridge in Kitchener, marking another milestone in our plan to widen Highway 7 between Kitchener and Guelph.

We are laying the groundwork to widen Highway 401 in the Durham region by getting shovels in the ground to replace the Oshawa Wilson Road overpass.

Our government also prioritizes using leading highway innovation from around the world to make our roads as efficient as possible. That is why we are moving forward with the design and environmental assessment work for a 2+1 highway pilot on Highway 11 near North Bay to improve traffic flow and enhance road safety. No other jurisdiction in North America has built a true 2+1 highway, and our preliminary work will help determine the suitability of the 2+1 model in other parts of the province as we embrace innovation to expand transportation.

As we all know, gridlock has plagued cities from Windsor to Ottawa, and it's a result of unprecedented population growth. This is why our government is taking bold, decisive action to reduce gridlock in the city of Toronto and across our province. In July, we announced that we would provide up to $73 million in funding with a condition that construction be allowed to take place on a 24/7 basis to accelerate the completion of the Gardiner Expressway construction by at least one year. This would move the completion date from April 2027 to April 2026 or earlier, benefiting our economy to the tune of $273 million by getting drivers and goods out of gridlock a year ahead of schedule. More than 140,000 drivers use the Gardiner Expressway each day, and we're delivering practical solutions to keep them moving and keep our economy growing.

Our province has quickly established itself as a world leader in the electric vehicle space, attracting billions of dollars in investments to build EVs and EV battery plants right here in Ontario. As more drivers transition to EVs, our government is making sure we have the charging infrastructure they need to rely on. That's why we launched the EV ChargeON program, which will invest $91 million in funding to build new EV charging stations in small and medium-sized communities across the province. As part of this program, we recently issued a request for bids to design, construct and install EV chargers on provincially owned land such as parks, rest areas and carpool parking lots through the EV ChargeON government sites stream. Those bids are currently under review. We will also be awarding funding to install additional charging infrastructure in small, remote and Indigenous communities across our province through the EV ChargeON community sites stream, because everyone

deserves access to reliable and sufficient charging infrastructure.

By getting more vehicles on the road, we are doing all we can to secure a better future for Ontario, supporting EV drivers and the creation of high-paying jobs at countless major auto manufacturers who are investing in Ontario.

Affordability is key to our government's work all across the board. We are hard at work making life more affordable and convenient for drivers across the province.

We introduced legislation to prohibit new tolls on provincial highways and maintain the current freeze on drivers' licences and Ontario photo cards, putting more money back where it belongs: in the pockets of hard-working families.

This summer, we automated licence plate renewals, saving millions of dollars for drivers across the province, and valuable time. More than 900,000 hours every year have been saved.

In May, we launched an online portal that allows newcomers to Ontario to book an appointment to exchange their out-of-province driver's licence for an Ontario one.

We've also made life easier for commercial truck drivers by integrating heavy-duty emissions testing and safety inspections through the DriveON program, and by introducing an online learning module to replace the in-person air brake knowledge test.

Our team is using every tool in our tool box to find ways to save Ontarians time and money.

As the Minister of Transportation, my ministry is overseeing the largest transit expansion in North America, working tirelessly to connect communities across the province as our population continues to grow. Over the next decade, we are spending close to $70 billion to transform the GO Transit network, build new subways and LRTs and restore passenger rail service in northeastern Ontario.

The Ontario Line will add 15 new stations to Toronto's Line 1 subway, accommodating 40 trains per hour and almost 400,000 riders per day. Wait times for the next train will be as short as 90 seconds. The Ontario Line will put tens of thousands of people and Torontonians within walking distance of public transit, and construction of this game-changing infrastructure is well under way. We have awarded contracts for the southern portion of the Ontario Line and the Pape tunnel and underground stations. We've already broken ground at the future sites of the Pape, King-Bathurst, Queen-Spadina, and Moss Park stations. We are currently reviewing RFP submissions for the elevated guideway and stations contract, as we carry out our mission to expand access to transit in Toronto.

That mission extends beyond the downtown core. We're currently boring a tunnel for the Scarborough subway extension, which will add three stops and almost eight kilometres of new track to the TTC's Line 2 subway. The Scarborough subway extension will accommodate 105,000 riders each day and put 38,000 people within walking distance of transit, offering connections to GO Transit and Durham Region Transit.

We also have work under way on the Yonge North subway extension, which will extend the TTC's Line 1 subway by approximately eight kilometres, connecting Toronto to Richmond Hill. The Yonge North subway extension will accommodate more than 94,000 daily trips and put 26,000 people within walking distance of public transit.

These new subways will bring much-needed relief to Toronto's congested roadways and help make transit the go-to choice for people travelling through the city.

In March, we issued a request for qualifications to design and build the seven stations that will make up the Eglinton Crosstown West extension. This historic project will add nine kilometres of track to the Eglinton Crosstown LRT, extending the line into Mississauga and connecting two of the province's fastest-growing cities. The Crosstown West extension will put 37,500 commuters within walking distance of convenient, reliable rapid transit. We reached a major milestone in June, when we finished tunnelling the western underground portion of the Crosstown West extension.

We're also moving forward to declare the Hazel McCallion Line extensions into downtown Brampton and downtown Mississauga a priority transit project, so we can accelerate construction of this game-changing rapid transit. As Peel region continues to grow, we will maintain our work to bring faster, better transit that gets people where they need to go.

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Our ministry also continues to expand the GO Transit network as we deliver on our promise to bring two-way, all-day service on the busiest GO rail routes. Last year, we completed major upgrades to Old Elm, Milliken and Agincourt GO stations and began work on the critical infrastructure upgrades at the Aurora GO station. In April, we unveiled the largest GO service expansion in more than a decade, adding more than 300 weekly train trips along GO Transit's most travelled routes. In August, we expanded GO bus service, adding more trips and increasing service to post-secondary institutions in Waterloo, Guelph and Brampton. We'll continue to get it done for Ontarians by improving our GO Transit network in the years ahead.

Our work doesn't end in the GTA. The people of northern Ontario have long waited for the return of passenger rail service, and our government is delivering on our promise to bring back the Northlander. Once in service, the Northlander will provide a safe and reliable transportation option for northern communities. It will run from Toronto to Timmins, with a rail connection to Cochrane, and will improve the lives of hard-working Ontarians throughout the region. In May, we awarded three contracts to design and manufacture nine new station shelters, enhance rail safety and complete warning system upgrades. This vital rail service will support northern industries and the resource sector, especially during the winter months, and provide northerners with the convenient transportation options they deserve.

In addition to building new transit and expanding service offerings, our ministry has made transit more afford-

able than ever before. Earlier this year, we launched the One Fare program. Transit riders now pay only one fare to transfer between the TTC, GO Transit, Brampton Transit, Durham Region Transit, MiWay and York Region Transit.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): One minute remaining.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: This program is saving commuters up to $1,600 each year, and I and my colleagues have heard first-hand what an absolute game-changer this has been for students and workers. No one should have to miss out on a job opportunity or a special occasion because the cost of transit is too high. Thanks to One Fare, they won't have to.

We've also launched debit and credit card payments on GO Transit, the UP Express and the TTC, in addition to Presto in Google and Apple Wallet. These initiatives will make life easier for so many people, and we are proud to make this happen.

Few ministries have as wide-ranging an impact on everyday lives as the Ministry of Transportation. People rely on us to get to work, school and medical appointments. Our ministry keeps the economy moving. By making these investments I have discussed today, we are building a better Ontario.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): Thank you very much, Minister. That was great.

We will now begin questions and answers in rotations of 20 minutes for the official opposition members of the committee, 10 minutes for the independent member of the committee and 20 minutes for the government members of the committee for the remainder of the allotted time. As always, please wait to be recognized by myself before speaking. All questions and comments will need to go through the Chair.

For the deputy ministers, assistant deputy ministers and staff: When you are called on to speak, please give your name and your title, so that we may accurately record in Hansard who we have.

I will start now with MPP Harden, from the official opposition.

Mr. Joel Harden: Thank you, Minister and staff, for being here today. It's not often we get to actually have a fulsome discussion on transit. Question period is a very brief experience, but today we get to actually delve into some of the needs the province has on transit by looking at the briefing book for the estimates, so thank you for being here today.

My first question has to do with what I hear the most when I talk to municipal transit authorities, and that's operating funding to maintain and run the transit systems we have: the buses, the streetcars, the paratransit for persons with disabilities.

I note, Minister, on page 11 of your report, the detailed financial information. It's represented here that the ministry is poised to spend 3.1% less on operating funds for public transit, and it comes from the gas tax piece and the funds coming from the ministry itself. I'm hearing a very different story from municipal transit authorities about the crisis they're facing trying to run people back into public transit. They need more money for operating spending.

So my question, sir, is, why are we poised to spend 3% less to operate the systems we have?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Thank you very much, MPP Harden. As you will know, from a gas-tax perspective, we have held that commitment steady. Our government stepped up during a time of need, during the pandemic, when many of these transit agencies saw their ridership almost completely disappear. The TTC just announced that they achieved their post-pandemic high in ridership—I think it was just this week they announced that. So we have continued to work with our municipal partners on strategies, on abilities, to make sure we can move forward—

Mr. Joel Harden: Minister, I'm sorry. I just want to make sure—because we want to have a fulsome exchange on this.

You mentioned the city of Toronto, and you're right, they are on track for pre-pandemic numbers. But the ministry has a particular deal with Toronto. They had a one-time $300-million investment into operating funds for their transit system. I think we're both making the same point about how important that is.

That is not the case for my own city in Ottawa. You probably know that my mayor, Mayor Mark Sutcliffe, recently said that he needs at least $140 million per year over the next three years to shore up our public transit system—the one that we actually have. We have great plans to get our LRT system back on track. I understand what you've been saying about the investments the ministry wants to make on transit.

But my question, sir, is, why are we investing 3.1% less across the board in transit, and why does Ottawa, in particular, have a $140-million yearly shortfall?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: With respect to the city of Ottawa, I think we landed an historic deal this year—over $500 million, particularly aimed at the challenges that the city of Ottawa was facing, whether it be to the transit side or from an operational side. So we've been there for the city of Ottawa, and I think we need to continue—

Mr. Joel Harden: Again, sorry, Minister. I'll just reclaim my time by saying that I note that you did sign that deal with the city of Ottawa and we're happy to have the attention from Queen's Park, but there was not a single dime for operating our public transit system, Minister, in that money. There was no funding for OC Transpo—

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: On that point—

Mr. Joel Harden: Sir, it's my time. I just want to make sure we have a fulsome discussion here—

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Point of order.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): Point of order over here.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Please allow the minister to answer the question. You can't interrupt, please.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): Thank you, MPP Kanapathi. That's not really a valid point of order, but just respectful banter—question and answer—

Mr. Joel Harden: Understood.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): —would be appreciated.

Mr. Joel Harden: I just want to make sure, because the people of Ontario benefit from this committee's work, that we understand the picture in municipalities.

I am aware that Toronto has a formidable negotiator in Mayor Chow, who was able to get a one-time $300-million investment to operate public transit for the city of Toronto. I'm also aware that in the minister's riding, in Brampton, transit usage, if I'm not mistaken, is over 100% of where it was pre-pandemic. That community is not getting the operating funding we need.

So again, Minister, very simple question: Why are we investing less in operating public transit, as is represented on page 11 of your briefing book for 2024-25?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: I'm going to ask my officials to help clarify what you're saying here, but on the essence of a deal with the city of Ottawa—factually speaking, you know you are the representative of the city of Ottawa. This government has stepped up over $500 million to support the needs of that city—a special deal that was signed by both the Premier and the mayor of that city; announced before hundreds of thousands of people there and appreciated.

We'll continue to work with our municipal partners, but I'd like to ask one of my officials to speak directly—Jamie, I believe—to that point on your specific number, to clarify.

Mr. Jamie Pearce: My name is Jamie Pearce. I'm the assistant deputy minister of the transit division at the Ministry of Transportation.

The 3.1% that you're referencing reflects a decline, but that's in the aggregate of all operating funding for transportation systems inclusive of our agencies, Metrolinx and the ONTC. To the minister's point, the investment that the province has made in operating funding for municipal transit systems has held steady this year and over the last number of years, at approximately $380 million.

Mr. Joel Harden: Okay, thank you for the response.

What I'll just point out to the minister and staff members here is that that's falling short of what we need to get people back on the bus, to get people back into communities and in the beautiful province in which we live. I love working in this city; I was born in this city. It's a great city, Toronto. I'm glad they got a new deal with more operating funds for transit, but that's not the case in Ottawa, not the case in Windsor.

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I just want to draw the committee's attention to a Financial Accountability Office of Ontario report released on September 12, Chair, where they note the following things: Where the ministry provides a subsidy for public transit in Toronto of $196.49 per resident, for my city, slated for 2024-25, Ottawa, it's $31.91. And we're by no means the worse affected here: Bruce Peninsula, $11.70; the city of London, Ontario, $15.33; Sarnia, $11.40.

So my question, Minister: Why the discrepancy? I know there are more riders in Toronto, but even with that taken into account, sir, I don't understand why operating funds for public transit are so different depending upon where you live. Why is that the case?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: MPP Harden, I think you very well know the challenges of the city of Ottawa with respect to getting ridership back on track there. For the first time, this week, you saw that the public servants have started to come back three days a week. They are the largest employer of that area.

Every city has a unique need, but your mayor has been at the table with this government discussing those unique opportunities and landed a $500-million deal that I have to mention that you continue to exclude out of conversations with respect to what's happening across the province. It's important to note that priorities for the city of Ottawa, the people of Ottawa—we're speaking to them, we're talking to them and we're delivering for them.

We're going to continue the growth across this province—

Mr. Joel Harden: I can honestly tell you—I'm just going to reclaim my time, Chair. I want to reclaim my time.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: —and we're going to continue to make sure we make those investments.

Mr. Joel Harden: Minister, if you travel in the city of Ottawa today, what you note with the return-to-work program is gridlock. It's the exact same concern you raised, respectfully, before about your great city of Brampton, the great city of Toronto—unprecedented gridlock. And what the mayor is saying, what I'm saying, what I think all politicians at every level of Ottawa would say—and beyond Ottawa—is, we need to get people back on the bus.

We now have a situation, believe it or not, where the federal government is encouraging procurement of buses, particularly electric buses, but there are 1,700 buses in Ontario sitting idle because we don't have the personnel to drive or maintain them. That's a waste. It's a waste of taxpayers' money. So while I salute ideas to expand public transit—I'll get to that now—we need some love for the bus. We need some love for the bus mechanics. We need to hire those people. We need to put those buses on the road and reduce gridlock.

I want to switch topics, Chair, to the Eglinton Crosstown LRT. Do you have an estimated date, Minister, for when the Eglinton Crosstown LRT will open?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: As you know from our updates in the past, MPP Harden, we'll continue to undertake the testing and commissioning phase of that, which is currently undergoing. This is one of the most complicated transit projects anyone has ever built in North America. We're a government that is committing to moving it forward, getting it done, but we have to make sure it's a safe and reliable system that works for the people of this province once it's operational. So we are continuing—

Mr. Joel Harden: Minister, just to take the question back—

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: —to that part of it, to have that safe and reliable—

Mr. Joel Harden: —do you have confidence at the moment, Minister, in the people responsible for correcting the 260 deficiencies CEO Phil Verster talked about in a press conference? Do you have confidence that those deficiencies are being rectified? Can you tell the public, in light of the fact that we've known about those deficiencies for well over a year, when we can expect this LRT to open? It is three years late and $1 billion over budget.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: MPP Harden, we are committed, and we have been on every single one of our projects, whether it be MTO or Metrolinx, to deliver a safe and reliable system. Absolutely, 100%, that will be the case when any line opens in this province—safety. Every deficiency will be corrected.

That's a part of building transit: Building—you're not going to get everything right on the first go. You're going to come across challenges. You're going to fix those challenges. You're going to work together as a team to ensure we build transit. This is a government that's putting $70 billion over the next 10—

Mr. Joel Harden: Chair, I'm going to take my time back, and I'm just going to follow up with the minister.

So, Minister, I didn't hear in your response any vote of confidence in Mr. Verster or his management team.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Point of order.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): MPP Bresee has a point of order.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Madam Chair, the minister has been asked and answered the question. This is a berating at this point.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): MPP Bresee, it's not a valid point of order, but just—

Interjections.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): Yes, if we could just have one person talking—

Interjection.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): MPP Harden, one person talking at a time would be nice. Thank you.

Mr. Joel Harden: Understood. Apologies, Chair. I'll respect your time. We need to respect the time of the opposition. The people have legitimate questions about an absolutely incapacitated, gridlocked bureaucracy otherwise known as Metrolinx. We know, Chair, there are 260 deficiencies, and I didn't hear from the minister's response any vote of confidence in the staff responsible for building this project.

We also know that the Auditor General's 2020 report noted that the project at that time—which happened under the tenure of this government, not any other government. Your government received a report from the Auditor General in 2020 that the Eglinton Crosstown LRT was being built at risk. We know the consortium and Crosslinx—Crosslinx and Metrolinx—are suing each other in court, and that's cost the public at least $500 million in litigation costs.

Do you have confidence, Minister—yes or no—in the people responsible for fixing these—

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: I have 100% confidence in our team at Metrolinx and those who are building our transit. I said that in my answer before, MPP Harden, so I hope maybe, if you had the opportunity to listen to my answer, that you would have heard that.

But every line that we deliver will be safe, and it will be reliable. We have one of the largest public transit procurements: $70 billion. There's no one in Canada, no one in North America, doing what we are doing here in Ontario. Unfortunately, it's because the governments of the past have neglected their duty to build public transit, to build highways, to build bridges—and then may I note, MPP Harden, that you have voted against every single one of those measures to build—

Mr. Joel Harden: Thank you. Chair, this is my time. I'm going to take the time back.

The minister said today on the record that he has faith in the Metrolinx team. I can tell you from correspondence I get from across this city and across the minister's city that that's not how the public feels. There are over 260 deficiencies in this project, Chair, and the minister has confidence. This is a three-year-late, billion-dollar-over-budget boondoggle that the minister now has full confidence in the people involved with building it. And this government knew that the project was being built at risk. It's not the fault of previous governments—this is where I will respectfully disagree with the minister—it's the fault of this government, that they knew the project was being built at risk, and the same management team involved then is the one involved now.

Chair, I'm wondering if the minister can tell us what the estimated annual maintenance costs of the Eglinton Crosstown LRT under this current P3 contract are. Specifically, what are the maintenance costs?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: As we have with every one of our projects, maintenance is a part of the contracts. We will ensure, like any other subway line or like any other transit project, that we have the budget necessary and the dollars necessary to make sure it continues to run in a very sufficient manner that keeps people safe that are riding it. So we will continue to work towards that—

Mr. Joel Harden: Chair, I'm going to take my time back. I had a specific question for the minister that's not been answered; it's the cost of the maintenance contract. This is the exact question we asked in Ottawa when we fought for our judicial inquiry into our struggling LRT. Many of the same consultants, sadly, who built our train have built this particular project. So we know for a fact that additional capital costs at the moment are potentially, according to some estimates, as high as $5.3 billion quoted when the P3 was originally signed.

Can the minister clarify, when will the public be able to scrutinize and see this P3 contract so we can know the cost overruns?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: MPP Harden, I think—and I'll ask the team to specifically talk about the pricing of the contracts and how they're awarded—you're referring to the construction costs of the contract—

Mr. Joel Harden: Correct.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: —but there is more that goes into a contract than just the construction costs, as you've mentioned, from the operating perspective. It could be things such as land acquisition as part of that project as well. Those are all part of total costs for a project, from start to finish.

Maybe I'll ask somebody from our team to just—our deputy, as well as—

Mr. Doug Jones: Deputy Doug Jones—and I'll ask Jamie to come back again.

I would say that the actual construction costs are known when they're all incurred, and that's at the end of the project, similar to—I'm just thinking of the Ottawa project right now. They're still incurring project costs, and so that will be totalled at the end. It's the same sort of thing.

But, Jamie, do you have the specifics—

Mr. Joel Harden: Chair, just to reclaim my time with a specific question for Mr. Jones: My question, though, to the minister, Deputy Minister Jones, was, why can't the public scrutinize and see this contract?

Mr. Doug Jones: Jamie?

Mr. Jamie Pearce: From a procurement perspective, we tender a project and it gets bid, and we don't publicly release the anticipated or estimated cost until after it's bid and a contract is signed in order to retain competitive tension in the bidding process.

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Mr. Joel Harden: So, Chair, just a question back to the gentleman: Are you saying that the public will never find out about the cost of a project until after it's built? What happens in the event, as we've seen with this project, where there are massive deficiencies, people suing each other in court, wasting the taxpayers' money? We're supposed to find out after they have wasted our money? Is that—

Mr. Jamie Pearce: Apologies if I misrepresented, but what I meant to say is that once a contract is signed, that information becomes public on, usually, the Infrastructure Ontario website, and it's also reported on through quarterly board reporting by Metrolinx.

Mr. Joel Harden: In press conferences—but what I understood, Chair, is that we cannot see this contract because it's proprietary information to the consortium and to Metrolinx.

Chair, I have a couple of other questions. My question is, what is the total cost?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Chair—

Mr. Joel Harden: My question to the minister—

Interjections.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): I'm afraid it's MPP Harden's time—

Mr. Joel Harden: Absolutely.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): —whether you choose to get the answers, what the gentlemen are offering you.

Mr. Joel Harden: I'm struggling over here, Chair, but I'm doing my very best.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): Okay, then. MPP Harden.

Mr. Joel Harden: The question is, what is the total capital cost of the Ontario Line subway, Minister, or either of your representatives here today? We have estimates from the Toronto Region Board of Trade in a recent report that the project is costing up to a billion dollars per kilometre, which is a world-leading cost. Is that figure accurate or not?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: First of all, back to the previous point, and it also applies to this question: What, MPP Harden, you are suggesting is that you release and that you remove the competitiveness from a project and from a bidding process. Nobody else would ever do that in any other jurisdiction, and from a transparency perspective and for value for money, it would make absolutely no sense in this environment. What you were just asking for is making sure that the government put out a price and then let everybody bid on that price and not have or invoke that competitive tension when it comes to bidding on particular projects—

Mr. Joel Harden: Chair, just to take my time back, what I would say to the minister is: As important as a proper environment for bidding on contracts is, transparency and accountability—

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: And all of that information is released publicly, as you have heard from the ADM as well—

Mr. Joel Harden: All that we know for a fact, now, Chair, is that we have CEO of Metrolinx who is earning over a million dollars, who was run out of the country of Scotland because of his lack of effectiveness in transit, and it disappoints me today to hear from the minister, a gentleman I respect, that he has confidence in Metrolinx. I can tell you, the people of Ontario do not have confidence in Metrolinx.

In the minute and a half I have left, Minister, I just want to ask you a simple question: Do you think Metrolinx needs 82 executive vice-presidents?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: MPP Harden, we are undertaking the largest expansion of public transit in the history of this province—$70 billion. Your line of questioning today, everything that you have brought forward, whether it be as a government, as opposition, has been in complete opposition to building public transit in this province, which is a shame—

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): One minute left.

Mr. Joel Harden: Just so we're clear, the minister's answer—

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: It's an absolute shame in this province—

Mr. Joel Harden: The minister is telling the committee that we need 82 executive vice-presidents, because that number, Chair, has tripled under this government's tenure. In 2018, there was a third of the amount of vice-presidents; now, there are 82. In fact, we don't even know the amount of consultants that could be on staff at Metrolinx, because they're not part of the sunshine list.

My question to the minister: Do we need 82 executive vice-presidents at Metrolinx? Does Mr. Verster need to

make a million dollars? Is this not ridiculous amounts of executive compensation?

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): Twenty-five seconds left.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: As I said, we are embarking upon the largest expansion of public transit this province has ever seen. It's because previous governments have failed, neglected in their duty to build public transit, to build highways, to build infrastructure. We're getting it done and we're going to make sure that we get shovels in the ground, as we have on every single one of these projects, moving forward.

It's because of opposition to public transit projects, led by the NDP, led by the previous Liberal government, that we're in this situation that we are today—

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): Thank you very much, Minister. This round is out for answers, but over to the government side for their round. MPP Hamid, please start.

MPP Zee Hamid: Thank you, Minister, for all the answers so far. Let's talk about highways. My commute this morning, which should have been 45 minutes, took two hours because of the construction on the Gardiner. I know that a lot of people in my riding of Milton and surrounding ridings rely on the Gardiner to get to work or to get back home to their families, and they're very frustrated by it. Can you please share with the committee what steps you're taking to improve the situation or remove gridlock?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Thank you very much, MPP. This is a very, very important project, not only for the city of Toronto, but for the 140,000 people that use it each and every single day. Given that it was quite a challenge to get into downtown Toronto, the team at MTO collaborated with the city team and their construction team to come up with a creative solution.

I just had the opportunity to visit Decast, which is up in Barrie; that supports the acceleration work that is happening on the Gardiner currently.

We are going to move this project up by a year, and we're doing it through incentivization and we're doing it through innovation—new ways to build projects, new ways in which we can ensure that projects get done quicker, faster, more efficiently. We worked with the city to impose 24-hour construction on it.

But it really goes back to the same reason—why are we in these positions that we are in today? You've heard very clearly from the member opposite his opposition to building. Everything is a challenge—"Why do we need to build this? Why do we need to build public transit? Why do we need to build highways?"

The people of this province gave us a very large mandate to build not only public transit but to build highways, whether it be the 413, the Bradford Bypass, or invest in public transit across many other parts of this province, and that's exactly what we're doing.

We're a government that's going to continue to build. Nothing will ever stop this government from putting shovels in the ground. You see a lot of people oppose projects for the sake of opposing them. They don't want to see anything grow. They don't want to see anything move. But we've got to do something about it. When you look at gridlock, when you look at driving into the city of Toronto, when you look at getting to and from Toronto to Niagara or from Toronto to Toronto—all parts of those highways, all parts of those investments that we are making as a government will help support, not two years from now or four years from now, but the next 20, 30, 50 years of infrastructure in this province. We're really proud to be a part of a team that can collectively do that moving forward.

MPP Zee Hamid: Thank you for your leadership on this. Shortening the timeline by a year will help tremendously.

That's all for me, Chair.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thanks, Chair. I appreciate that. And I hope you can indulge me for a moment. I need to give a little bit of background on this first, before I get to the actual question.

I was made parliamentary assistant to northern development in 2019, and I spent four years in that ministry, travelling in northern Ontario, hearing a lot of the same stories. What was really interesting was, what I heard frequently is exactly what we saw earlier today in committee—that the focus of the Liberals and the NDP was almost exclusively on Ottawa and Toronto and nowhere else in the province, that they weren't interested in transportation anywhere other than Toronto and Ottawa. And we saw that in 20 minutes of questions; it was all about Toronto and Ottawa. So I think that people in northern Ontario had a very valid point on that. We've obviously invested in subways; we have obviously invested in train technology in southern Ontario. What gets lost is northern Ontario, in a lot of cases.

You can fly pretty much anywhere in northern Ontario, or you can drive, but to steal a line from Via Rail, train is the civilized way to travel. I know that there has been some significant investment in the Northlander. That is something that gets lost on southern Ontario—the challenges that we have in northern Ontario with transportation, ensuring that we have something that is ecologically friendly as well as convenient and comfortable, and I can't emphasize that enough. Having travelled by train that way before—I'm able to do some stuff on my laptop, I'm able to make some phone calls. I can't do that when I'm sitting in an airplane. I can't do that when I'm driving in northern Ontario.

I'd really appreciate it if you could talk a little bit about the investments that we have in the Northlander, in particular, and how that really is a game-changer and is something positive for everybody in Ontario—not just northern Ontario, but anyone in the province.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: That's a great question, MPP Smith.

Unfortunately, the previous Liberal government—you're absolutely right—cancelled the Northlander train, with the support of the NDP. We know their position on public transit, as you heard the MPP on committee—very

negative, very opposed to building new projects, very opposed to the concept of public transit, building highways in this province. It's for that reason that people in the north—it's not just about Toronto. It's not just about Ottawa. It's about the entire province. And so, when you look at the investments that we make as a ministry, we are investing in every corner of this province.

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The Northlander is one of the most exciting projects for the north. As we build up our capacity from a mining perspective, as we talk about the Ring of Fire, as we talk about the incredible opportunities for critical mineral exploration and just generally the excitement around northern communities just in the past couple of years, since our government has been back and investing—the people of northern Ontario deserve better options for transit, and that's exactly what the Northlander is investing in and going to be moving forward with.

We've launched an exciting number of contracts that are being procured, are under way—shovels are in the ground—and every time we go up north, we hear the excitement around this project. It's easier. It will open up more opportunities for the people in the north to get to cities like Toronto, or anywhere along the line. It will allow for more convenience, more choice, more options. Whether you want to take your car or whether you want to get onto a train, it's important that the people of northern Ontario have that optionality and have the option to choose, and then also have the ability to get onto transit.

So I think it's really important that, as a government, when we invest, we invest all across the province. We made some exciting announcements a couple of weeks ago to expand the 401 by first working on doing some of the bridge work up east, so going in through the Durham side. As we see population and traffic volumes increase there, we announced some exciting new investments in the Ajax and Durham area.

So we'll continue to work and support the province in every corner. You look at St. Thomas and the exciting announcements with the new EV facilities, and in Windsor, some of the investments we have made on the interchanges there to ensure that we're getting the dollars invested. Those are all investments that are supporting not only the economy of Ontario, but every region of this province, because we know how important it is. The Northlander is going to be an exciting opportunity for all of us, for those in the north, and it will connect to new opportunities everywhere in Ontario.

Mr. Dave Smith: I just want to add on to that from the perspective of someone who has done so much travel time in northern Ontario: One of the things that we saw was an exodus of individuals leaving northern Ontario for opportunities in southern Ontario.

I think this is one of the few times in Ontario's history where we have the opportunity for economic growth, for jobs in the north, and restoring the Northlander means that rather than having people commute from the north to the south to find employment, I think that we're going to find an easy opportunity for individuals to move from the south up north to take on those employment opportunities. So kudos to you for the work that's being done on the Northlander. I greatly appreciate it and I know that those in northern Ontario that complained to me significantly about the focus always being on Toronto and Ottawa recognize that work that you're doing there.

I will turn it over to one of my colleagues.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): MPP Rae, please. There's 10 minutes left.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thank you, Chair, for that time check. I don't have to ask then.

Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Deputy Minister and all your officials for being here today, and thank you for all the work you do to keep people and goods moving in Ontario. I know we're all watching what's happening south of the border with a lot of interest and I know the Premier has made it a great push of his, chairing the Council of the Federation right now, to ensure that our American colleagues remember that we—just Ontario itself—are the third-largest trading partner with the US.

And so, obviously, agriculture is a big part of that. I represent a rural riding, Minister, as you know. You've had the pleasure of visiting beautiful Perth–Wellington. It's a beautiful day today. Everyone back home is in the fields, taking off soybeans or corn right now and ensuring that's taken. The harvest is well under way.

But, obviously, all farmers in Ontario are dealing with the federal Liberal carbon tax. By 2031, it is estimated that it will cost grain and oilseed farmers alone $2.7 billion. And by 2030—that's not that far away, for everyone in the room; that is five years basically now at this point. The federal Liberal carbon tax currently costs 17 cents per litre on gasoline, 21 cents per litre on diesel, and so for a big-rig truck—the trucks that are in the fields right now; the combines that are filling up with soybeans and corn, which will go down those roads to get on those trains and rail lines that we're helping to build, to go to the port in Hamilton to get on those ships that go across the world—it will cost an extra $200 to fill that big-rig truck up, just pure tax. That is immediately passed along to the consumer and the food processor, which then has to pass it along to the consumer in the grocery store. I know we heard about that a lot in our ridings when we have been there this summer.

The federal Liberal-NDP government—and I know our members across the way like to say many things, but they are not for affordability, Minister, as you know—are doubling down on this punitive tax. So if you could please explain to the committee a little bit about how MTO in particular is fighting the carbon tax and helping ensure rural communities like mine in Perth–Wellington are ensuring we improve that public transit.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: That's a great question, MPP Rae. It's unfortunate that some people think the best way to raise taxes is on the backs of families, whether it would be farmers who produce our food every single day or those who transport that food, such as truck drivers.

The Ontario Trucking Association gave us some statistics on what a current carbon tax in today's date costs

truckers and long-haul truckers. So if you're commuting back and forth, whether it be produce, whether it be any essential item moving to and from, for example, the US to Canada, on a yearly basis, I think it was approximately $15,000 is what they had estimated the cost of that carbon tax to be. And now when we look at what it can be by 2030, it's shameful.

Then we have some people in this Legislature who think that there should be an even higher tax than what has been proposed, unfortunately. But now we've seen also at the same time those same individuals trying to move away from that policy.

But, ultimately, we should never, ever punish somebody with a carbon tax for taking their kids to soccer practice. We should never punish somebody who is taking soybeans off a farm and delivering them to a local market or to a producer. They should never be punished with the unfair carbon tax. It hits families; it hits those who need the relief the hardest. Often in cases when we talk about rural Ontario, there aren't as many means of, in some circumstances, public transportation to get to and from where you need to go. You need to have a large vehicle to transport your family to soccer practice or to hockey practice. Unfortunately, the way in which this carbon tax is structured, it punishes families that live in those communities, and it punishes those who need to commute to go to school, or commute to get groceries, or those who deliver groceries.

That is why we have always supported the reduction in the gas tax. The 10 cents a litre that has been removed off the tax is something that we truly believe benefits people in Ontario. Everybody in the province of Ontario—a large, large majority of people—drive every single day.

We give people options on public transit, which is important. But if somebody would like to drive, or somebody would like to take public transit, that's their choice. They have the ability to do that. But in doing so, we should not be punishing people through this unfair carbon tax. It's about those truckers and those people working in their communities. They should be able to keep that money in their pockets.

It's also why we removed the $120 off the val tag. You look at affordability; you look at, from a transportation lens, how we can alleviate some of the pressures that families are facing. It's through measures like this, whether it be the 10-cent reduction or the val tag removal. Every year you had to renew, for $120, every single car that you owned. Thanks to Premier Ford, our government and the policies put forward, you no longer have to do that.

We announced the second phase of that just this summer in which it's an automatic renewal now, so that has helped a lot of people. As I mentioned in my remarks, it saved close to 900,000 hours.

We're going to continue to look at ways to ensure that people put more money back in their pockets, that they have more opportunities to save and not punish people through this unfair and illegitimate tax, which is known as the carbon tax. It's just not fair. It helps nobody and punishes the people who need it the most.

1400

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate your leadership on those affordability measures, and I know you mentioned it very briefly and I'm more than willing to have you expand a bit on the gas tax. I know in my own riding of Perth–Wellington this past year over $800,000 was delivered through that program. I believe it's $380 million across the province for this year. You mentioned, obviously, affordability is a big issue and our government is taking action on that, as you mentioned, cutting the gas tax, but we've also maintained that funding because a portion of that obviously came, for that program, from the tax on that. So we have taken it upon ourselves to ensure our municipal partners receive their fair share in that component while providing relief to drivers, and you rightfully identified where, in my riding, you have to drive if you want to go work, you want to go to soccer, you want to go to hockey or baseball.

So I was just wondering if you could elaborate on some of the initiatives that our government has been taking around rural transportation, whether it's the community transportation grants, any additional funding through the gas tax this year, for example, ensuring that we expand that rural transit system that exists across Ontario.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Absolutely. When I was at AMO this past August I heard a lot from smaller rural municipalities that really wanted to take advantage of public transit, and so the programs that we'll continue to look at—you mentioned the community transportation program has been a pretty great success. We're looking at ways to continue to build upon that so we can encourage more transportation needs in the north through public transit. We also have to be creative because no two communities are the same, whether it be from a geographic perspective or demographics perspective. All of a sudden we've seen huge, significant job opportunities in St. Thomas, and so what were the needs of St. Thomas five years ago are no longer the needs of the community of St. Thomas and surrounding Elgin county today.

So how do we fit those unique needs of transportation from a rural perspective is why we've had those focused programs on rural transportation. It gives us more opportunities to examine ways in which we can support more optionality, reward some innovation in that space, because we know, ultimately, that we will have to fund some of it. It's hard for municipalities that might not have much of a population base to support a full public transit system on their own. That's why we have programs, like, as you mentioned, the gas tax funding as well where those who do run transit services based on the ridership or previous levels get some funding, but then, ultimately, through their programs that we have put forward and announced in the past and look to announce in the future we think that rural transportation lens is really important and something that we need to continue to focus on.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): One minute left.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: So we're looking at ways to do that, and we're excited to see the opportunities

that can be put forward through investments in more rural transportation.

When I was at AMO, as I mentioned earlier, we heard some great stories of how some of those new transit options in these smaller rural communities can help with seniors, keeping them more engaged in their communities, allowing them—specific routes, structured routes in certain communities—to get to and from events, which unfortunately they couldn't afford in a different circumstance where they have to pay maybe a taxi fare into the city, but when you can combine it with public transit in support of the provincial government and the local government and other municipalities, it really gives us an opportunity to invest some critical infrastructure and help improve the quality of life in some of those areas. So we'll continue to do that and look at ways to support more options.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): Thank you very much, Minister. We're out of time for this round.

We'll now go to the official opposition. MPP French, please.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Good afternoon, Minister. I'm glad to have you here and joined by so many folks from the ministry. I'm proud to serve as the official opposition critic for infrastructure, transportation and highways. I've been doing committee work, though, for 10 years and I'm looking around and realizing I'm one of two elected faces at this table who remembers when estimates was about seven and a half hours, and we could delve into the details and it was a very intelligent and accountable process. Right now, because of the Conservative government changes to the standing orders, we have two rounds of 20 minutes to ask questions—

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): MPP Smith has a point order. I'm sorry, MPP French.

MPP Smith, go ahead.

Mr. Dave Smith: There are four of us, not two—four of us who remember estimates being significantly longer.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): Thank you, MPP Smith. That's not a point of order.

Go ahead, MPP French.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: No, but it does absolutely use up some of my time, which is what my point was. I have very limited time to hold this government accountable or to pick the brains of ministry staff, and I hope that the minister can do his best to be clear, and I will do my best to be concise.

Before I actually delve into the questions, I did want to raise that I have sent a few letters to the minister regarding local priorities, specifically the widening of Highway 401, the improvement of the 401 interchange at Harmony Road, the feasibility of a new interchange at Townline Road, and the Bowmanville GO extension. I'm not looking to have updates at this time, but I have requested in multiple letters—and I have one physically here to try to get around the gatekeepers and give it to you directly. I'm asking for a briefing by ministry staff to find out updates on these local priorities. Will you allow the meeting?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Thank you, MPP French. As we have with all of our other projects, we're happy to engage with you and give you updates on—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you. So I can expect to hear from someone to arrange a briefing?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Absolutely, yes. It's not a problem at all.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you.

Continuing in that vein: The folks east of Toronto have been very patient, and we have an interest. Do you have an estimate of when the Bowmanville GO extension project will be completed?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: GO rail transit expansion, as we've laid out on our OnCorr program, has been a continuous work in progress. We're in the design phase of those, the extension of the line and into Bowmanville as well. This is something that the government committed to and is actively working on as we look at ways to continue to expand GO Transit, so—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Yes. Is there a date? And if there's not, that's okay, but is there a date? I'd love to report back.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: MPP French, as you know, these are complex, complicated projects along the line of GO Transit. It involves multiple individuals, multiple companies—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Chair, I'm going to reclaim my time—

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: —whether it be rail partners or others.

Chair, I do have the right to respond to the question as I do see fit—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Minister, this isn't a game.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: —and I should not be interrupted—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: This isn't a game.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: It isn't a game, and, absolutely, I should be able to respond to the question—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay. I'm reclaiming my time, Chair. Thank you—

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): Minister, it is the official opposition's time, if they don't want the answer.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I will interpret that as there isn't yet a date. We are all eagerly watching that project. I was looking for a specific date, not an update, but I'll look forward to that at my briefing.

Another question: In the past, provincial governments have paid for infrastructure including but not limited to train stations. There is now a change that funding stations is not going to be done through the province anymore. Bill 131, Transportation for the Future Act, allows a municipality to impose a transit station charge to help pay for new GO stations. I know that the region of Durham was pleased to participate in that process and come up with a creative solution. My druthers is that the province would pay for it. That's not happening, so my question is, do we know how much Metrolinx is planning to charge the people of Oshawa and Bowmanville for the new stations that will be built as part of that GO expansion?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Ms. French, as you know, each transit project is a collaborative option and collaborative relationship and partnership between, in some circumstances just the province, in some circumstances federal and provincial and in some circumstances federal, provincial and municipal.

We deliver the GO expansion plan per our $70-billion budget over the next 10 years, as a part of that program and a part of that project. Each part of that project is unique in its own way. But the main investment that is put forward to invest in both GO Transit along that line has been done under this government and is being done under the leadership of Premier Ford, and may I note that you voted against that expansion.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Chair, I'm going to reclaim my time. The question was specific to the transit station charges. That's a new program, and I do think that the folks who live in the area, since they will be paying for that infrastructure that used to be covered by the province—I think that the question of, "How much will it cost them over time?" was a fair one. But I'll move on. I don't think that there is an answer forthcoming.

1410

Sticking to trains, though, regarding the Ontario Northlander, folks in the north and the people who love them want to know, when will the Ontario Northlander passenger rail service begin running? Do you have a date? I'm looking for a date or an estimate of a date.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: The Ontario Northlander is a great project. Unfortunately, you voted against it multiple times, which is really unfortunate, MPP French. But this government is continuing to make investments in the north. As you know, my colleague MPP Smith and his line of questioning brought forward the importance of what people felt in the past—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Chair, I'm going to reclaim my time.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: —when those investments weren't being made.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: The way that I am—

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: We're going to continue to build the Northlander.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Minister, the question was specific to "Do you have a date?" I think, partisan pieces aside, every elected member at Queen's Park has an interest in seeing this train come back. Certainly, the members from the north and the NDP have long advocated for this train, and we've long heard that it is coming. I was hopeful for a date. I certainly know that people who live in that community have heard lots of promises, but they're looking for dates.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: MPP French, I urge you to go—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: The government announced that the northbound service will leave Toronto at 6 p.m. and arrive in Timmins at 5, and the southbound service will leave Timmins near midnight, arrive in Toronto around 11 a.m. These trip times are quite a bit longer than what it would take to travel by car, even with Toronto traffic. Most of the travel is late at night.

So, I raise this—the member from the government side was talking about train travel, and many of us have the opportunity to do that. Convenient, comfortable, civilized—various words that were used. But in this case, these trip times—longer than it would take by car—these service frequencies, departure and arrival times—I'm asking how they compare with the Northlander rail service that existed prior to 2012. Could I get ministry staff to tell me how they compare if the minister is not sure himself, or could I ask for that comparison, if not today, for a follow-up?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: MPP French, as you know, this is a new line that is being put forward, again, by this government, to support the people of northern Ontario. If you actually take the opportunity to go out on to the programs, onto the stations that have started to be procured, the contracts that have been released and the work that has been ongoing, you will see the progress that is being made on a daily basis.

With respect to timing and with respect to the trains that are going to be operational and the timing, we'll work with our communities, and we'll work to see, as we move throughout that process, how we can continue to improve. Oftentimes, whether it be through Metrolinx, we often work and adjust our GO rail transit schedules. But it's important to get this project off the road, off the ground, and that's what this government committed to doing—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Good.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: —unfortunately without the support of the Liberals or the NDP.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I also look forward to this project being on track.

I asked for a specific comparison. Is that something that could be provided to me, how the Northlander rail service existed prior to 2012 as compared to the times that I just shared?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: No, I'm happy to give you, from a historical perspective, what it was and the timings that you have now.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: But I think it's important to note that those can always change—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: That was a perfect segue, by the way, Minister.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: —and that we can always move forward.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Minister, I couldn't have asked for a better set-up, as you talked about the historical pieces. Now, my next question is about the bright and electric future. I am a girl from Oshawa. I support the automotive industry. I'm proud of our history, but I am also excited for the future.

I acknowledge and appreciate the minister's comments about the future being electric and some of the government investment in that regard. It is a very good thing that the province is investing in electric vehicle manufacturing. However, people who want to buy those EVs are looking

around, and they are seeing that the charging infrastructure isn't quite there yet. The minister did mention some initiatives. I have a specific question, though. While your government is talking a lot about building homes, one easy way to support the electric vehicle industry is to make sure that new homes built in the province will be EV-charger ready. I have a few things to share in that regard.

Full disclosure: You know that I have a private member's bill—the EV-Ready Homes Act—before the Legislature. But some of the thoughtful opinions: Lana Payne, Unifor national president, urges all parties to support that legislation and has said, "On behalf of nearly 40,000 Unifor members working in the auto and component parts manufacturing sector, I am writing to express my strong support for the proposed EV-Ready Homes Act.... These proposed amendments will facilitate the future installation of EV supply equipment in new homes." She has far more to say; I'm happy to share those thoughts.

The Global Automakers of Canada David Adams, president and CEO, has said, "We know consumers want to make the switch to cutting-edge electrified vehicles but are facing some important barriers to make the switch. Amending Ontario's Building Code Act to ensure more homes in the province are ready to support vehicle charging is an important opportunity to remove a significant barrier to making the switch to new vehicle technology."

The EDA, Electricity Distributors Association—

Mr. Ric Bresee: Point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): MPP Bresee, a point of order.

Mr. Ric Bresee: The building code and the related legislation around that are part of MMAH, not part of MTO, and so anything addressing that should be dealt with at those estimates or in those committee meetings, not in dealing with estimates for MTO.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): It's not really a valid point of order, but I think that the thing was to keep it to the estimates that are before us—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I take the member's point. I do—

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): So if you could focus—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay. I'm going to finish this one piece: "The EDA is pleased to see that the EV-Ready Homes Act would respond to our mutual goal of an electrified Ontario."

I raise this because the minister raised the government's investment and interest in electric vehicle charging technology, so I was just responding to the minister's point—this particular minister in this particular estimates.

For this particular minister in this particular estimates: Minister of Transportation, do you agree with the voices I have shared and think that building new homes that have the electrical capacity roughed in for EV charging would help to support the future of the automotive industry and an electric future?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Thank you, MPP French, for that question. As the Minister of Transportation, we are always examining ways to make charging infrastructure more accessible. As you noted, through my opening remarks, we've put forward a $91-million program to enhance more charging options, targeted mostly outside of large urban areas, so communities such as yours, under 150,000 people, was one of the requirements. One of the biggest challenges we hear is around range anxiety and people not buying a vehicle because maybe they're driving from Toronto to Ottawa, and in between Toronto and Ottawa, there are not that many charging stations. So we are coming up with a fix to that. We announced the program, applications have been taken in and we'll continue to work with industry and consumers to better place those chargers across the province.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: And to the point of the member opposite, I know that there is another minister who is looking into this, and I am happy for all of us to have a conversation to ensure we have a strong electric future—and please pass my bill.

Speaking of please pass my bill, Bill 15, Fairness for Road Users Act, is a private member's bill I've been keeping in front of the House for years. It's now Bill 15. It has passed through debate. It has gone to committee. That was under the previous Minister of Transportation. It received a fair audience and had its day in court, so to speak. It has not yet made it to clause-by-clause consideration. It's stuck in neutral.

I have worked with legislative counsel to come up with some, what I think are, constructive and thoughtful amendments that address the government's concerns. But I have written to you, Minister, back in October and again in March, and I would really love to work with your staff to see if there is a way for this bill to advance. We've come up with a few potential amendments, and I can't get the courtesy of a response to my letters. May I meet with you and your appropriate ministry staff to discuss amendments, figure out a plan for this important issue for fairness for road users? I would like it to finally move out of neutral and into the passing lane.

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Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: That was good. Thank you, MPP French.

Look, our government has always been committed to removing tolls and reducing the cost of living for people across this province. As you will know, in your area as well, that was something we committed to in the previous election, and we got it done for the people of not only Durham but across this province. And so, whether it comes to—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: That's not this bill.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Whether it comes to—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Hold on just a second—brief interruption.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Oh, I think I confused your two bills. I apologize.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I'm going to talk about the next one after this, but Bill 15, Fairness for Road Users Act, was about fairness for survivors and families. The penalty in the event of someone's death or catastrophic injury is a really insulting slap on the wrist and I was very

appreciative of the previous minister's allowance of that to go through to committee, but it can't come out the other side until it is fixed, so I have some solutions. I would be glad to work with this minister.

I also don't need to use this time to update or discuss, but I would be grateful for an audience, as I've requested in letters—and also, may I please get a response to my letter? That is pointedly to whoever receives your emails.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: I obviously commend your advocacy on this bill, MPP French, and we'll work together on this particular piece and your thoughts around it.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you. But you had highlighted that the tolls have been removed from the 412 and 418. I am grateful that your predecessor and the Premier listened to active and engaged community members across Durham who supported my PMB to remove the tolls from the 412 and 418.

Along that line, the Ontario NDP has called for the removal of tolls from the 407 for trucks, which would reduce traffic, make safer highways, better utilize existing infrastructure. Will you remove truck tolls from the 407, Minister?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Our position, MPP French, as you know very well, is to build the 413. We know, in the next 10 years, we're going to be at capacity on all of our highways. We've seen record population growth in this province, and the biggest solution that we can offer to people today is to make sure that we invest in highways like the 413, the Bradford Bypass. That will alleviate the gridlock for the future. We've seen what previous governments have done—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Chair, I'm going to reclaim, because that question was, will you remove truck tolls from the 407? At this time, I don't hear a yes.

But as you mentioned the Bradford Bypass and Highway 413, can the minister or his staff provide estimated capital costs both for the Bradford Bypass and for Highway 413?

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): One minute and 15 seconds—I'll give you the warning.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: MPP French, as you know, we have a $27-billion capital road infrastructure program over the next 10 years. As we build our highways and as a process from the perspective of making sure that our bids are competitive, we'll continue to ensure that we get those projects built.

Nothing will stop the Bradford Bypass or the 413 from getting built. We've seen the costs of not building these projects. Look at our roads. Look at our highways today. Look at the lack of investment into public infrastructure and what that's caused today, not only in this city, but from productivity issues across the province. We need to get these projects built, whether it be public transit or highways, and that's exactly what our government is committed to doing.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. Do I have any more time?

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): Twenty seconds, if you wish.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Oh, man. I have another 20 minutes' worth of questions, but since we no longer have seven and a half hours, will we be sharing the time of the independents, or will we have an additional rotation if they don't show?

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): The answer is you have an additional 20 minutes.

Now over to the government side for their 20 minutes and MPP Bresee, please.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Minister, thank you for your presentation today.

We have a challenge of success. We have seen this government—and I take no personal credit for it; it started long before I got here—rebuild our industry and rebuild our economy. To that end, you talk a fair bit in your presentation about the expansions that are going on, about the expansions for transit, about the expansions for our road systems, all the way across the province, and these are absolutely necessary, given how well our economy is doing and how much material, how many goods are being shipped up and down our highways, across our entire systems, including a new marine strategy, which I congratulate you on as well.

Minister, part of something that happened about two years ago was the Ontario east transportation master plan was presented, and at that time, we talked about the expansion of the 401, honestly, in both directions, but for my focus, certainly to the east. When we see so much truck traffic—again, a symptom of a growing economy, a symptom of our growing population. We're seeing a tremendous amount of truck traffic, and you and I have had many discussions about some of the mishaps on the roads. I also know that there is a lot of investment and a lot of time going into the expansion of the 401 to that, in phases, of course. Can you talk about the early phases that are already under way? As well, can you talk about the future of that, further to the east?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Absolutely. I'm going to ask my team to speak to some of the more specific eastern projects because I think there's so much excitement around it to share around some of our highway projects in the east. You had the opportunity to announce one of them last week, the completion of which—but when you look at the 401, we've seen, as I've said in the past, record population growth in our provinces, and we know with that, as you've said, a symptom of success is more growth, more opportunities, and we're growing. Our highway infrastructure has to keep up with that, both from a safety perspective and also from a growth perspective. So when we talk about the 401, specifically, in the east, I'll ask Alain here to give some of the projects that we're working on or some of what we're doing with respect to that.

Mr. Alain Beaulieu: Thank you, Minister. I'm Alain Beaulieu. I'm the chief engineer at the Ministry of Transportation.

Among the 650 expansion and rehabilitation projects that we've got either under way or planned in the province, many of them are in the eastern portion of the province. On Highway 401, just east of the GTA, we're doing some environmental assessment and design work for future expansion in that area. Some of our work includes advanced widening of bridges for future widening of the highway, as well. Beyond that, we just completed a rehabilitation of the Bay of Quinte Skyway Bridge and we're replacing bridges on Highway 417 in Ottawa, using a very innovative method, using rapid bridge replacements.

Mr. Ric Bresee: It will be very interesting to see that.

Minister, if I may continue on that theme of the increase in the logistics, the increase in the supply chain that is happening across the board. Again, specifically to the eastern portions of Ontario—it is my own area, so I hope you don't mind me focusing in on that.

Again, we are seeing a lot of truck traffic, certainly. We also know that there have been challenges with some of the trucking companies and some of the regulation around that. I know that there's work going on within the ministry to focus on that. Can you speak more to what we're doing to ensure that safety, what we're doing to ensure that people are actually following the regulations?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Great question, MPP. I know you've worked very well on this file with respect to also being the PA to the file. Commercial safety is very important to everyone on the team and to all road users. We have some of the safest roads in Ontario, but that doesn't mean that we can't always strive to be better. We're going to continuously look at ways to strengthen our programming with respect to how those commercial licences are issued, the training that goes into being able to become a commercial driver.

Also, on the enforcement side, I had the opportunity near Thunder Bay to open up one of our new facilities in which we've invested a lot of money into some of our scales to prevent and to pull off a lot of our trucks from the roads. I was in Gananoque not too long ago on our way to AMO, in which we saw, once again, first-hand, some of the great technology that's being deployed there, some of our additional MTO resources on the ground. Our officers that are inspecting these were carrying out blitzes almost every single week, if not month, in different parts of this province to ensure that everyone is following the road safety and taking those trucks that are not safe off the road as well.

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But these are really the focuses for our team in the road safety, on the transportation safety division side of it, because we know how important it is. We've also introduced the new DriveON Program that really helps from not only an environmental perspective but also from a safety perspective.

We're going to continue to work with the industry to ensure that we bring new, innovative solutions, bring more innovation, but also at the same time innovation in a way which makes our roads safer. The way we build our highways, how we've built our highways, we continue to improve upon to ensure that users are safe. We'll do everything we can to ensure those who are driving or operating commercial vehicles do so in a safe manner.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Thank you very much, Minister. As you mentioned, I am the PA to you, and I greatly appreciate your engagement with me and the collaboration that we've shared around many of these issues.

I could go on for quite a while longer, but I do have other members waiting to ask questions, so at this time, Madam Chair, I would pass it along.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): MPP Kanapathi, please go ahead.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you, Minister, for that important presentation and for your hard work—not only hard work for your area, hard work for all Ontarians. I'd also like to thank the entire team. You brought all the big heavyweights—the team is here and thank you for being here.

The investment we are making in our infrastructure will benefit Ontarians for generations—the huge investment we are making. You came to York region last year for the exciting tendering announcement of the Yonge North subway extension. People have been waiting for the Yonge North subway extension, not only in my Markham–Thornhill riding, but the entire York region. York region is the fastest-growing region in Ontario—1.2 million people.

You know that we have a less-effective public transportation system. When I was a councillor for the city of Markham for 12 years, we were talking about the Yonge North subway extension for 14 years—it never happened. Under your leadership, under the Premier and your hard work, this is finally coming to fruition. So thank you for that. You're putting a smile on the face of York region—not only the Markham–Thornhill riding but across the entire York region.

Could you please elaborate on the timeline for the Yonge North subway extension?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Thank you very much, MPP Kanapathi. I remember, since day one in 2018 when you've been elected to a provincial—after your municipal days, you've been the number one advocate for the Yonge North subway extension. I think it's important to note that, in your municipal days, you really led the charge on pushing governments of the past to invest in the Yonge North subway extension. Unfortunately, those were ignored. But it's a great opportunity when you get elected to a higher level of office to have that opportunity to work for your community and then ultimately see it to what it is today, which is one of our key flagship priority projects, which are a part of our $70 billion over the next 10 years to invest in public transit.

One of the most fascinating stats: Just today alone, it will put over 25,000 people within walking distance of public transit. I know that your communities have a lot of density also planned around the transit stations as well, so as they come online even more people will have access to within walking distance of public transit in those areas.

But, really, that's what building transit is all about: making sure that we help improve the quality of life, give people options to live wherever they want, to get to and from places easier, quicker, more efficiently so you're not stuck in gridlock.

But what we see here today and in the past six years is a government that's committed to building. Unfortunately, decades before, we saw zero investments into our public transit and our highways across this province.

We're a government that's always going to be building. Nothing is going to ever stop with us; we're going to keep building. Once we finish one project, we'll be on to the next project. Yonge North is an exciting example of that—something that that region needs—not only needs but deserves—better transit options, as you have said. You know from a local level how important it is to deliver for that region. Whether it be Markham, whether it be York, whether it be Richmond Hill, all of these communities are going to benefit immensely.

We announced last year the RFQ phase in which we are going out to market with respect to the Yonge North subway extension. We're excited about the market and the interest that we've seen in it, and we know that we'll get shovels in the ground very quickly. We've seen the early works already commence around much of the line, which is really important to do before you can start to build the full completion of it. So we're looking forward to continue marking those milestones, awarding the contracts, getting more dirt flying and, ultimately, ensuring that transit riders in that area have options to connect all the way into downtown Toronto once it's going to be connected to Line 2 there.

Thanks for all your advocacy on it. Thanks for all the work that you've put into that subway project. It's great to see it come to fruition now.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you, Minister, for that update. It's about the connectivity, no?

I'll pass it on to my colleague.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): MPP Hamid, please go ahead.

MPP Zee Hamid: Thank you, Minister, for your leadership on this, especially on transit. I was on Milton council for much of the 15 years that Liberals governed this province, and as you mentioned and as MPP Kanapathi mentioned, during that time, much of our transit asks and needs fell on deaf ears. We've had a huge backlog, and you're making a generational difference, so I do want to thank you for that.

Among the transit projects, the MPP actually asked about a different line, but I'm curious about the Ontario Line, which is probably the largest expansion of my lifetime—probably much longer than that, but I'm very, very, very excited about it.

Now, can you share with us some of the benefits of it and also the update of where we're at and where we're going?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: The Ontario Line and the projects that we've put forward are ultimately going to double our subway infrastructure in this province. When you look back at when the last expansions happened on the subway lines here in Ontario and you look across the world, whether it be in Europe or other places, you really recognize how far back previous governments have put us. It took a leader like Premier Doug Ford and our government committed to building for the future to really recognize the opportunity of building transit in this province.

The Ontario Line: 15 kilometres underground through some of the most densely populated areas of the city of Toronto—we are going to see close to 400,000 people on that train every single day. So when you think about it, that's thousands of cars that are going to be off the road, thousands of people that are going to be able to take a subway, whether it be into downtown or anywhere else along that line or connecting to different lines. To MPP Kanapathi's point, it's about connectivity and giving people the options to connect across not just along the Ontario Line but different lines and enabling people to be able to move from one place to the other.

We're also going to see trains every 90 seconds on this line, which is really important. You show up at a subway stop, you're going to get a train within a minute and a half, give or take. That's really exciting. That's transformational, when we look at it and we look at our other subway projects across the province. And my colleague Minister Surma is also looking at ways to encourage more housing around some of these stations as well, to develop the Transit-Oriented Communities Program.

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Just last week, we broke ground on three of the stations that are going to be used for the Ontario Line. That's really exciting. It shows you the progress that we're making with respect to these projects. It tells you the pace at which we're going.

You look at what we've learned from other projects in the past, and you see that we're able to really use innovative procurement models, innovative ways of structuring contracts, innovative ways of construction to not only limit things such as noise, but also limit the amount of time it takes to start getting shovels in the ground and, ultimately, move these projects along.

We're very excited about the progress that we've seen so far on some of these lines. We're going to continue to work with the community, who have seen a lot of excitement around this project but also around—the excitement, in general, of being able to have more than one or two subway lines in the city of Toronto. It's transformational for the city and will really help get people moving.

MPP Zee Hamid: I'm very excited myself, as well. I'm looking forward to riding that line and many other lines. People from my riding actually will benefit from it, as well, even though my riding is a bit farther out. However, in order to get to, let's say, the Ontario Line, they'll be relying on GO Transit or driving somewhere.

With the cost-of-living crisis that we're in, the affordability crisis, costs are going up everywhere. Can you touch base on how, related to transit and transportation and filling up the gas in the car and renewing drivers' licences—

what is our government doing, what are you doing, to bring affordability into transportation?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: I think one of the biggest successes, recently, on the transportation side of it has been One Fare. If you look at, whether it be Durham transit, the TTC, MiWay, Brampton Transit and some of our other transit lines that are associated with the One Fare program, it shows you—and I don't have the most—I know we get updates. I remember just a couple of months ago, we recognized five million taps for One Fare. If you're coming into the city, that's a huge savings.

I had the opportunity to visit a classroom at TMU to speak about public transit not too long ago; this was only probably a month or two into the One Fare program. I asked how many people had actually been able to take advantage of the One Fare program, and I think about 95% of the students in that classroom put up their hand. We estimated that it would save about $1,600 per user, potentially, depending on the frequency which you use transit.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): One minute remaining.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Think of someone coming in from the Milton GO line trying to get to TMU. You jump on GO Transit, and then you go from Union Station to TMU. What used to cost you $6 a day—$3 there, $3 on the way back. It's not prohibitive to you anymore.

That's a game-changer. It makes more people think of taking transit. It makes transit more convenient—and more frequent for you. It gives you the ability to not have to think about using transit. So when it comes to affordability on transit, that has been a huge piece of what we think the success of it—and we'll continue to look at ways in which we can not only improve frequency on our transit systems but also ensure that people have the opportunity to use our transit systems—

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): Thank you very much, Minister.

We'll now go over to the official opposition. The time will expire at 3:03. MPP Harden.

Mr. Joel Harden: The uploading of Highway 417—the 174 discussion as part of our new deal with Ottawa: Is it safe for the city of Ottawa to assume that the uploading costs are going to be borne by the province?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Thank you, MPP Harden. I'll ask maybe our team to explain the more specifics of the detail of the deal in charge, but we put forward a $500-million deal. Also, with respect to some of the other road costs related to the challenges that are being faced by the city of Ottawa—stepped up with the Premier. But I'll ask maybe Eric to speak to the specifics of the 417 upload.

As a reference point, very quickly, I'll say the DVP and the Gardiner—we're doing two years of a due diligence period and working through that with the city. As you've seen, we've invested $75 million just a couple of weeks ago to help accelerate that progress as well.

Mr. Eric Doidge: Thank you, Minister. Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Eric Doidge, and I'm the assistant deputy minister for MTO's infrastructure division.

With respect to the question around the province picking up the uploading costs for the 174, in Ottawa, we just recently issued a request for services to acquire a due diligence provider to take a look at the upload process in terms of what is involved. It's a three-step process that we're asking our due diligence provider to take on, and it's through that process that we'll determine what will be eligible for upload costs.

Mr. Joel Harden: Thank you for that clarification. So if we have the precedent with the DVP, it's safe for our municipal officials to expect that it's likely that precedent, once we know what the numbers are, could be repeated.

Mr. Eric Doidge: Correct.

Mr. Joel Harden: I appreciate that.

I want to move to a matter that MPP French raised in the last line of questioning, Minister, and you know this is an issue I care deeply about—I know you do, too; I know PA Bresee cares about it because he's met with the advocates—and that's vulnerable road users being hurt: pedestrians, people with disabilities, seniors, cyclists. The last MTO road safety report I'm familiar with had 3,066 injuries of pedestrians, 466 of which were major or fatal; 1,412 injuries of cyclists, 135 of which were major or fatal. Really, there is not a day that goes by where we don't hear of something happening in the news of somebody tragically lost or critically injured. I know this is something that folks in your community care about, folks in my community care about. When we had the Bill 15 discussion, the Bill 40 discussion, you committed—and PA Bresee has followed up on this—to meet with the advocates.

I'd like to know, just given we have in these estimates a report from your road safety group, what is the plan to protect vulnerable road users? Because right now, if someone critically injures or kills someone with their vehicle, it's a minor fine. Families are in traumatic grief, and they have to bear the costs of legal fees if they want to seek any kind of due process. So at the moment, sir, what's the plan to protect vulnerable road users?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Thank you, MPP Harden. I can answer it in two different ways.

You're probably very aware of some of the new legislation that we've brought in with respect to seeing a high increase in impaired driving on our roads. That also impacts pedestrians and impacts vulnerable road users, so we have taken a lot of measures with respect to any sort of impairment while causing death results in a removal of a licence.

We've increased fines on stunt driving, longer impoundment periods on any of those individuals driving carelessly and defined as stunt, which is 40 over in some circumstances or 50 over in some circumstances.

We've also brought in mandatory interlock devices for those caught, lookback periods, changes to that through the new legislation.

We will continue to work and find different ways to make those roads safer. And if you would like, I can ask

one of my officials to speak to how we build out some of our highways and road infrastructure from an engineering perspective, if you'd like, on the road, on that side—

Mr. Joel Harden: I would, Chair. I'm just mindful I need to share this time with MPP French.

Coming back to the report on page 28 of the briefing book for the estimates, once again, I see language—and I'm not attributing this to you. It's the ministerial perspective; it's the provincial perspective. Our roads are described as some of the safest in the world, and the metric being used here is a motor vehicle-specific metric, about 10,000 licensed drivers and a percentage of fatalities on a basis of that. What I encourage us to think about is whether or not we look at all road users and people working on the road, construction workers, people who are first responders. Other countries—the country of Finland, for example, Minister—have set the goal of Vision Zero: zero fatalities, zero injuries. And Finland has actually achieved that. But what we have right now is a situation in which, if you critically injure or kill someone with your vehicle, in some cases—multiple times—it's a minor fine. So my honest question to you, before passing it to MPP French: Shouldn't we fix that?

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Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: MPP Harden, we're absolutely committed to making our roads safer, and looking at ways, through your proposals and other ways. We have piloted some very innovative methods on our roads when it comes to removing some of those. The 2+1 pilot is, for example, something that—nowhere else in North America is it being implemented, a very specific road safety element. And also, in other ways—Deputy, I'm not sure if you want to speak to—

Mr. Joel Harden: I'm actually going to reclaim my time, with respect, Minister, and allow MPP French to—

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Oh yes, and moving over and slowing down for construction workers, as well. Sorry; I lost—

Mr. Joel Harden: Thank you, Chair, for reclaiming my time, and I'm allowing MPP French to take it. Thank you, Minister.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): MPP French, please.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you very much. I know that MPP Harden and I would both be very grateful for a fulsome and in-depth chat about vulnerable road users. I'm happy to buy the coffee, and we could take the time.

I'm going to switch gears a little bit here. Regarding safety, I had chatted with our colleague MPP Vaugeois. She has been doing a lot of important work on northern road safety. She and I both have been working with transportation enforcement officers, who do very important work across the province, but they have a massive area to cover and, frankly, there are not enough of them.

Specific to the north, there are 28 transportation enforcement officers to cover all of northern Ontario. This includes northeastern and northwestern Ontario, a huge land mass, run through by Highways 11 and 17. The inspection stations are rarely open, and 28 enforcement officers is far too few for the needs and size of the region. Has this government budgeted to increase the number of trained enforcement officers? And will there be a requirement for them to stay in northern Ontario after their training for a fixed period of time?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Thank you very much, MPP French—obviously a really important issue here. This past year, we have increased enforcement officers in the north. We also opened up the new facility in the north; I believe it was the Shuniah scale inspection. We were up there. A large amount of blitzes have been put forward.

In the north, irrespective of industry, sometimes there are challenges to retain, but we are doing anything and everything we can with respect to our officers to put more boots on the ground there, and also to have some more enforcement.

If I can maybe take an opportunity to ask our team to speak about some of the blitzes, as well, that have occurred, if that's of interest—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I don't want specifics of the blitzes—

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: —but we've also partnered with the OPP with respect to the amount of charges we have laid etc. But it's up to you.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: That's not what I want at this point, because I do work with the officers and have a sense of things. Specifically, have you budgeted to increase the number of trained enforcement officers—

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Yes, we have. On that, we have, absolutely, in the north specifically.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: And after their training, is there a requirement for them to stay in northern Ontario for a fixed time, or would you consider that?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Look, we're always willing to consider different options, irrespective of which place in the—every part of the province has its unique challenges, and we've been able to put forward more resources in the north.

I'll ask my ADM to maybe speak to that very specific challenge or some of our resourcing challenges there, as well.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: And I will allow you to do that. I'm interested in that. I also know, though, that in the rest of Ontario, some of the enforcement officers are being pulled to the north to cover what's needed in the north. I begrudge the north nothing, but without the appropriate numbers across the province, we're creating new challenges. So unless this is specific to that, I would like to move on. So if you have something specific to—

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: MPP French, I'm happy to speak and have our ADM speak to just generally some of our staffing in the north. Obviously, we've improved some of it, but I'll ask ADM Marcelle to speak to it a bit as well.

Ms. Marcelle Crouse: Thank you, Minister. I'm Marcelle Crouse. I'm the associate deputy minister of transportation safety at MTO.

We recently hired, specifically, 25 new officers for the northern region, and it was limited to folks who live in the

north. There is not a specific requirement that they agree to stay there for a certain time. However, when people do ask for transfers, we certainly take into account our needs in different areas. So transfers out of the north would not be approved right now.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you.

Minister, based on what you've said, and based on what I imagine—because I imagine it's true for all of us in this room. We want truck inspection stations to be effective. Nobody wants to imagine that there are unsafe vehicles on the road or drivers breaking the rules that we don't have a chance to intercept.

That said—and the minister highlighted the new facility—I have it on good authority from truck drivers and from the enforcement officers that a number of those truck inspection stations have cement barriers in front of them or may or may not be calibrated and that they may not be able to be used. So when truck drivers know that it is closed and will not be open, that's a risk.

I had asked the ministry to provide a list of truck inspection stations and the number of hours they have each been operational since 2018, with a monthly and yearly breakdown, and what I was hoping for was to see if indeed there are some that have not been open or are rarely open. What I got was a list of "tuck" inspection stations—I know that's a typo. I'd like a list of truck inspection stations—specifically, though, that breakdown. The government gave me a line about how non-compliant drivers are more likely to be brought into a truck inspection station if they don't know when it will be open, and therefore the hours of operation are not available. I don't want hours of operation; nobody is asking for that.

I would like the ministry to reassure me and Ontarians that those inspection stations could be opened, that they are all in good repair and that they are appropriately staffed.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: We continue to invest significantly, including this year, in enhancing our scales, our enforcement. As you've heard, as well, in some circumstances, there could be renovations going on. In some circumstances, they could be closed, from an operational perspective, to do improvements. But we have invested significantly, whether it be rest stops along some of these areas for truck drivers to have better access to—or, in some cases, just the need to rest, to pull over on scales, specifically. Also, opening up more facilities with new technology—I mentioned Shuniah, close to Thunder Bay. Gananoque, I was there a couple of weeks ago—new technology being deployed. We are investing significantly in all of these inspection stations and in our resources on enforcement to ensure that we pull off bad trucks. We're running blitzes with the OPP, as well, simultaneously to ensure that those operational needs are met.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: All of us want things to be safe. I don't imagine that the ministry wants there to be corners being cut.

I do hear from truck drivers who are saying, "What I see on the roads with other drivers makes me very nervous." They would like to see more enforcement and see more of those truck inspection stations open without the concrete barriers.

Something else that I would raise, as you had said about rest—and I don't have time right now. But again, my colleague the MPP from Thunder Bay–Superior North has asked a lot about the need to address the hundreds of kilometres that have soft shoulders, no passing lanes, no winterized comfort stations in the north. She had wanted me to ask how much money is being invested in Highways 11 and 17 specific to that. I've brought in a petition about appropriate rest stops needed. These are complicated issues—I recognize that—but we would like to see them moving forward and have that reassurance.

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I guess while I'm at it, a lot of fraud is taking place at the drive test centres, and commercial drivers not receiving adequate training. We all watched that on CBC Marketplace on March 8 and it's terrifying. So I'm hoping that this minister will support my colleague's motion to have all testing and licensing of commercial vehicle drivers be done by public servants within the Ministry of Transportation. I'm hoping you would support that. Will you?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Thank you very much, MPP French. If I can bring up Jasan from the officials to speak to some of the rest areas and improvements that we're making, if you'd like.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Yes, because truck drivers and all of that stuff—major implications if things aren't handled well.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: We'll speak to the parking spaces, rest stops and some of the investment for that perspective.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: And training.

Mr. Jasan Boparai: Thank you, Minister. Jasan Boparai, assistant deputy minister, MTO's operations division.

In response to the rest areas, MTO has a total of 43 rest areas with truck parking, and we have also the 23 ONroute service centres which, again, have additional truck parking.

But specifically about the north, MTO has a five-year plan which is being implemented which includes 10 new rest areas and 14 rehabilitations of existing rest areas. Of these 10, we have nine in the north which are new rest areas being built, and we have 10 rehabilitation projects in the north that are going on.

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): One minute left.

Mr. Jasan Boparai: Three new rest areas have been built and nine rehabs have been completed.

We've also identified 10 rest areas which are frequently used as year-round rest areas, which means they are kept open in the winter season also to allow trucks to park. And we continue to look for more opportunities to either partner with local communities or build new rest areas, including also looking at building EV charging station facilities for range anxiety in those areas.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: The work that public accounts had done—I sat in on some of that. You would know that there are stretches of road where people cannot stop safely,

let alone a commercial vehicle, but that doesn't mean that they don't need to. So it's the plan for those long stretches on Highways 11 and 17, with soft shoulders, no passing lanes, no winterized comfort stations: Those are the stretches I'm interested in. Is there a plan for that, or can we have a conversation after this?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: MPP French, as you know, we have—

The Chair (Ms. Laurie Scott): The time is up, Minister; I'm so sorry.

We're going to now conclude the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Transportation. Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates.

Shall vote 2701, ministry administration, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. I declare the motion carried.

Shall vote 2702, transit, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. I declare the motion carried.

Shall vote 2703, transportation safety, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. The motion is accordingly carried.

Shall vote 2704, transportation infrastructure management, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. I declare the motion carried.

Shall vote 2705, labour and transportation cluster, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. I declare the motion carried.

Shall vote 2706, integrated policy and planning, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. The motion is accordingly carried.

Shall vote 2707, operations, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. I declare the motion carried.

Shall vote 2708, oversight and agency governance, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. I declare the motion carried.

Shall the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry of Transportation carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. I declare the motion accordingly carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry of Transportation to the House? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. I declare the motion accordingly carried.

Thank you. That concludes our business for today. The committee is now adjourned until September 25, 2024, at 1 p.m.

The committee adjourned at 1506.

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