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Wednesday 28 October 2026

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Clerk: Isaiah Thorning

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE POLICY

COMITÉ PERMANENT DE LA JUSTICE

Wednesday 28 October 2026

Mercredi 28 octobre 2026

The committee met at 1300 in committee room 2.

ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS AND FIRST NATIONS ECONOMIC RECONCILIATION

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Good afternoon, everyone. The Standing Committee on Justice Policy will now come to order. On today's agenda is the review of the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation.

The ministry will be considered for two hours, with a 20-minute opening statement from the minister, followed by questions and answers in rotations of 15 minutes for the official opposition, 15 minutes for the third party and 15 minutes for the government members of the committee for the remainder of the allotted time.

From the ministry, we're joined by the Honourable Greg Rickford and ministry officials and staff. Welcome to the committee.

I'd like to take the opportunity to remind everyone that the purpose of considering the estimates is for members of the Legislature to determine if the government is spending money appropriately, wisely and effectively in the delivery of the services intended.

As Chair, I will allow members to ask a wide range of questions pertaining to the estimates before the committee to ensure that they are confident that the ministry will spend those dollars appropriately. In the past, members have asked questions about the delivery of similar programs in previous fiscal years, about the policy framework that supports a ministry approach to a problem or service delivery, or about the confidence of a ministry to spend the money wisely and efficiently. However, it must be noted that the onus is on the members asking the questions to make the questioning relevant to the estimates under consideration. If, in my opinion, the question is out of the scope of what we're considering, I'll rule the question out of order and you'll be required to ask a new question.

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

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

I'm now required to call vote 2001, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement from the minister for up to 20 minutes, and, Minister, I'll let you know when you have one minute remaining, sir, to wrap up your presentation.

Minister, the floor is yours, please, sir.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you, colleagues. Good afternoon, Chair. Thank you for the opportunity to join you today to detail the work of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation, the ministry responsible for community and economic partnerships for the Ring of Fire and to highlight the investments we are making to support Indigenous communities and advance economic reconciliation across Ontario.

With me today is my deputy minister, Raj Dhir, along with our assistant deputy ministers and directors, who are joining us online, and my amazing ministry staff, who have worked hard to prepare with me for estimates.

Since 2018, the ministry has continued to evolve, reflecting the relationships that we have built and, most importantly, the leadership and priorities of Indigenous communities across Ontario. As First Nations continue to lead the way in identifying community priorities and taking up the kinds of activities that advance economic development, our government has been clear: We think it's important and we're proud to stand alongside communities as full and meaningful partners.

Under the leadership of Premier Ford, we have made an important decision to help rewrite the next chapter of reconciliation; a cue that we have taken from political leaders, First Nations leaders and elders, and that is economic reconciliation. There is more to it, for sure, but this distinction is reflected in the evolution of my ministry's mandate, including the addition of economic reconciliation and the responsibility for the Ring of Fire economic and community partnerships to my ministerial portfolio. These are not title changes. This is a clear message that economic reconciliation and true partnerships are foundational to our government's approach in its nation-to-nation relationships with First Nation communities. These are not decisions made for communities but rather decisions made with communities—building consensus, building partnerships.

As the Minister of Indigenous Affairs, my work remains focused on clear outcomes: resolving land claims and land-related matters, increasing economic opportunities and

careers for Indigenous young people, improving social outcomes and ensuring Indigenous interests and perspectives are reflected in government policies and programs.

I would like to highlight how my ministry's expenditures are advancing these priorities. The ministry's 2026-27 spending plan is as follows: My ministry's planned expenditures of approximately $179 million reflect our commitment to working alongside Indigenous communities as we advance shared priorities, strengthen partnerships and deliver results for meaningful shared prosperity. This year reflects an increase of $20.9 million, or 13%, from the 2025-26 budget.

Some key allocations include $31.6 million to support the negotiation and implementation of community partnership agreements with First Nations most proximal to the Ring of Fire and $16.8 million to support community capacity to participate in regulatory and consultation processes related to mineral exploration through the Indigenous Participation Fund. Additional allocations are delivered in partnership to support Indigenous communities' capacity building, pursuit of economic opportunities and ability to participate effectively in consultation.

My ministry's operating plan also includes approximately $3.34 million in statutory appropriations, the majority of which is for the mercury disability fund trustee, which is receiving an $830,000 increase this year to support operating costs including growth in medical assessments, claimant reviews and inflationary impacts on contracted medical services.

I'd like to talk a little bit about land claims. Chair, resolving outstanding land claims remains a top priority for the work carried out within my ministry. Since 2018, our government has settled more land claims, flood claims and treaties than any other government in Ontario's history. Those settlements are not about resolving old files but rather outstanding grievances. They are about creating certainty and clarity in our partnerships and creating trust and confidence that Ontario can move forward as full partners with First Nations communities for those past grievances, and creating the conditions for communities to determine the long-term growth and opportunity ahead.

In 2025-26, my ministry continued assessing, negotiating and implementing land claims. We provided $14 million through the Support for Community Negotiations Fund to help First Nations communities participate meaningfully in negotiations. During the year, we signed settlement agreements with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation Rouge River Valley tract claim and Washagamis Bay First Nation flooding claim. Through both settlements, we provided the clarity and certainty each community sought and needed while strengthening our nation-to-nation relationship. Work continues within my ministry to assess, advance and negotiate assertions and any new claims to continue to advance reconciliation with communities across the province. These are important steps—there is more to take—and we will continue to build on that progress.

I'd like to talk a little bit about community priorities and well-being. For our government, supporting Indigenous well-being has always meant listening and working with communities towards healing and a stronger future. As we move forward, we must address the past. The Indian residential school system remains one of the darkest chapters in the history of this country.

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From day one, we have remained committed to an Indigenous-led process for the identification, investigation and protection of burial sites at the 18 federally recognized Indian residential schools that existed in Ontario. To date, Ontario has led the country by committing $144.5 million to support that work.

In 2023, through my ministry, we launched the Indian Residential School Community Engagement Fund, which extended supports to a broader group of Indigenous communities, provincial-territorial organizations and other organizations. It is a program without comparison across the country. For 2026-27, we are allocating $20 million to continue supporting communities as they lead investigations, pursue healing and now move to commemorative activities that connect community members to research and archival work, and advance education and the preservation of truth.

One may notice a variance amongst our 2025-26 to 2026-27 expenditures, and I want to be clear: This does not reflect a reduction in our commitment to Indigenous-led investigations or to supporting survivors, families and communities. Rather, it reflects a program cycle that is responsive to the timing and pace of lead partners who have indicated transition from investigative initiatives to commemorative and legacy initiatives.

Funding remains responsive and ongoing to support communities with survivor engagement gatherings; commemoration and legacy initiatives; public education and awareness; culturally appropriate healing and wellness supports; research activities and ground-based investigations research; and archival work

We will continue to work with communities throughout the year to adjust allocations as appropriate to ensure this work continues without disruption.

Relationships, consultation and policy: Strong working relationships with Indigenous communities, leaders and organizations are foundational not only to my ministry but to the government writ large. They support Indigenous participation in government decisions, policies and programs. A central feature of my ministry's estimates is dedicated to consultation and engagement capacity to ensure that communities can meaningfully engage with governments and the private sector.

In 2026-27, we are allocating $14.5 million for the New Relationship Fund. Launched in 2008, this program is available for First Nations communities to assist them in building fundamental consultation and engagement capacity for land and resource matters.

A further $9.075 million is allocated to the relationship supports fund. It supports core organizational capacity and sustained engagement. This funding is delivered through leadership and relationship tables and multi-year, non-project-based agreements.

This year, we celebrated a $1.5-million investment into MineConnect's MineOpportunity challenge to provide interactive, team-based competitions to introduce Indigenous grade 9 to 12 students to modern mining, Ontario's mining supply and services sector and the wide range of careers available within the industry.

As mentioned earlier, one of the key allocations within this year's estimates binder is the $16.79 million through the Indigenous Participation Fund, which supports communities as they build capacity to participate in consultation related to mineral exploration, mine development and related economic opportunities. This new allocation reflects the transfer of the funding and delivery of the program, which previously was within the Ministry of Energy and Mines.

This aligns program accountability with my ministry's mandate for Indigenous-led engagement, partnership and economic reconciliation. These programs are an important part of ensuring communities have the resources to participate in discussions and decisions that affect their lands, resources and futures.

In addition to the funding programs previously identified, we have repatriated the duty to consult back into my ministry through the duty to consult division. Through this division, we are improving consistency across ministries to ensure that consultation remains robust, accountable and a top priority for this government, with advice, support and counsel from the most appropriate ministry positioned to do that.

Indigenous economic development: In the new chapter of economic reconciliation that's being written, we have sharpened our ministry's focus on providing the right kinds of supports and funding programs that are responsive to Indigenous communities. This can be seen throughout this year's estimates book, where our funding programs remain tailored to support what already remains on full display: Indigenous-led economic development.

Since 2025, we have committed $24.9 million over three years to support Indigenous-led economic development, capacity building, access to capital and strengthened partnerships with Indigenous economic organizations. Through this, we continue to partner with Ontario's network of Indigenous financial institutions to increase access to low-interest loans and grants for Indigenous businesses and entrepreneurs and deliver a digitization and e-commerce grant program. These investments help Indigenous businesses expand, pursue new opportunities and contribute to economic growth and job creation in communities across the province.

We've supported the Chiefs of Ontario as they lead the way in First Nations supply chain and procurement opportunities. In fact, last year we were proud to stand alongside the Chiefs of Ontario as they announced the upcoming launch of the Chiefs of Ontario First Nations business directory, Ontario's first Indigenous-led and certified First Nations business directory.

We're investing $12 million in the Indigenous Economic Development Fund, which funds economic diversification, long-term business planning, training and employment opportunities. Although $1 million higher than the 2025–26 estimates, this simply reflects an internal realignment of e-commerce and digitization funding to improve administrative efficiency and coordination. Through this, we're ensuring responsiveness to the needs of program participants as we continue to advance the economic development fund.

As we have seen the Indigenous Economic Development Fund on full display, last year the Grand Council Treaty 3 Investment Group limited partnership received $250,000 from the Indigenous Economic Development Fund towards a large-scale food distribution activity to enhance food security, create job opportunities and ultimately ensure moving towards food sovereignty and entrepreneurship in the food sector and agriculture sector across Treaty 3.

Thessalon First Nation received $100,000 to create diverse and comprehensive business development by engaging with the community on- and off-reserve.

Chi Mino Ozhitoowin General Partnership Inc. received $100,000 to develop business planning and capacity-building initiatives to support First Nations participation in the Waasigan transmission line, a line that spans roughly 365 kilometres with enough clean electricity to power the city of Thunder Bay twice over.

Complementing the Indigenous Economic Development Fund is the Indigenous Community Capital Grants Program. This year, you will note a further $6-million allocation to support this program and Indigenous communities in the planning, renovation and construction of community capital projects both on- and off-reserve.

Last year, alongside North Spirit Lake, Deer Lake and Poplar Hill First Nations, we celebrated a $600,000 investment through the ICCGP for the Keewaytinook Corner Fuel Station. It's a very cool economic opportunity. The investment positioned the three partnering communities as key players on the Trans-Canada corridor by supporting the economic development that they were already leading. Whitesand First Nation received $600,000 through the ICCGP funding to construct a modular meat processing and learning centre. Construction has been completed, and a ribbon-cutting ceremony is scheduled for later this fall. The new facility will support local food processing, Skills Development Fund and economic opportunities within the community, in addition to food security and a path to food sovereignty.

Our capacity and growth fund supported 11 Indigenous organizations, communities and tribal councils in 2025-26 to strengthen community capacity through workforce development and training leadership supports. Through 2026 and 2027, we are investing $5.8 million to continue advancing this important work that is proving to have real results.

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As a key example of the capacity and growth fund in action, our continued partnership with the Ontario First Nations Economic Developers Association—known as OFNEDA—last year, at their Ready, Set, Grow: Seizing Economic Opportunities conference, we announced $8 million in funding over three years. OFNEDA continues to be a leader in seizing economic opportunities through their provided training, mentorship, professional develop-

ment and networking opportunities for First Nations economic development officers and entrepreneurs. We remain proud partners in the work that they will do.

We've additionally continued to increase opportunities for Indigenous businesses through Ontario's public procurement system. Since 2015, the Indigenous Procurement Program has directly supported more than 475 new procurements across 11 ministries, valued at more than $266 million for Indigenous businesses in Ontario. This year, the Indigenous Procurement Program has helped Shawanaga, Henvey Inlet and Magnetawan First Nations secure a seven-year, multi-million dollar highway maintenance contract along the Highway 69 corridor, creating jobs, training opportunities and long-term economic benefits, and dramatically improving the safety and passage along what will become a fully twinned highway to Sudbury.

These represent tangible examples of how my ministry's funding program supports ministries and communities across a multitude of projects. The bottom line is, communities determine how to drive their own economic activities, and we remain a steadfast partner.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Minister, you have a minute left, sir, please. Thank you.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you.

I'll close then by just commenting on the Ring of Fire economic and community partnerships. Chair, I've often said that the Ring of Fire has made headlines that highlight the critical minerals beneath the surface; however, I continue to argue that the bigger story is what's being built on the ground, and that's precisely what is happening. I'm pleased to report to this committee that all access points for corridors to and from isolated communities are under construction.

I'll close just by saying the ministry continues to evolve to meet the needs of Indigenous communities throughout the province and to meet the moment.

With that, Mr. Chair, I'm happy to stand down and take questions from this committee.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you very much, Minister, for your presentation.

We're now going to begin the question-and-answer segment in rotations of 15 minutes for the official opposition, 15 minutes for the third party and 15 minutes for the government for the remainder of the allotted time. As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair.

Now, as the Chair, if a member seeks to reclaim the floor during their rotation while the minister is responding, I'll recognize the member and I'll allow them to reclaim the floor, but to ask a new question, not to restate the previous question. For the deputy minister, who is here, assistant deputy ministers and staff, please state your name and your title the first time that you speak so that we can accurately record in Hansard who we have before this committee.

Committee members, I will now start with the official opposition with MPP Mamakwa, please, sir, when you're ready.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch, Chair. Meegwetch, Minister.

Jethro Anderson, Curran Strang, Paul Panacheese, Robyn Harper, Reggie Bushie, Kyle Morriseau and Jordan Wabasse: It's been over a decade since these recommendations were made through the seven First Nations youth inquest in Thunder Bay. These students were high school students that came from the north, and they never came home when they went to high school.

Can you provide an update on the progress—the current progress—of what the government of Ontario is doing in implementing the recommendations that came from that seven First Nations youth inquest?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for the question. So 55 out of 61 recommendations directed to Ontario are complete; six recommendations remain in progress.

Since the release of the inquest jury recommendations, Ontario has worked across all ministries to support student transition, safety and well-being, school infrastructure, health and mental health, justice and community safety, broadband access and family supports and commemoration.

Some examples of some key advances on in-progress and completed recommendations include the following—if the member would like me to indulge, Mr. Chair?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I want to go to the beginning of your presentation. You mentioned the $179 million that has been under this ministry, but also an over $20-million increase from the year before.

I know that one of the things that we've been facing—First Nations across the country, First Nations in Kiiwetinoong—is the denialism of Indian residential schools. When we checked into the estimates briefing book, it shows an estimate decrease in spending. You spoke about that.

Can you reiterate again, why is the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs making a major cut to funding that would otherwise support survivor-led activities and Indian residential school burial sites while we're dealing with the denialism of Indian residential schools across Canada?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): To the question, Minister, please, and through the Chair.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for the question. The variance reflects a program cycle that is responsive to the timing and pace indicated to our ministry from the lead partners, who have indicated a transition from investigative initiatives to commemorative and legacy initiatives. We are responding with greater flexibility to our funding with a simplified funding stream to address the community needs, with proactive reallocations to prioritize commemorative and legacy initiatives.

Activities eligible for funding will continue to include: survivor engagement gatherings; commemoration and legacy initiatives; public education and awareness; culturally appropriate healing and wellness supports; research activities and ground-based investigations; research and archival work.

We will continue to work with communities throughout the year to adjust allocations as appropriate to ensure this work continues without disruption.

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

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I know that back in August, Ashley Monture, a researcher at the Survivors' Secretariat, spoke with the Trillium about the impacts these cuts will have. For example, it will impact the organization's ability to organize survivor gatherings and may lead to reductions in staff.

What does the minister have to say—through you, Chair—to the survivors of Ontario Indian residential schools whose healing journeys will be directly impacted by these cuts?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): To the question.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I want to thank the member for his question. I can only reiterate that these are actually not cuts. They reflect the funding cycle that has been led by the respective leadership groups of the 18 schools in Ontario. While they appear as a reduction in the estimates, this has been a cycle for a funding envelope that remains in place and stands at the ready to continue to fund any and all activities that were set out in the program by First Nations communities of the 18, and the changing and dynamic focus that they are putting at.

In simpler terms, through you, Mr. Chair, host communities of residential schools are at different places and have different requests for funding. We are seeing a trend towards commemorative activities, and we stand at the ready to fund those programs.

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The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, sir, for that answer.

New question, please.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I think, as First Nations, that's one of the things that we've been seeing, both provincially and also federally: that the funding for Indian residential schools has been cut.

But I want to move on, Chair, with regard to one of the things that the estimates briefing books states, that the ministry's role is "supporting the province's response to declared states of emergencies in First Nation communities." These communities could be Neskantaga. It could be Ginoogaming, Long Lake #58, Onigaming, Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug and many more.

In the upcoming year, what specific funds is the ministry allocating to help address the ongoing states of emergencies, among many others that remain active in the province?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Minister, to the question please.

Hon. Greg Rickford: First of all, I'd like to thank the member opposite for the co-operation and partnership that we had through some conversations about priorities in the midst of these emergencies, pertinent to specific communities at times.

But I'll share with the committee, as this member knows—through you, Chair—that my ministry is not the lead ministry for this. It's not reflected in the estimates. I play a coordinating role as the minister, as do my officials, in ensuring responses from the ministries on more nuanced elements of evacuations or repatriation back to their communities, and that would explain why it's not reflected as a line item in these estimates.

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

So, going forward on that particular point, the minister was correct. Questions related to wildfires are out of scope of vote 2001 that we're considering today—just so we understand that.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Declared states of emergencies are fires.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Listen, we're not debating it. It's out of scope. So carry on with your new question, please. Thank you.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: How much funding from the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation is set aside to assist First Nations in the event of more wildfires and evacuations next year?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): I just ruled that questions related to wildfires are out of scope of the estimates that we're considering for this ministry. Move on to a new question, please.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: It's part of the estimates book.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): I'm ruling it's not part of the estimates. Carry on, please. Thank you. New question.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I want to talk about some of the mental health and wellness supports. I know that 100% of the ministry's $3.5 million for Indigenous mental health and wellness supports is off the books. You see that in page 39, table C4. Where did this money go?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Minister, to the question, please.

Hon. Greg Rickford: The first thing I'd like to say with respect to this is that we are advancing some innovations in some of the community partnership agreements that focus on mental health and well-being. These are ways to ensure that we have some focused and targeted program spending money for mental health. These are typically advanced by the communities themselves.

I can share specifically on the matter that—well, it says it's a funding decrease. This was actually funding for ONWA's women healing centre in Thunder Bay, which was a funding program delivered in partnership with the Ministry of Health. The variance relates—the variance, not the cut—to a whole multi-ministerial approach to some larger mental health assets that we are not in a position to expound on at this time, but rather to integrate them with other partnership ministries in some cases better positioned to, as often is the case, provide a larger allocation towards those. This is not a resource we are cutting, but rather transferring to the Ministry of Health to consolidate all project funds to a more streamlined and coordinated administration of mental health services. They fall under that ministry.

Through the Ministry of Health, we are continuing to support what we believe will be some exciting and very positive developments in mental health and wellness for First Nations. And to the extent that they manifest in an announcement, I'll only be too happy to invite the member, who has done a great job over the past eight years advocating for mental health in First Nations communities, particularly isolated and remote First Nations communities.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, Minister, for that response.

New question, please. You have a little over two minutes left for your questions.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I know that one of the things you spoke about is Ring of Fire-related agreements. How many First Nations would the minister consider impacted by the priority infrastructure and critical minerals development projects in the Ring of Fire region?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Minister, please, to the question.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I've got the map in my head and I could do a count, but I would just say that there's an incredible opportunity for a number of communities. We started out, obviously, with communities who had approached the government about community partnership agreements that would evolve into economic partnership agreements, and who represented some of the key legacy infrastructure elements of developing that region.

My primary focus in the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation and the responsibility stylized under the Ring of Fire was to address community-level deficits in infrastructure and capacity to build the projects that they were advancing. Some of them are very community-based, so situated within the community. Others involve, obviously, the development or the construction of road access, in the case of the Marten Falls community access road, the Webequie supply road and, of course, the recent announcements I've made, born from the shared prosperity agreement with Aroland First Nation to ensure that the capacity to build roads—and actually, their construction, which has commenced—occurred synchronously with a view for electrification.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: You mentioned three First Nations. Is it fair to say that other First Nations are not impacted, the other First Nations that have not signed on? Is that what you're saying?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I can tell you that we are in discussions with one community. This is a question of advancement towards a community partnership agreement. We have given expressions of interest to other communities on a very frequent and persistent basis to sit down at the table to do that—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, Minister. That concludes the questions from the official opposition.

We're now going to move to the third party. MPP Shamji, when you're ready, sir. Thank you and welcome to the committee.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you for your leadership here—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Can you move your microphone a little bit closer? Thank you. We've got people watching and trying to listen.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Understood. Thank you, Chair.

Minister, thank you very much for being here, for your service, and I know it's been a challenging time. This summer was, in particular, challenging for your riding, and my sympathies there, truly.

The following question is specifically around consultation. As you likely know, earlier this summer a number of First Nations communities were plunged into crisis. Those included Armstrong, Lac La Croix First Nation, Collins First Nation, Whitesand First Nation, Gull Bay First Nation and Lac des Mille Lacs First Nation. The chiefs and community members from many of these communities, while in a state of crisis, publicly asserted that they did not feel consulted and that their calls for help were not responded to.

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What, in this year's estimates, will make sure that that never happens again?

Hon. Greg Rickford: First of all, as the Minister of Natural Resources pointed out, they are doing a full-scale review. These are not reflected in these estimates, Mr. Chair. It's not an activity that I lead, and so it would explain why there's not a line item in my ministry.

I can tell you, in full and frank disclosure, that I—throughout the summer, obviously—spent a great deal of time coordinating more nuanced aspects of support, specifically for some of the chiefs that you mentioned and others. They included activities like ensuring dog food got to one First Nations community when everybody had gone and there was nobody there to feed the dogs. But that is not a financial responsibility of my ministry; it is just the more nuanced role that I play. There were other activities—I don't mean to minimize any of it—but financially, it's an allocation for another ministry.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): I just wanted to mention that I did previously rule on a question that MPP Mamakwa made. That question that you asked would be better placed with the Ministry of Natural Resources as well as the ministry of emergency services and preparedness. Please try to keep your questions specific to vote 2001. Otherwise, I'm going to have to rule it out of order.

Mr. Adil Shamji: I understand.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): So I'd like a new question, please.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Respectfully, my question wasn't specifically around any sort of emergency, but specifically around consultation. And the estimates make extensive references to consultation, as you can understand, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Yes, I understand. I don't want to enter a broad debate on my rulings, but if I feel it's out of scope, move on to a new question, please.

Mr. Adil Shamji: I understand, Chair. Thank you.

Thank you for your answer.

Earlier this morning, the Chiefs of Ontario put out a statement asking for renewed interest and attention in supporting airports and runways that are servicing First Nations communities. How will your ministry be able to support and act upon those calls?

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

Hon. Greg Rickford: So, first of all, the only thing in the estimates that would reflect financial participation in anything to do with airports would be in one particular community partnership agreement where it was identified

that upgrades to a community's airport were required in support of the community partnership agreement.

We would be happy to provide you a breakdown of how that partnership agreement is reflected, but other than that, I am not, Mr. Chair, in a position to comment on that. I am not the lead ministry for airports—but fair enough. I appreciate that the member has flown in and out of those northern communities and understands, in his capacity as a physician—and given the extremes of weather etc.—that those airports are lifelines for the communities.

I continue to advocate in my capacity as a minister for their upgrades. And I have made it my business in communities—certainly that are surging with the kind of activity to develop legacy infrastructure—that the airports have the appropriate capacity. But that is reflected by a request from the community, and it fits into a community partnership agreement. Otherwise, my ministry doesn't financially support them.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, Minister, for that response.

New question on the estimates—vote 2001. You were outside of the scope with your first two questions. Bring it back into what's in the summary of the estimates. Thank you.

Mr. Adil Shamji: I must admit, Chair—and, obviously, I respect your ruling, as I must. But as we discuss the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation, I hope you'll understand that sometimes I have concerns about things that I believe should be in the estimates but aren't. But actually, I appreciate the minister's response.

I listened very carefully to your remarks that launched this review of the estimates, and you highlighted something that you mentioned to me last year as well, which is that Indigenous consultation is now going to be centralized in your ministry. So what do you imagine would be your role in consulting on these changes to northern airports?

Hon. Greg Rickford: As I said in my remarks—thank you for the question, Mr. Chair—we have repatriated the duty to consult as a central agency. What that means is that ministries continue to have people who lead consultation, but any and all activities related to the duty to consult will come to and through my ministry for final advice and support on how discharging that duty is best served for the benefit of the community.

This has been reflected in some recent announcements that we have made, for example on Highway 69. Again, Chair, in fairness, these are not activities reflected in the estimates, but it's fair enough to say that I do participate in them in my capacity as the minister. And so those duties to consult—we advise and support the lead ministries, if you will, Mr. Chair, on how we can provide clear, timely, fair consultation that reflects the communities that should be consulted. Obviously, we are there as close partners to ensure that as the duty to consult evolves and to the extent that it might become something akin to the duty to accommodate, as the law has set out in its trajectory over the course of time, we provide support and counsel in that.

I'll just finally say to the member that this is a work in progress, and we're having—initially, of course, I'm going to say—some results that I feel confident are providing more transparency and more consistency from the government of Ontario to a specific project and the duty to consult therein.

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

Mr. Adil Shamji: I believe it was last year, a number of—I believe it was the Chiefs of Ontario, actually, who asked for a moratorium on new mining permits because they didn't have enough time to consult on those. Do you have any plans to allocate more funding in order to permit better and more meaningful consultation with them?

Hon. Greg Rickford: We absolutely do. The Indigenous Participation Fund—which I had identified had been transferred from the Ministry of Mines—we think is a policy innovation and an approach that will more fairly reflect what the communities have said they need for capacity to deal with and address matters with respect to the duty to consult on mining-specific projects.

The program can be viewed through the lens of not just providing an opportunity, but, in complementary terms, corresponding opportunities in education to support more meaningful capacity and understanding—from engineering to consultation, more generally speaking, and the more technical elements of the mining or resource sector itself.

This is a new transfer. I'm hopeful, next year, we'll be able to share, on reflection, some meaningful examples, as I've endeavoured to do in my opening remarks today. But we're very encouraged by that.

And I take the point of the member, Chair: In arriving at the transfer of this from the Ministry of Mines, we developed a deep appreciation for the fact that many First Nations communities were engaged in dozens and dozens and dozens—in fact, in the order of 50 to 60; some higher—official duties to consult on various things. Now, I'll qualify that by saying that they weren't all mining, but to the extent that they were, it became abundantly clear to us that capacity in the duty to consult, specifically with respect to mining, required extra support, and that's what this program spending is intended to reflect.

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

Mr. Adil Shamji: As part of your ongoing plans for further and future consultation, are you anticipating any plans for consultation in relation to new special economic zones?

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

Hon. Greg Rickford: Again, Mr. Chair, while I am not the lead ministry in special economic zones, we do provide guidance and support for lead ministries on that. What I can say is, with respect to the estimates that reflect the repatriation of the duty to consult, I think it's fair to say that we anticipate that we would be involved in those activities. I can't speculate, but to the extent that special economic zones took up an increasing amount of the time that we provide as a central agency in consultation—a more robust, therefore, activity—a more robust resource to support that.

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

Mr. Adil Shamji: I take your point on that, and I listened very carefully to your answer. So at this point, do you anticipate, in the next year, being asked to support consultation on special economic zones, and if so, which ones?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'm not in a position, Mr. Chair, to speculate on special economic zones—sorry; I'm having some computer glitches here that I'm not that savvy in developing here—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): That's fine.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I can't speculate here on those. I'm not the lead ministry for special economic zones, but I'll say two things: First of all, we stand at the ready to participate in any consultation that would be required to support special economic zones, including and especially the number of First Nations communities who have expressed an interest in how a special economic zone might be something of interest for them or their economic development.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, Minister, for that response.

New question—you have two minutes left.

Mr. Adil Shamji: When we spoke last year, we looked at some of the anticipated legal expenses for your ministry. At that time, you indicated to me, through you, Chair, that those legal expenses were not anticipated to be in relation to any sort of implementation of Bill 5. I know, again, that there is another projection for legal expenses for this year. I wonder if you would clarify what you anticipate requiring that for.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Our legal expenses are typically assigned to stand at the ready for any legal activities that we may be required to participate in. I like to think of it as more of a contingency, but we obviously, from time to time, call on external legal experts—

Mr. Adil Shamji: So what would be some examples of that?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Some examples of that might be settlements for treaties, some expertise in land claims. I mentioned earlier that we have settled more land claims, flood claims and treaties than any other government in the history of Ontario. We want to be careful, but we want to be sure at the same time that the counsel we receive internally from time to time on some of the more technical matters would have the consideration of external legal capacity.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, sir, for that response.

That concludes your time for questioning in this round.

I'll now go to the government, and I have MPP Bouma, please, sir, when you're ready—parliamentary assistant to the minister.

Mr. Will Bouma: Thank you, Minister, for your submission so far. Through you, Chair, I think the single most memorable event that I've been able to participate in in this role was to be able, on behalf of the province of Ontario and the crown, to go to a treaty signing ceremony at Matachewan First Nation. I remember when I asked, "Is there any way you could print up an extra copy of those so that I could have one?" To have that hanging in my office, I think, is just such a testament to the work that our government is doing through your great work. So much of that is righting old wrongs, but it's so much more than that also. Working in true partnership with First Nations means ensuring that communities have the resources, that they have the capacity and that they have the opportunity to determine their own economic future.

Across the province and across the country, we've seen Indigenous communities taking up leadership roles in major infrastructure, major resource development and major economic projects, and our government remains a full partner in this progress.

Minister, as these opportunities grow, it is important that our investments reflect the priorities of Indigenous communities and the pace of economic development. I was wondering if—through you, Chair—you could outline how this year's estimates reflect our government's approach to economic reconciliation.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): To the question, sir.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I want to thank the member for his question, Mr. Chair.

Our government's 2026 budget reflects the growing importance of Indigenous partnerships and economic reconciliation in building a stronger, more competitive and self-reliant economy. That's really the foundational perspective that we work from.

Our 2026-27 allocation is $179 million, an increase of $20.9 million, or 13% compared to last year's budget. It reflects a commitment to advancing shared prosperity and supporting community priorities, partnerships and economic opportunities for First Nations.

Economic reconciliation is about creating the conditions for First Nations to lead and participate in the sorts of economic activities that they may have been historically excluded from. It has also given them an opportunity to identify certain kinds of infrastructure in their community that the province hasn't historically been involved in but recognizes in order for them to participate in a given activity. For example, the Marten Falls community access road or the Webequie supply road—the kind of infrastructure that's required to support that.

As you would know, the other thing that it has done, as is often the case with the province of Ontario, is signalled across the country, and in particular to the federal government, the compelling need for them to be involved and engaged in these activities. I point to the recent announcement by the federal government to commit at least $1 billion to the Ring of Fire and, more specifically, the corridor and its activities.

I think this is an important function of the provincial government and, frankly, our ministry, because we're in close contact with these communities. They're not just investing in community assets; they're investing in the kind of legacy infrastructure that moves well beyond the notion that this is all about mining or resource development, but, in fact, in the case of the Ring of Fire, reflects the kind of legacy infrastructure that those communities

lag behind in, specifically electrification—the ability for transmission lines to bring clean, green electricity to their communities.

This is reflected in the shared prosperity agreement in a previous budget year with Aroland First Nation, where we would bring to the fore subsequent announcements from another ministry that focus on the capacity for us to actually technically do that. Then my ministry would be involved in the minutiae vis-à-vis these agreements to ensure that the community had local infrastructure and local capacity to carry those out.

Taken together, the budget advances the full breadth of our mandate, one might say, from healing and reconciliation and respecting rights and building economic partnerships.

I should say, finally, that on the economic partnership piece, the economic partnership agreements aren't necessarily—although they may become—partnerships that the government participates in, but rather think of us as an enabler for the community to enter into economic partnerships with, in some cases, some of the largest companies in the country and maybe the world over that are well positioned to build legacy infrastructure into that region.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, sir, for that response.

MPP Ciriello, please.

MPP Monica Ciriello: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being here today and providing an incredible overview of your ongoing leadership in this ministry. I should also thank you for coming to Hamilton this past summer. We had an opportunity to sit down with some Indigenous community members as well as organizations. I think that opportunity in Hamilton really highlighted the importance of meaningful partnership.

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We also know that strengthening mental health and wellness services requires those meaningful partnerships with the Indigenous organizations. Support must be culturally appropriate, community driven and responsive to local needs. This year's estimate shows a decrease of $3.5 million in the Indigenous mental health and wellness supports allocation. Could you explain the reason for this change and how our government is continuing to support this project?

Hon. Greg Rickford: It's a very serious matter, and I want to thank the member for her question and her prominent role in these and other matters as they relate to mental health and wellness of First Nations communities.

I'll say to you, as I had mentioned to the member from Kiiwetinoong, that that specific amount that she mentioned is actually a variance that relates and reflects the targeted funding for an initiative that we are putting together with the Ontario Native Women's Association healing centre proposal in Thunder Bay. This is a very important one to me personally. But at the end of the day, some of our activities are better served by working with other ministries who aren't just significantly financially contributing, whose budget profile reflects the obligation and the resources required to support that—but our participation in the activity—don't be confused about one thing, and that is that in many instances we lead the discussion, and to the extent that my ministry has financial resources to support targeted activities, we will continue to do that.

One of the things, as I mentioned to the member from Kiiwetinoong, is that we are now building mental health and wellness supports into some of the community partnership agreements with those communities as they evolve—so those particular agreements, and hopefully new ones with other communities, in particular with respect to the region around the Ring of Fire—to provide the kinds of supports that not only address acute mental health challenges but ones that can adapt to the changing circumstances and fortunes of, say, an individual who may have gone on to complete training, may find themselves in the workforce on one of these economic opportunities and requires further mental health and wellness supports.

We hope to in the future incorporate them into new partnership agreements, and we're getting good feedback already from the communities we have partnership agreements with—how to scope those as they relate to mental health, addictions and well-being.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, Minister, for that response.

New question: MPP Firin, please, when you're ready, sir.

MPP Mohamed Firin: I would like to start off by thanking the minister, the deputy minister and the rest of the team for coming before this committee today.

Minister, Indigenous communities are leading projects that strengthen local economies, improve food security and create opportunities for future generations. Supporting their capacity to plan and deliver those projects is an important part of economic reconciliation. The capacity and growth fund has supported a wide range of Indigenous-led initiatives.

This year's estimates show an allocation that is $1 million lower than last year's. Could you explain what accounts for that change and how the ministry continues to support community priorities through the fund?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for the tough but fair question. I just want to say to the member, I'm looking forward to an opportunity to work more closely with you in some of the relationships that you have. In particular, I was reminded of our visit of that incredible entrepreneur who builds state-of-the-art housing infrastructure and is interested in forming partnerships with First Nations communities, in particular those surging in economic activities where housing is required, either in their community or just outside on economic legacy infrastructure projects.

I'm going to invite the member from Kiiwetinoong to join us on another tour. I think you'll be impressed, and I appreciate your interest.

The $1-million year-over-year change is an internal transfer. It is not a reduction to the annual e-commerce program. That funding has moved from the capacity and growth fund to the Indigenous Economic Development

Fund, bringing support delivered through the Indigenous financial institutions under one program's structures.

The capacity and growth fund has a $5.8-million allocation in the 2026-27 estimates, and it continues to support Indigenous-led economic development, focusing on food security, business planning and training. Since 2023, more than $7 million has been allocated through the fund to support 39 projects across the province. Communities are using that support to grow food locally, for example, build skills and create new business opportunities.

For example, Mamaweswen, the North Shore Tribal Council, received $294,000 to support 16 greenhouses—16 greenhouses. Eabametoong First Nation received $110,000 to expand agricultural training and greenhouse operations to support their farm.

These projects show what community-led economic development looks like in practice: more locally grown food, new skills and opportunities that create jobs in their community and, obviously, the path towards food security and food sovereignty in a world of increasing costs for food.

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

New question, please. MPP Sarrazin, you've got two minutes. Allez-vous.

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin: First of all, thank you for being here. I find it's always interesting as a member to have these presentations for us. It helps us really understand what the different ministries do, and it's always a great opportunity.

We know that economic reconciliation depends on strong relationships with Indigenous communities and organizations. Of course, building these relationships takes sustained engagement and gives communities a way to bring their priorities forward beyond any single project.

This year's estimates include the $9.1 million for the relationship supports fund. I think you talked about it; it was previously called the participation fund.

Hon. Greg Rickford: That's correct.

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin: What does this funding support, and why is it important to advancing shared priorities with Indigenous partners?

Hon. Greg Rickford: It builds a sturdy platform for Indigenous partners to bring the people and the expertise needed. It's never lost on us that organizational capacity continues to be something that we pay careful attention to and get feedback on from the communities that is often required. When you're building legacy infrastructure, the relationships with new business partners require a certain kind of expertise, some of it very technical. We find consistently, through our relationship tables, a request from the communities for the resources to support the ongoing work that's needed to identify shared priorities and act on them.

I can tell you similarly for partnership or community partnership agreements etc., when you're building a road—somebody came to me to say, "We're building this massive corridor. I'm not equipped to do that; I need partners that can help support us in that," even though it's a positive relationship with, for example, a global-sized or -scaled construction company.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, Minister, for that response.

We'll now move back to the opposition for the second round of 15 minutes each. We'll start with MPP Mamakwa. Please, sir, when you're ready.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: When we talk about Indigenous economic and community partnership initiatives, what percentage of First Nations in Ontario have access to this fund?

Hon. Greg Rickford: One hundred per cent.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Every community?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Every community who makes an application to those will be given consideration. We make great efforts to support—obviously, due diligence is a part of it. I'm not suggesting for a moment that 100% of those applications are approved, but we work hard to support those communities to put that application in the right position to be accepted.

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

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: What are the criteria to qualify for this funding?

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

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'm happy to provide the member with the specific criteria for each and every program. Obviously, we have a title of a given economic program, and then it's broken down into its parts.

I've had a chance to provide consultations, if you will—not in the duty to consult consultation, but briefings for economic groups, companies who want to understand more about the program. We are completely open to debriefing with communities who may have struggled with having success in a given program. We don't find that too often, but we certainly make every effort to ensure that they're supported.

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

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I know that the briefing book talks about funding to support Indigenous community capacity to participate in regulatory and consultation processes related to mineral exploration and development. My question to the minister would be: What percentage of funding for community-identified priorities sits outside the funding streams related to mineral exploration and development or the Ring of Fire?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Sorry, I'm not sure I understand the question.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Anything outside mineral development, anything outside the Ring of Fire—is there any?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Gotcha. If I understand the question correctly, a percentage of participation, funding, support for activities outside of, say, mining-specific activities. Is that it?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Yes.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Let me say two things: Obviously we have a larger fund that is focused on activities related to mining, and I think I outlined in my remarks how that is broken out. I'm happy to provide the member with a

more detailed outline of that. But the specific fund is designed more generally, so I would say the percentage may change on an annual basis, depending on the projects that are being contemplated.

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

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: It doesn't really answer my question. What I was pretty much asking is anything outside the scope of the mining development or the Ring of Fire. You cannot just fund development. That's kind of what I was getting at.

Also, Minister, can you provide an example of this ministry providing feedback on cabinet submissions? This is from the estimates book on page 29, contained in the section describing operating expenses for the Indigenous affairs program. I'm just wondering: Can you provide some examples of feedback on cabinet submissions?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Sorry, Mr. Chair—provide feedback on—

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: It's on page 29 of the estimates review.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I've got it right here.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: It talks about providing feedback on cabinet submissions. Could you provide an example what that means?

Hon. Greg Rickford: This particular page deals with the Indigenous affairs capital program specifically. I'm sorry; I'm not really sure how I understand the "cabinet submission." This is an existing program. Any modernization or changes to it, either in the amount of money or the contours of the specific program, are set out, and I would be happy to provide the member with the details of that program if that's what he's asking.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): I think that that would be appropriate under the circumstances. This particular page doesn't deal with feedback from this ministry related to cabinet submissions, right? It is, as it was stated by the minister, a capital program.

New question, please.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: One of the things that you spoke about in your opening—but also, it's on page 15. It talks about working in partnership with Marten Falls and Webequie to negotiate community partnership agreements valued at $39.5 million each and to develop joint statements of economic partnerships. What did those amounts entail?

Hon. Greg Rickford: They are a combination of a couple of things. I'll just speak in general terms, but I will give specific examples. What we endeavour to do is to support community-based assets that would be required to do the work that they have set out to do, and that is to build a road.

For example—and some of this is very new; the submissions are coming in hard and fast on this—there's mobilizing the appropriate equipment to crush gravel and the required equipment for clearing to fortify more local winter road access to bring that kind of equipment in. Additional diesel generation capacity—that's more a function for the Ministry of Energy and Mines, but it can be contemplated in the community partnership agreement because, through you, Chair, to the member, those are obviously foundational realities and the reason why we want to build this infrastructure.

They may also include training facilities. It may come in the form of a submission for what looks and feels like a community multi-purpose building, if you will. But it can provide capacity for myriad activities, from recreation to training and the like, and also to build, for example, camps along the way as they construct their corridor and it leaves their communities' boundaries proper.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): You have six minutes left, MPP Mamakwa, for questions.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Also, the words "duty to consult"—I know those are words that typically the government throws around. I know that sometimes, we have a different understanding of what duty to consult is—similarly to "free, prior and informed consent."

I hear it from people. To people who live on these homelands, "free" means that the land rights holders will not pay a dime on any process of duty to consult. To them, anything "prior" means that with any drill that goes in, before any work is done, you have to talk to them before, not after. "Informed consent" to them means that they understand the language in their own way, whether it's in Oji-Cree or Ojibway. That's their own way of free, prior and informed consent.

Consent is also that they have the right to say yes or no, and I think that at the end of the day, before anything happens, they have to say yes to it. Do you think that's the same as duty to consult?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Look, we take our responsibilities for the duty to consult very seriously, as they're protected by section 35 of the Constitution, and we'll continue to act in a manner consistent with the recognition and affirmation of those rights. As I've said, we repatriated the duty to consult to be a more effective government writ large when it comes to—as the member pointed out through you, Mr. Chair—discharging the duty to consult.

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I should say that, as an extension of that, obviously, we endeavour at every turn to build consensus amongst communities, not just through the duty to accommodate, but by ensuring that when and where, for example, an evolving duty to accommodate or proactively advanced partnership agreements on a given legacy infrastructure or resource development project is the right thing to do.

This kind of leadership, which is, I would say, in fairness, without comparison across the country. I can only say yesterday or on Monday, at the First Nations national meeting led by National Chief Woodhouse, we were recognized for the manner in which not only we carry out the duty to consult, but how consultations involving full, meaningful partnerships at the community level and some of the economic partnerships that have brought consensus to the kind of legacy infrastructure—particularly around the Ring of Fire, where there are deficits when it comes to electricity transmission; all of them, for example, being on diesel—and a real desire, obviously, to support the superordinate goal of providing clean, green electricity.

I know the member is very familiar with the Watay Power line and showed up at a number of announcements with me and my colleagues as we electrified communities, including his own ones that, obviously, I had spent some time on, understanding how—

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

New question, please. You've got two minutes.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I know we did some checking a few weeks ago with respect to the cost of travel up north, and I'm bringing this issue up at—say, Fort Severn. One way from Fort Severn to Thunder Bay is 2,400 bucks, one way from Wunnumin Lake to Thunder Bay is $1,800, and KI is around $1,400.

I bring that—you talked about food sovereignty and you talked about social outcomes. I know when we say, "targeted investments into the north," when we talk about food programs—how can you improve to make sure that the food sovereignty of the First Nations that live in the north is improved?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Through you, Mr. Chair: The member and I share a passion in the pursuit of food security and food sovereignty. As he knows, the federal program is in place to look at existing access to grocery and food.

Our programs are more tailored to look at how we can build the right capacity and provide the right kinds of tools, quite literally, for in-community food production. These are emerging farms, greenhouse capacity studies for those. I mentioned Grand Council Treaty 3; they have acquired a farm. It's not situated in Treaty 3 proper, but we hope one will be soon, and they are now making available, to membership communities, access to a markedly reduced cost in beef.

And Eabametoong is proudly building on their capacity for a some-seven-acre farm to have the right tools, literally—tractors, a Quonset hut or more akin to a barn, actually—to safely and effectively store the right tools to build locally grown food.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, sir, for that response.

MPP Shamji, please. When you're ready, sir—to the estimates.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Minister, I'm going to ask for your help on something. I suspect my question reflects more my lack of experience and not quite fully understanding how your ministry operates, but perhaps you can just help me understand.

I'm looking at vote 2001-2, which is land claims and self-government initiatives. I see services for $100,000, land claim settlements and negotiated settlements for $1,000 each.

I just have a difficult time imagining how the anticipated expenses are merely $102,000, despite what you've described as a lot of work in working on land claims and self-government initiatives.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Minister, to the question, please.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I don't think that reflects a lack of understanding on your part, but rather, these are notional amounts that are provided as contingency for unforeseen—although I like to focus on anticipated—costs that we might incur in the process of moving towards a settlement on a given land claim or flood claim.

Mr. Adil Shamji: So can you help me understand? If this is sort of the contingency—and I acknowledge that your government is doing work around land claims and self-governance—what would be a more accurate number for the amount that will need to be spent in supporting these initiatives?

Hon. Greg Rickford: You mean—sorry, Mr. Chair; through you—the amount of a given claim or the activities required to support it?

Mr. Adil Shamji: If you'd be able to provide, I'd be interested in both.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Mr. Chair, in my opening remarks, of course, I mentioned two communities who had settled for an amount, and settled for an amount that is a function not only of their position, but the participation of the federal government, and so the amount can be anticipated.

It's a process, so we can start to get a clear understanding—sometimes we get offers for a settlement, but we don't engage in an activity where we set down an amount and can't operate outside of it for various reasons. So these continue to be notional amounts, until they're crystal clear and they settle in a given fiscal year.

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

Mr. Adil Shamji: That is very helpful to me. I appreciate that.

Again, for my understanding, are you able to maybe indicate how much was spent in the last year, to maybe help me project how much might be spent in the next?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Sorry, Mr. Chair: Again, are you saying land claims that were settled in the past year?

Mr. Adil Shamji: Yes.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I think I mentioned in my opening remarks the two—Washagamis Bay and Mississaugas of the Credit—with respect to the Rouge River Valley tract. I can just take you to that.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Forgive me if I missed it.

Hon. Greg Rickford: No, it's okay. The amounts I set out there were—I want to say $157 million was the combined total. Just bear with me for one quick second.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Just take a moment to get the number.

Hon. Greg Rickford: You know what? I'll just provide the member with the global settlement and he'll be able to see very quickly the contribution of the province and the federal government.

Mr. Adil Shamji: I appreciate that.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I mentioned them in my remarks.

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

New question, please.

Mr. Adil Shamji: I'll check the Hansard. Thank you, Minister.

So my understanding is—

Hon. Greg Rickford: I have them here now if you want.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Sure.

Hon. Greg Rickford: So we settled agreements with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation on the Rouge River Valley tract claim, which is a clarity over title to a portion of land within Toronto. It included $108.4 million from Canada and $75 million from Ontario for a total settlement of $183.4 million. And Washagamis Bay First Nation, which sits at the border of where I live in Keewatin: The flooding claim resolved and resulted in a $185-million settlement; $135 million from the federal government and $49 million from Ontario.

The only distinction I would make there for the member's curiosity is the difference between a land claim and a flooding claim and the jurisdiction over the course of time that a given government would have had where that grievance would have arisen. That's how we landed those amounts.

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Mr. Adil Shamji: Thanks, Minister.

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

Mr. Adil Shamji: I wonder if we could turn to something you'll be familiar with because it is close to home for you. I wanted to ask around Grassy Narrows. Specifically, my understanding is that there was an $85-million river cleanup trust established in 2017, but as of December 2025, my understanding is that remediation hasn't started and there's no plan or timeline. I even understand that more money is being requested or will be required. What are your plans for that?

Hon. Greg Rickford: My plans as a minister are to focus on the mercury disability fund, to be clear. Now again, Mr. Chair, while the question doesn't deal with something specific in my ministry, the importance of advocating for Grassy Narrows is obviously not lost on me. This, for me, means focusing on the disability fund itself, and I'm happy to be more explicit in details of something that my ministry leads with respect to that.

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

That question is with the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks.

Mr. Adil Shamji: I see. I understand.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): New question.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Do you have a target this year for resolving land claims?

Hon. Greg Rickford: As I said, if there's any indication on our past record—there are a number of land claims in different stages; I'm trying to think of a few. Obviously, these are matters of confidence, in fairness to the First Nations, but suffice it to say, these are historical grievances, legitimate claims, kept out of the courtrooms so that the federal government, the provincial government and the community themselves can reconcile that. The settlements often form a fund that gives them powerful economic tools to participate in lands that, historically, they have not been able to use, as is the case in traditional or modern economic activities.

I can't give a specific amount. As I say, we don't anticipate doing anything but making sure that Ontario lives up to its commitment to settle these claims as quickly as possible. I can tell the member that we have settled 18—I think it's now up to 20, if I'm not mistaken. And there will be more, because when those claims are settled—this came up in a recent file where the community said, "Look, we get that these are separate tracts for the corridor that we're trying to develop, but it would be helpful if we had a clear signal that our land claims were on the radar screen," and we redoubled our efforts to make sure that they are a meaningful part of the activity that my ministry actually participates in and leads, and that is land claim and flood claim settlements.

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

Mr. Adil Shamji: In regard to a subject we had briefly addressed earlier around central consultation, I know that one of your priorities this year, as it was last year, is to facilitate more of that consultation in your ministry. Is there going to be an office for that? Because I know, on reviewing the estimates, I don't see a budget line for that. So what does that office look like, what are we looking at for staff and what are we looking at for funding?

Hon. Greg Rickford: It's a great question. It is a division within my ministry, and it is supported from the Ministry of the Attorney General. Obviously, the duty to consult—those three words are very legal when we use them. This is a shared, I guess you could think of it, initiative that my ministry works very closely with the Attorney General on, to the extent that there's an important enough exercise in legal terms to meet a specific duty. But my ministry's capacity is meant to reflect other ministries who are engaged in the duty to consult.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): New question.

Mr. Adil Shamji: To be clear, this central consultation that your ministry is leading is actually—am I hearing that it's funded by the Ministry of the Attorney General?

Hon. Greg Rickford: It's a division within my ministry, physically and literally, but supported by the resources in the Ministry of the Attorney General.

Mr. Adil Shamji: So is that your way of saying that the funding isn't reflected in these estimates but would be found elsewhere?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Where would they be found?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Under the Attorney General.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): The Attorney General was before this committee a week ago.

Notwithstanding, move on, please: New question. You have four minutes left—to the estimates.

Mr. Adil Shamji: One of the programs under your ministry is Pathways to Safety in relation to missing and murdered Indigenous women and children. I don't see a line item for that, though, and I haven't seen any progress reports from that program since at least 2022.

Can you fill us in on how much your ministry is spending and provide an update on what progress it has made?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes—a couple of things on that. This stems—obviously, the member would know—from the five-year response strategy and subsequent progress reports in March 2022 and December 2023. We continue

to work with the Indigenous Women's Advisory Council and the appropriate Indigenous communities and organizations. This is actually in part administered by one of my colleagues.

We have historically announced investments to support—for example, in 2024, $13.5 million over three years to enhance supports for women at risk for violence or exploitation. These have manifested themselves in care units—for example, the one in Kenora, a Victim Quick Response Program, which increases base access to basic necessities—and $2.5 million to extend outreach to children in the welfare system that links them with the appropriate educational supports and resources.

This year, we have announced a renewal of that Pathways to Safety strategy for the next five years to continue this important work.

Mr. Adil Shamji: How much funding is behind that renewal?

Hon. Greg Rickford: As is often the case, Mr. Chair, our ministry is involved in support for other ministries that provide these specific programs. Our role, of course, is to provide support and good guidance on the relationships that we have, particularly around the anti-human trafficking strategy and investments in prevention, survivor supports and accountability measures.

Mr. Adil Shamji: I understand that, and I appreciate what you're saying. So just for the members of the committee here—just if you would clarify, considering your ministry is providing consultation on this—is Pathways to Safety still operational, and is it still funded by the Ontario government?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Absolutely it is. In fact, we announced our renewal of it for five years for 2026 to 2031. That would be the royal "we," as in the appropriate ministry.

Mr. Adil Shamji: I understand. Do you know when the next progress report will come out?

Hon. Greg Rickford: We can endeavour to get that information to you, yes.

Mr. Adil Shamji: I would be grateful about that.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): You have 45 seconds left.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Very quickly, about the capacity and growth fund, which supports Indigenous-led food security and economic development, I note that 60% was left unspent last year. Why is that? My understanding is that food security is a massive issue in First Nations communities.

Hon. Greg Rickford: We have a program; people apply to it. If it's undersubscribed, then we have a responsibility to make the necessary modifications so that that project, that program or that fund will meet the needs of the communities that are applying to it. We're still learning how to be more effective at that, trying to understand the contours of given applications that reflect specific things.

Look, this has literally come down to decisions as to whether the government would be in the business of, by way of an application, helping to buy shovels and hoes and other kinds of—what do you call those—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, sir. All right, Minister, we're going to go to the government, please. Thank you.

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That concludes the time allocated for the third party. We will now move to the government, and I have MPP Grewal. When you're ready, sir.

Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal: Thank you, Minister, and thank you to your staff as well, your deputy minister and your chief of staff and the entire team at Indigenous affairs and economic reconciliation for the great work that you've been doing, collaborating with communities across the province.

I just want to talk a little bit about the work your ministry has been undertaking with your leadership when it comes to mineral expropriation and mine development. We're talking about projects that can have long-term significance for Indigenous communities and Ontario's economy. These discussions involve land, community priorities, potential impacts on rights and opportunities for future generations. There's a lot going on with the consultations that you're having with those communities, and it involves a considerable amount of work when it comes to proposals that can include technical studies, maps, other detailed information as the project progresses forward. That's a lot for communities that bring their own knowledge and perspective to that process, and so meaningful participation involves reviewing that information, asking the questions and considering what that proposal means for that community.

That's why I was interested in how our government's funding programs support this work in practice. Previously, you spoke about the relationship supports fund and its contribution to our relationships with Indigenous partners. I'd like to better understand how that Indigenous Participation Fund fits into that broader effort, and I'd also like for you to distinguish the two funds and explain the rationale for moving the Indigenous Participation Fund into your ministry and how this year's allocation will support First Nations and Métis communities with participating in those consultations.

Hon. Greg Rickford: It's a very good question, and it builds on the member from Kiiwetinoong's question and my response.

Look, let me just state from the outset what is underpinning this: It is a desire to strengthen and coordinate Indigenous consultation. We have brought the Indigenous Participation Fund from the Ministry of Energy and Mines into this ministry, and the estimates allocate approximately $16.8 million, I think it is, to the fund.

The fund supports First Nations and Métis communities' ability for consultation capacity around specific mineral exploration and mine development. Let me unpack that: It includes support for communities to hire, for example, mineral development advisers, technical specialists that help communities assess proposed activities and consider opportunities associated with the mineral sector.

Bringing this fund to our ministry, I think, supports a more centralized and coordinated approach to Indigenous

consultation and engagement. We move in real time to meet the needs and the capacity of a given community's involvement in the development of any and all aspects of a resource development—more specifically, a mining project.

The Ministry of Energy and Mines continues to lead mining regulation and consultation associated with its decision, although we, through our duty to consult division, support that, while my ministry would of course administer funding that supports Indigenous participation.

I hope that clarifies things for you.

Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal: Thank you very much, Minister. Thank you for that explanation, and I'd like to share the rest of my time with PA Bouma.

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

Mr. Will Bouma: Chair, through you to the minister: Minister, since day one, we've been clear, as we work towards opening up the Ring of Fire, that as that advancement happens, it must be done in true partnership with First Nations. I know, in conversations with some of the chiefs, that, as they were doing the community engagement on the proposed roads that we're building in that region now, it was actually their youth that were most excited about these opportunities. And to see that moving forward now, to see these communities connected, is incredible news—not just for the rest of us, because I think southern Ontario has figured out that everything that we hoped to do into the future is dependent on what happens in northern Ontario, and we see that more and more.

But as we continue to see communities lead the charge—and that's what's happening; these communities are leading this—on major legacy infrastructure, economic opportunities, and advance the long-term benefits associated with regional development—and over the past couple of years, our government has signed and advanced community partnership agreements with communities through identified shared priorities.

I know you've touched on it earlier this afternoon already, but could you speak more on the progress that our government has made through these agreements and how they are helping ensure that First Nations are full partners in the economic opportunities that are coming their way and our way.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): To the question.

Hon. Greg Rickford: As I said—and I want to thank the member for his participation in these activities—look, the bottom line is that we're building legacy infrastructure that addresses not just the prevailing desire to access mine sites—specifically one of the most exquisite quantitively and qualitatively deposits of critical minerals known the world over—but to address what those communities and other communities across northern Ontario are asking for. That is the kind of corridor capacity that can provide more than just the ability to transport people and goods via automobile or vehicle, but also to be the kind of corridor that has the capacity to support industrial and commercial traffic and other kinds of legacy infrastructure like electrification, if you consider that the Matawa communities most proximal to the Ring of Fire—I believe there are six—remain on diesel generation.

Our efforts, then, are focused as much on building the kind of legacy infrastructure as part of our community partnership agreements to address that, as they are, per se, in the mine development. In the instances of the partnerships that we've developed so far, there has obviously been an explicit interest in accessing those roads north and south—north to south, for example. But there are other opportunities for, for example, winter road networks that run east to west in the Far North.

While Webequie First Nation, squarely through their community partnership agreement, has the ability to develop that forum, if you will, it's all with a view to provide primary and secondary routes in and out of the Ring of Fire region, but also to the extent that there are communities with outstanding legacy infrastructure that other communities, for example, have. The most direct comparison would be the communities with the Watay Power line transmission—into the same place where they should expect that kind of infrastructure in their communities. Once that's established, those corridors then provide them with the kind of modern infrastructure to engage in a broader economic activity.

So far, we have every indication that those community partnerships evolve into economic partnership agreements to build that infrastructure and the kinds of businesses—for example, in a supply chain or a subcontracting model—come to fruition.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): New question, please. You've got six minutes and 31 seconds, MPP Ciriello.

MPP Monica Ciriello: Thank you for the breakdown of the time.

I want to redirect our conversation back to something that you had mentioned a little bit earlier, Minister: the capacity and growth fund and the importance of it to ensure that First Nations have access to the right kinds of resources needed to pursue their own economic priorities. That work also depends on people with the skills and connections to turn community plans into businesses, partnerships and jobs.

Your ministry continues to leverage the capacity and growth fund to ensure that entrepreneurs, communities and businesses have the resources that they need to strive and to succeed.

In your opening remarks, you did touch on your partnerships with the Ontario First Nations Economic Developers Association. Could you further expand and perhaps explain what this investment provides and how it helps First Nations build lasting economic development capacity, please?

Hon. Greg Rickford: The common threads, through the funds that are identified in the estimates and that structurally comprise the programs that my ministry offers, are around ensuring that there is the capacity to do that, and further to that the very often technical supports required in the case of a consultant or some other person, but also with a view to support people who are already doing that kind of work in those communities.

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Through the fund, for example, we invested $8 million over three years to the Ontario First Nations Economic Developers Association, who are doing extraordinary work in supporting economic opportunities and job creation. But, in my view, the most important thing is training up and supporting economic development officers in communities. Community members, as economic development officers, can support entrepreneurial activities; point them in the right direction to programs and funds available not just in my ministry, but across the provincial government; and, increasingly, point them in the right direction to complementary programs that the federal government has.

This comes in the form, as well, of supporting professional development networking, bringing the exchange—I've had a chance to attend some of those forums with the member from Kiiwetinoong, for example, and I appreciate his brother is involved in one in particular. But increasingly, these are populated by First Nations-owned and -operated businesses, so supporting their business plans, pursuing partnerships and identifying and then funding specific economic activities in communities, I think, is a pretty good goal to pursue.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): We're at two minutes and 57 seconds. New question, MPP Firin, please, when you're ready.

MPP Mohamed Firin: Minister, you've spoken about why sustained relationships matter to economic reconciliation. Those relationships also give First Nations leadership a way to bring their economic priorities and barriers directly to our government. You mentioned that the Chiefs of Ontario have been an important partner in that work. Could you speak to how your ministry is working with the Chiefs of Ontario to advance First Nations economic priorities and create practical opportunities for communities, businesses and entrepreneurs?

Hon. Greg Rickford: In two ways: First of all, the First Nations Economic Growth and Prosperity Table brings First Nations leadership—but, importantly, First Nations business leadership—and provincial ministries together to identify the right economic priorities and then, perhaps as a benefit of that, practical examples that evolve from it.

In this particular case, the First Nations business directory is an idea that's born at the table, and it brings First Nations businesses more visible not just to us, but to the private sector. We've seen national First Nations economic organizations understand that when you do supply chain mapping, for example, you can supply chain map. But if there are no First Nations businesses on that map, then we're missing an opportunity. And so the business directory is an important precursor to creating the kind of map, if you will, that industries know where to go to.

There's some incredible work being done by First Nations businesses on developing modern business tools, AI-generated or otherwise, that put vendors, put businesses endeavouring into a partnership with a First Nations community, for example; into existing First Nations-owned and -operated businesses that they can partner with. They may not be known; these business directories help identify them.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you for that response. We have 24 seconds. I think it's a little bit not enough for a question or an answer.

This committee will conclude at 3:03 p.m. The remaining time will go to the official opposition for questions. MPP Mamakwa, please, when you're ready—to the estimates.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: To hear in the estimates briefing book on the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation some words that are being thrown around, like: "relationship funds." We talk about economic reconciliation. We talk about social outcomes. Sometimes I think people around the table do not know what is actually happening in the community.

Today, the Chiefs of Ontario and the Nishnawbe Aski Nation actually just presented an issue related to northern airports and the condition of them, which is run by the province of Ontario, and the things that are happening in the communities, the drugs and the addictions that are happening and the mental health—and the lack thereof. When we talk about safety, the policing—I got a note a couple of days ago where there was a young girl, nine years old, that died by suicide.

These are the realities that are happening. When you talk to me about economic reconciliation, when we talk about all these funds, these are the realities. We have elders that are leaving home for long-term-care facilities, because we don't have those. For eight years, we've been waiting for a long-term-care facility in Sioux Lookout. When we talk about the justice system, the policing, the courts, the jails—when I go to the Kenora Jail, 90% of those people are people who look like me. And the lack of housing—in Sioux Lookout, you see young people without homes that are walking around Sioux Lookout. The cost of living—and I think those are the realities of Kiiwetinoong; those are the realities in the province of Ontario, and when you talk to me about economic reconciliation, you have to deal with those too.

And I know, Chair, sometimes when we talk about those, they're all inter-related, but the estimates briefing book does not do enough. There are a lot of people dying in our communities—needless deaths, unnecessary suffering—and I think that it's really important to be able to acknowledge that. I say that because "Ring of Fire" is mentioned 12 times in the estimates briefing book. "Health"—very important—is mentioned five times. "Minerals" and "mines" are mentioned 12 times. But the words "safety," "housing," and "water" don't show up in the estimates book.

It makes me wonder if the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs is listening to First Nations people at all. Why is advancing Ontario's critical minerals strategy a core priority for this ministry when the urgent needs of First Nations are not being addressed at all?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you. Specifically with respect to the estimates, I would just say that I think a fairer reflection of the investments, with respect to a

number of things that the member has raised, are manifestly in other ministries that I don't lead. Its comparison might be the federal government where, by design, Indigenous Services Canada takes up a number of those activities couched or housed in the activities that they do. Based on my own federal experience and reflections, I would say that this should lie with more than just one ministry, as it is with us.

So to be clear and to be fair, the estimates that the member is commenting on here today, I think, reflect more focused activities that we provide, not just in economic reconciliation but in the Indian residential school agreement and other activities.

I would just say that as somebody who has worked in and for First Nations communities in a variety of different capacities, I'd be an effective advocate at the cabinet table to reflect the concerns that the member has expressed. I think that if other ministers were here to comment on the subject matters that the member has raised, the people of Ontario would see very fair investment into a number of the things that the member mentioned.

Further is the work that I and my colleagues do, including the Premier of Ontario, in advocating to the federal government to step it up in those communities that he mentioned. Through our efforts, we have been able to signal to the federal government a very serious interest in cost-sharing some of the kinds of infrastructure, programs and services that the province hasn't historically been involved in but is willing to be in the name of advancing economic reconciliation more broadly speaking.

There are more examples not confined to the Ring of Fire where First Nations communities are asking for the kind of infrastructure to unleash economic activity that will bring better access to the kinds of services and programs that the member has rightly pointed out can be challenged in our isolated and remote communities.

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

You have 40 seconds, sir.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: To pass off to the federal government and other ministries has historically been the problem. I've learned that's how oppression works. That's how colonialism works. That's how racism works. I'm not going against you, Minister, directly, but that's the system that we work under, and we know that.

Meegwetch.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you.

This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation.

Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are the members ready to vote?

Shall vote 2001, Indigenous affairs program, carry? All those in favour, raise your hands. All those opposed, raise your hands. It's carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation to the House? All those in favour, raise your hands. All those opposed? It's carried.

This concludes our consideration of this ministry's estimates. I'd like to thank the minister, his staff, the Clerk to my left, legislative research, Hansard and all the committee members for your participation, including the staff that supported everyone here today.

The committee is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1504.

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