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(Hansard)**

JP-52

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JP-52

**Standing Committee on
Justice Policy**

**Comité permanent
de la justice**

Estimates

Ministry of Indigenous Affairs
and First Nations Economic Reconciliation

Budget des dépenses

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

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Friday 4 October 2024

1^{re} session
43^e législature

Vendredi 4 octobre 2024

Chair: Lorne Coe
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Président : Lorne Coe
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

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ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE POLICY

COMITÉ PERMANENT DE LA JUSTICE

Friday 4 October 2024

Vendredi 4 octobre 2024

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, members. The committee is about to begin consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs for a total of two hours. Are there any questions from members before we start?

Seeing none, I'm now required to call vote 2001, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation. The remaining time will be allotted for questions and answers in rotations of 20 minutes for the official opposition members of the committee, 10 minutes for the independent members of the committee, and 20 minutes for the government members of the committee.

Minister, the floor is yours. I'll let you know, sir, when you've got two minutes remaining so you can start to sum up.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I appreciate this opportunity, colleagues. Thank you for having me here today to address the Standing Committee on Justice Policy. Today, I'll be discussing the work of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs—and the additional title that has been added to it: “First Nations Economic Reconciliation.” I'll be happy to answer your questions after.

I'd like to introduce my colleagues joining me: Deputy Minister Dave Corbett; Rebecca Ramsarran, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy and planning; Candice Telfer, assistant deputy minister, negotiations and reconciliation; Michael Reid, assistant deputy minister, Indigenous relations and programs; Scott Mantle, chief administrative officer and assistant deputy minister, corporate management; and an extraordinary group of people who work in my minister's office.

Thank you for being here with me today.

Colleagues, our ministry is committed to fostering prosperity and well-being for First Nations, Inuit, Métis communities across Ontario, making reconciliation meaningful for all.

In June, the ministry's name change, as it is stylized, reflects a new focus on First Nations economic reconcilia-

tion. It's an enterprise-wide approach. The change highlights our government's commitment to true economic partnerships, ensuring Indigenous participation in major and key infrastructure projects, industrial and commercial activities, as well as resource projects across the province.

Under the leadership of Premier Ford, we are focused on building an Ontario with economic reconciliation for First Nations as a key priority, working hard to develop strong partnerships and a future where Indigenous communities thrive socially and economically.

Our work at the ministry includes fostering ongoing engagement with First Nations, Inuit and Métis as well as, importantly, urban Indigenous partners and people. These relationships are vital to our progress on strategic economic and social policy, funding programs and settling treaty claims. Key priorities this year have included:

- expanding First Nations access to provincial programs and supporting more effective responses to emergencies;

- strengthening relationships through formal relationship tables and informal engagement for joint priority-setting;

- supporting First Nations and Métis communities through the New Relationship Fund, enabling meaningful participation in land and resource management;

- advancing economic opportunities with a \$25-million economic development commitment in partnership with the Chiefs of Ontario; most notably, this proposal was in fact drafted by the Chiefs of Ontario;

- providing funding through the Indigenous Economic Development Fund to boost Indigenous businesses' growth and competitiveness;

- supporting regional economic capacity and food security through the \$3-million regional capacity and growth fund;

- assisting communities in identifying and commemorating Indian residential school burial sites; and

- providing mental health support to survivors and their communities.

I feel proud of the progress that we've made over the past year, and I look forward to sharing more about our accomplishments with you today.

In terms of the relationship, our ministry continues to enhance collaboration with First Nations, Inuit, Métis and urban Indigenous partners through ongoing relationship tables. These tables have proved to serve as crucial plat-

forms for meaningful dialogue, mutual understanding and partnership, as well as developing good policy in my ministry. We engage in First Nations, Métis and urban Indigenous organizations on emerging issues, but most importantly, as I think of them, opportunities.

At the request of the Chiefs of Ontario, Premier Ford, my cabinet colleagues and I meet regularly with First Nations leadership to ensure that the leadership advocacy strategy meetings are effective and meaningful. These discussions focus on key priorities, which include on-reserve housing; drinking water; calls for justice from the final report on missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA+ people; and First Nations data sovereignty. These meetings are vital for relationship-building and collaborative efforts, with another session planned for this fall.

Our work with the First Nations growth and prosperity table has been another key focus and success this year. The table has driven significant economic activities and is very much a collaborative effort between the participants, which include First Nation leadership and First Nation business leaders.

Economic development initiatives like the \$25-million-over-three-years program that we took our lead and cue from the Chiefs of Ontario on cover various products and stem directly from these discussions. For example, the funding is supporting food security innovation and skills development for Indigenous communities across Ontario, and further helps us to identify supply chain opportunities for Indigenous-owned-and-operated businesses. Regular meetings with Indigenous organizations allow us to share updates and address the challenges faced by their communities, helping us to build stronger partnerships.

Key highlights of this year include working with the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, or NAN, to address social emergencies in northern First Nations. In partnership with the associate minister of health, we have provided more than \$2.6 million for crisis support, social emergencies, infrastructure to support those services, as well as mental health and addictions in NAN territory. Collaboration with Grand Council Treaty 3 led to a significant investment in funding to support regional economic development priorities, including the creation of an ecotourism strategy to foster future prosperity.

These examples demonstrate the positive impact of our relationship tables and the ongoing work to support Indigenous communities in social emergencies. Social emergencies in First Nations often stem from complex factors requiring co-creation and First Nations-led implementation for effective solutions. My ministry works with partners to co-create Indigenous-led strategies to improve health, safety and well-being, and response to and for Indigenous communities across Ontario.

In terms of addressing critical needs, Ontario committed more than \$1 million annually for 10 years through the regional Social Emergency Managers Program to expand the 2024-25—to central and southern Ontario, with continued funding of \$1.4 million. The program helps First Nation partners strengthen their crisis response,

particularly with respect to mental health and addictions. An additional \$500,000 was allocated for shared training, coordination and governance development.

Further, Ontario is investing \$60 million over three years in mental health and addiction services, focusing on clinical mental health programs, community well-being initiatives and opioid-related programming to address underlying causes and social emergencies.

In response to the trauma caused by the Indian residential school system, Ontario has committed \$92.4 million for the identification, investigation and commemoration of burial sites at former residential schools. This year, \$32.1 million was provided, with \$17.1 million directed to burial investigations and \$15 million for trauma and mental health supports for survivors, families and communities. The Indian Residential School Community Engagement Fund also provided over \$7 million in 2023-24 to support more than 45 applicants with up to \$150,000 for this year. The work is community-led and culturally respectful. It has been tremendously well received, particularly amongst survivor groups and survivor group forums that I have attended, recognizing the sensitive nature of these investigations and their emotional toll on Indigenous communities.

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On September 30, the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, we remembered and honoured survivors and the children who never came home. I was honoured to attend the survivors' flag-raising at Queen's Park, hosted by the Ontario Native Women's Association, where association grandmother and survivor Kitty Everson from Kenora raised the flag.

Ontario remains committed to providing the necessary supports to help those affected by the Indian residential school system to heal and move forward.

In my own estimates, you will note that some of the figures I've quoted today are and come from other ministries. This is because we remain committed to enterprise-wide and whole-of-government support on these important matters.

I'd like to talk about Pathways to Safety. The Ministry of Indigenous Affairs alongside the Associate Minister of Women's Social and Economic Opportunity co-lead Ontario's Pathways to Safety strategy and support the work of the Indigenous Women's Advisory Council. In December, Ontario released the second Pathways to Safety Progress Report that showcases the advances in key Indigenous-led initiatives within this strategy, covering areas such as justice, economic security, health and well-being, and safety and security. Later this year, we will release the third report, continuing to document our program in these crucial areas.

I'd like to talk a little bit about the duty to consult and some exciting things going on in Greenstone—partnerships in northern Ontario. The Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation plays a vital role in ensuring that Ontario's duty-to-consult obligations with First Nations are met across all ministries. This involves creating tools, training and guidance to help

government bodies, ministries, municipalities and industry stakeholders to meet the consultation requirements. The duty to consult is a constitutional commitment, and it is integral to advancing reconciliation, fostering ongoing partnerships, and strengthening relationships with Indigenous communities. Our work in the Greenstone development area exemplifies this commitment. We have led the way in collaborating with other ministries, such as the ministries of transport, labour, mines, energy and electrification, as well as the First Nations communities of AZA, Aroland First Nation, Ginoogaming First Nation and Long Lake #58 First Nation.

This past June, under Premier Ford's leadership, we reached a landmark agreement with these four First Nations and key ministries in Greenstone. The Premier, parliamentary assistant Will Bouma and I were honoured to stand alongside the chiefs to affirm our mutual commitment to building prosperity for Indigenous communities and their peoples in northern Ontario, specifically in this region. For Ontario, the commitment includes significant infrastructure and economic development projects that include upgrading roads, connecting First Nations communities with provincial highway networks, and creating substantial economic opportunities through First Nations-owned-and-operated businesses in and around Greenstone. In addition, we invested more than \$1.9 million through the Skills Development Fund to provide training and job opportunities in mineral development. These initiatives reflect our shared goal of unlocking economic opportunities in northern Ontario, particularly resource development. This partnership paves the way for future critical minerals projects that will benefit both the province and First Nations communities, and we are proud of the continued collaboration and progress.

How much time do I have?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): You have six minutes and 30 seconds, sir.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Okay.

I'd like to talk a little bit about treaty claims and settlements.

Negotiated land claim settlements play a critical role in addressing historical grievances, honouring treaty relationships and ensuring fair compensation for First Nations. These settlements, colleagues, not only bring economic benefits, certainly, to First Nations, but also foster new business partnerships and create opportunities in neighbouring communities.

This year, we have made significant strides in advancing land claim research, assessments and settlements. A key achievement was the Naicatchewenin First Nation flooding claim settlement. After the initial claim in 1996, Ontario worked diligently, over the past year in particular, with the community and federal partners to reach an agreement. In September 2022, the members of Naicatchewenin First Nation ratified the settlement agreement, and I was privileged to attend the celebration this past May, marking decades of effort culminating finally in successful resolution.

Another major milestone came in May 2024, with the settlement of the Matachewan First Nation's treaty land entitlement claim. This settlement reinforced our commitment to ensuring that Matachewan First Nation receives the land and resources rightfully owed to them, contributing to reconciliation and long-term community prosperity.

In 2023-24, we accepted new claims for negotiations from Red Rock Indian Band and Whitesand First Nation, embarking on further reconciliation-focused dialogues with these communities. Additionally, through the Support for Community Negotiations Fund, Ontario provided more than \$12 million to support Indigenous communities' meaningful participation in these negotiation processes.

One of the most significant milestones this year was the historic settlement between Ontario, Canada and the 21 First Nation signatories to the Robinson-Huron Treaty. This settlement was achieved through political partnerships and meaningful political dialogue. The settlement addressed a long-standing claim for past compensation related to treaty annuities and resulted in a \$10-billion agreement shared between Ontario and Canada. The settlement was formally executed in January 2024 and endorsed by the Ontario Superior Court in February. The agreement stands as a landmark and historical national moment in our ongoing collaborative efforts to renew treaty relationships, fulfill promises of the past and move forward together.

I'll use the last few minutes to talk about economic development and prosperity, with particular attention on fostering economic development and prosperity as a central component to the work of my ministry, especially with the addition of "First Nations Economic Reconciliation" added to the title of our ministry. We are about empowering First Nations communities with the necessary skills, resources and infrastructure not only to enhance Indigenous economic growth, because we know it's not limited to that, but also for the benefit of First Nations communities, especially in the Far North, where things like critical infrastructure are required for a better quality of life day-to-day but tied in our efforts to create economic opportunities for those communities.

Over the past year, Ontario has made significant investments to support Indigenous businesses, improve infrastructure and create pathways for future growth. These are not confined to but rather complemented by the work that I do through the Ministry of Northern Development; specifically, through a number of activities, but most notably through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. These efforts include improving access to low-interest loans, grants, training programs and capacity-building projects. Through the Indigenous Economic Development Fund and the Indigenous Community Capital Grants Program, the annual application-based funding streams are provided to support infrastructure development, growth plans and employment services.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): You have two minutes, Minister.

Hon. Greg Rickford: In September, Ontario announced \$3.2 million in support for 48 initiatives under the

Indigenous Economic Diversification Grant and Regional Partnership Grant, along with \$6 million in commitment to the Indigenous Community Capital Grants Program for 2024 and 2025.

I'll highlight one particular program. Just yesterday, I was speaking to a chief in Parry Sound with respect to our work for the Ontario First Nations Economic Developers Association, otherwise known as OFNEDA, to provide instrumental economic growth, skill development and capacity and innovation. We committed \$4 million to enable over 1,000 Indigenous participants to acquire valuable skills in trades—in construction and welding and electrical work. We also, importantly, have created new economic development officers who are readily available to work with communities who need support in advancing projects, programs and applications to various governments for the benefit of their community.

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With those remarks, Mr. Chair, I want to thank you for this opportunity, and I'm happy now to take any questions or comments from colleagues here today.

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

As a reminder, I will allow members to ask a wide range of questions pertaining to the estimates before the committee. However, it must be noted that the onus is on the members asking the questions to make sure the question is relevant to the estimates under consideration; otherwise, I'll bring you back to that—just so we have an understanding from the very beginning. It has been an approach that has been quite successful. Behind me is a big book that contains all the estimates that I've chaired, and I know that both the official opposition and the government members have co-operated very well in that regard.

The ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address. If you wish, you may, at the end of your appearance, verify the questions and issues being tracked with the research officer. Mr. McNaught is the research officer for the committee, and he's to my left.

For any staff appearing today: When you're called on to speak, please give your name and your title so that we may accurately record in Hansard who we have before the committee.

As always, please wait to be recognized by myself before speaking. All questions and comments will need to go through the Chair. This allows the committee to proceed smoothly, and it has been a formula for success for the last three to four weeks.

I will now start with the members of the official opposition. MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Minister, thank you for your comments.

I want to start, as well, by thanking my colleagues for their excellent work on this committee, and particularly deputy leader Mamakwa, for his leadership on this file and for his advocating for First Nations and Indigenous people in Ontario.

I think it is fair to say that the government of Ontario's relationship with First Nations has never been at a more critical point. As such, I wanted to come here in person today to hear the minister's response to questions and concerns that I'm hearing as I cross the province.

I'd like to refer to page 33 of the 2024-25 estimates where it refers to \$954,000 to be directed to the mercury disability fund.

Minister, over the last few years, we have been visited here by the people of Grassy Narrows many times. They've come a long way to share their stories and to advocate for their people. As you know, 90% of Grassy Narrows is still suffering from mercury poisoning to this day—90%. These are families, these are children, these are elders, these are entire generations impacted by this crisis, and they have been waiting for justice for decades. I've listened to their stories; I'm sure many of us here have. I've seen their resilience. But they are still waiting for that justice.

I've looked at the estimates and I see that the estimated amount for the mercury disability fund, as I mentioned, is \$954,000, but it's the same as in 2023-24. In fact, in the interim actuals for last year, there was a modestly higher amount actually spent. So I'm wondering if the minister can tell us why there is no increase in the mercury disability fund for this year.

Hon. Greg Rickford: First of all, I share the view that the relationship with First Nations communities is at a critical point; it generally always is because there are a number of critical opportunities and challenges that remain. I think we've built an effective platform or forum to discuss those—whether it's the Chiefs of Ontario or meeting with First Nations leadership on community matters.

That takes us to your question with respect to Grassy Narrows, in particular, and the mercury disability fund. First of all, this was replenished with over \$127 million based on a triannual assessment we received in June 2021. The funds ensure that the mercury disability fund is resourced to provide benefits to mercury disability fund beneficiaries for many years to come. One of the first acts that our government made—and, in fact, I, as its minister—was to index those benefits. That was significant. It recognized that the benefits had remained the same for those beneficiaries for a very long time—since 1986, in fact. The new assessment process is based on a comprehensive reform to the mercury disability benefit model and its assessment process, recommended by the expert panel in its February 2021 final report. The contracts with medical experts to conduct the testing necessary to determine eligibility—these tests are conducted at no cost, obviously, to the individual. And the benefits are indexed to inflation annually to ensure consistent compensation for the beneficiaries. So the beneficiaries themselves do, in fact, experience an annual increase tied to the rate of inflation. As of June 30, 2024, I can report to you that over 1,000 people are receiving those benefits, and importantly, Grassy Narrows First Nation members and Wabaseemoong

Independent Nations, which isn't mentioned often enough, can apply for the mercury disability benefit—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Chair, I'd like to reclaim my time.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Excuse me, Minister. I have a point of order.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I'd like to reclaim my time, if I may. I just want to ask further for your response there—I'm struggling to understand. The numbers remain the same, stagnant. There was a commitment to promise to tie the fund to inflation. The numbers here don't reflect that. I'm struggling to understand how this is adequate to what we see as still an ongoing and very serious issue. The pollution continues. The suffering continues. I'm struggling to understand how this is actually reflecting those increases—

Hon. Greg Rickford: Those allegations are yours. But I can tell you that the initial funding envelope that our government brought after a thorough assessment by expert panels allocated resources to that program for three years, commencing in 2021, and that fund has the flexibility and, necessarily, actually increases the benefits for each beneficiary every single year at the rate of inflation.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Well, the numbers are flat for last year and this year.

I'll move on. I think it's pretty clear the people of Grassy Narrows are not satisfied. They're taking this government to court, seeking compensation.

I heard the minister talk about a whole-of-government approach to Indigenous matters or First Nations matters. I was wondering if the minister would care to share how much the government is spending on fighting Grassy Narrows in court.

Hon. Greg Rickford: First of all, I won't speak to the specific matter, and I would point out to the honourable member that if there's any comment to be made on it—that litigation would be separate from the mercury disability beneficiary program. I hope that she has gone far enough in her analysis to understand and acknowledge that.

That notwithstanding, we remain committed to a program that focuses on the needs of the beneficiaries. As they relate to specific beneficiaries in Grassy Narrows First Nations and Wabaseemoong Independent Nations, we will continue to remain committed—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Point of order.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Excuse me, Minister. We have a point of order.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Sorry. Chair, I'd like to reclaim my time.

I don't think the minister understood my question. I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt here. To be clear, I'm not talking about the mercury disability fund—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): I need to rule on your point of order, to begin. I'm going to allow the minister to continue to answer his question. I find his response in line. Minister, please.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you. I would just finish, then, so that the honourable member can continue with her inquiries, that we remain committed to a model that has

been driven by an expert panel that reflects the fact that, for several decades, a benefit was stagnant. As a matter of record and as a matter of fact, those benefits now were not only indexed at the time or the moment shortly after we came to government, but also indexed at the rate of inflation subsequent to that, and they will continue as such.

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Ms. Marit Stiles: I guess the minister didn't really understand the question. I wasn't asking about the mercury disability fund. I appreciate that he has given us even more information—or really not that much, but some more on that. But that's not what I was asking, and I think the minister knows that. I was asking about the costs to the people of Ontario of fighting the legal challenge by the people of Grassy Narrows. So I would like to know the cost—

Mr. Steve Clark: Point of order, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): We have a point of order with MPP Clark, please.

Mr. Steve Clark: The official opposition, on several occasions throughout the estimates process, have tried to talk about active litigation with the government, which I think you can see, with past rulings by past Chairs in estimates, is out of the scope of the estimates conversation that we're having this afternoon.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): I find the same. That's my conclusion.

New question, please.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I'm going to continue to ask about the costs. I'm asking about expenditures related to—because it's actually in here. We have a whole section on legal challenges, and so I'd like to know how much the government is paying and has estimated to pay to spend on the legal challenge by Grassy Narrows.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Mr. Chair—

Ms. Marit Stiles: This is an expenditures question.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Mr. Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Yes, sir.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'm happy to talk about the savings of legal costs. They may not be reflected in the estimates, but I can tell you that we have settled more land flood claims and treaty settlements in the past six years than previous governments for several decades. That is, as well, a matter of fact in record.

Ms. Marit Stiles: But with respect, Minister—

Hon. Greg Rickford: If you appreciate the cost of those historical costs—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Point of order, Chair. He's not answering my question.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): No, listen, MPP Stiles. You need to go through me to pose questions. You can't continue to pose questions to the minister when I already—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Point of order.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): He's trying to provide an answer, and you're interrupting the answer. Put the question and listen to the answer. That's the formula that has been successful for close to 12 ministries thus far. Please. Thank you.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Chair, point of order: I would like to reclaim my time. We have very limited time to ask these questions. And, with respect, the minister isn't actually answering my question about the Grassy Narrows legal challenge, which is what I want information about.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): So that we don't have cross-debate on this—I've already ruled on this once. For the record, if I feel it's out of the scope of the estimates, I'll find it that. My decision stands. So back to your questions on the estimates, please.

Ms. Marit Stiles: And I'm going to continue to ask about the estimates, as I have been doing.

I will move on to another important issue. I know this is not an issue—many of these issues aren't very convenient or things that the government wants to talk about. Eight years ago, an inquest was held after the tragic deaths of seven Indigenous youths in Thunder Bay. I'd refer everybody, by the way, to page 13 of the 2024-25 estimates book, which is what I'm going to be referring to here. Seven Indigenous youths in Thunder Bay died tragically. Their names were Jethro Anderson, Reggie Bushie, Robyn Harper, Kyle Morrisseau, Paul Panacheese, Curran Strang, and Jordan Wabasse. Minister, Jethro, Reggie and Jordan were only 15 years old. These were preventable deaths; the inquest made that very clear. And for eight years after this inquest, your government has failed to fulfill key recommendations that could have prevented further tragedies. I think we all know children continue to die.

I wonder if the minister could detail what the six recommendations are that haven't been fulfilled yet as part of the recommendations coming from the Seven Fallen Feathers inquest from 2016. Again, I refer to page 13 of the 2024-25 estimates briefing book.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Mr. Chair, obviously, I'm keenly aware of the names that were mentioned today—more keenly than the member might think, since I lived and worked in many of the communities that these young people came from, so I understand the circumstances surrounding them, and I am very familiar with the process that has followed from that. My work is to ensure—and I've attended proceedings with family members—that the province of Ontario meets, if not exceeds, its obligations not just with respect to the recommendations, but also the broader matter of, as you mentioned, ongoing supports for attempts and in some instances—more than one is too many—completed suicides. We take this very, very seriously.

Since 2020, we've made historic investment to the tune of \$3.8 billion over 10 years for mental health and addictions services, as part of our Roadmap to Wellness: A Plan to Build Ontario's Mental Health and Addictions System, importantly, a significant amount of money—more than \$500 million in new base funding for mental health and addictions services and supports; a targeted \$40 million for Indigenous mental health and addiction programming, including culturally safe and Indigenous-led community-based mental health and addictions services and supports, in many instances for the isolated

and remote communities, to offer them in their communities and provide immediate intervention and support for youth experiencing mental health challenges. It has resulted in the development of an Indigenous-driven opioid strategy, Indigenous-specific victim-healing services and expansions to Indigenous-governed primary care teams.

And to the member's question specifically, on the recommendations to support children who leave their isolated or remote First Nations community and attend schools in, for example, places like Thunder Bay—this is more than just a story about mental health; it's a story about social adjustment and the changing realities for a youth who has moved from an isolated community into a larger city and attends those schools. Earlier this year, as part of our commitment, we actually engaged in support for some specific items that were born from the recommendations, and provided real infrastructure and mental health supports to meet any challenges of Indigenous youth coming from those communities—landing in Red Lake, landing in Sioux Lookout, arriving in Thunder Bay, in the absence of any coordination, or simply that the young person fell through the gaps—that Nishnawbe Aski Nation would indeed be in a position to provide—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, Minister. We're going to go back for a new question, please.

MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you. I'd like to reclaim my time here.

I asked a very specific question; I didn't hear an answer—and for the record, I don't think I heard an answer to my previous question either. The minister didn't answer this question. I asked specifically which of the six recommendations had yet to be fulfilled as part of the Seven Fallen Feathers inquest. And I would like to know what the estimated expenditure is, or the budget, to fulfill those recommendations in the estimates 2024-25. I haven't heard that yet.

By the way, if the minister is unable to provide those details, I'm happy to hear from staff, but I'd also like to see a written response, if possible.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'm happy to provide a written response. And if the member wants me to read the six recommendations to you to use up the rest of the time, we could do that, or I could talk about and acknowledge the 61 recommendations that were directed at Ontario. I can tell you, to date, that we have, in fact, completed 55 of them, and there are six more in progress. We addressed 14 of them this past year.

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Highlights of the 14 additional recommendations addressed by Ontario in 2023 include:

- renewing multi-year funding to assist implementing education-related recommendations, and I alluded to that in my previous answer;

- continued funding that began in 2021-22 through the Ontario Health north to support three safe sobering sites for First Nations youth in Thunder Bay;

- investments in mental health and addictions programming, including a range of co-developed mental

health services for First Nations children, youth and families, in full co-operation and partnership with Nishnawbe Aski Nation; and

—continued work through dedicated trilateral First Nations health transformation processes with Nishnawbe Aski Nation and Canada to advance better mental health outcomes.

I mentioned earlier that enhancing First Nations schools off-reserve—at last year’s political table meeting, January 26, 2023, the province heard about the importance of sustainable funding to support First Nations students over the long term.

We continue to provide sustainable, reliable funding to NAN and NAN organizations that provide important services and have now, more than ever, been in a better position to provide these services through multi-year funding agreements, rather than the historical practice of annual funding, in some cases. This has provided greater certainty, job security for the organizations and the people who provide those services, so we’d like to keep it on track. This includes funding, \$800,000 per year—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you very much, Minister. That concludes the time for questions from the—

Hon. Greg Rickford: I have more information, Mr. Chair.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Send us your notes.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): We’re going to go now, please—

Interjections.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): I need everyone’s attention, please.

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): MPP Wong-Tam, please. Thank you.

We now are going to the government members. MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Minister, there has been a great deal of discussion around the Greenstone development area and the investments our government is making through your ministry and partner ministries to unlock key economic growth in this area of the province. Can you elaborate for us, please, and discuss some of the partnerships that you’re trying to explore with First Nation communities that are in close proximity to that area and how your ministry is supporting these endeavours to unlock the economic opportunities there?

Hon. Greg Rickford: It’s a great question.

It’s a bit of a story, and it’s an important one because it recognizes Ontario’s renewed and, I would say, refreshed efforts to ensure that any major resource development project is characterized by two important features: first of all, a recognition that most of this, whether it’s critical minerals or a base metal mine or a forestry development project, is more about the legacy infrastructure required to support it—I’m not just talking about roads and power corridors, broadband and the like. I’m also talking about the business opportunities. Some people call it the supply chain. It’s more than that. If you take, for example, the Greenstone area, there is a new centre of gravity for

mining-related activities. In fact, the four First Nations communities that I mentioned in my remarks have developed proposals, and they have subsequently been significantly funded by the province of Ontario to set up, for example, a commercial plaza right there at the Trans-Canada as you turn off to go into Greenstone and then parts beyond—up to Nakina, Aroland First Nation and, importantly, the winter road network beyond. It was a great experience to be able to go up there and, if you will, consummate this relationship with agreements and with announcements that support any and all of those activities. We have, quite recently, in fact, put the finishing touches on further agreements. We are, in some respects, in continued negotiations with some of these First Nations. Also, and importantly, to ensure that local economic infrastructure and capacity—importantly, corridors for electricity and road access are key features of the development of that area and the region beyond. That’s important. Those First Nations communities have spoken loud and clear. They are the only communities left on diesel generation. The ability to electrify—or perhaps some other kind of hybrid mix, as other chiefs in the region have suggested—is now being led through discussions from the Minister of Energy and Electrification and my office. There is an opportunity to develop non-merchantable timber for roads that ultimately have to be built to connect some of these communities.

We are in the advanced stages of agreements with a couple of First Nations communities north of Greenstone. It just reminds us of the central significance of Greenstone as what I mentioned: a centre of gravity, not just for mining, but in fact and mostly for northern development, as it pertains to the area proximal to the town of Geraldton and the four First Nations communities there, including Aroland First Nation—but as the point of departure for other legacy infrastructure that is required and is being asked of us by the First Nations communities farther north to be developed sooner rather than later.

We’re hopeful that even within the next couple of weeks we can move forward on the kinds of prosperity agreements with First Nations communities in the Greenstone area and farther north that will set into motion real activities to match the progress being made with the First Nations communities farther north; namely, Marten Falls and Webequie, and in addition, at the very least, Eabametoong, who have a strong expression of interest in joining some of the legacy infrastructure projects, like talking about road access and electrification, in the near future. Sadly, in the case of Eabametoong, they lost their school. We’ve been playing a key role in supporting the efforts to rebuild a school and then build a new school as quickly as possible. It reminds us that in the design of those communities—of that particular school—the plans still on the books are for electrification through diesel generation. If we go back far enough, to places like Pikangikum, we built diesel power—I was the federal minister at the time—to supply that school, and it’s enormous, a beautiful facility, but also as supplementary power for the community itself.

The good news is that Pikangikum now is tied to clean, green electricity. I know the member from Kiiwetinoong was there to celebrate in that exercise—he's very proud of the accomplishments of this government in an effort to complete Watay Power.

Those communities north of Greenstone, in my respectful view, deserve the right to have that kind of legacy infrastructure established in their communities.

So, Greenstone, yes, is kind of important, but for more than just the base metal operations, the gold mine that's there and that is providing real economic benefits in equity positions by the First Nations communities most proximal—but also setting the stage for building out a platform for the kind of legacy infrastructure and economic capacity to serve policy interests of the First Nations and the government of Ontario farther north.

1350

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you. I'll defer to one of my colleagues.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): MPP Clark.

Mr. Steve Clark: Chair, through you to Minister Rickford: Minister, thank you for being here today. I felt you might have been a bit rushed at the end of your presentation, and I thought you might have more to say about some of the Indigenous economic development programs in your budget. So I want to give you the chance to be able to elaborate on the programs.

Probably the easiest way to frame this is: What stands out to you, as minister, that's really important with those economic development initiatives—programs like the Indigenous Economic Development Fund and the Indigenous Community Capital Grants Program? Maybe you can let the committee know what stands out most for you, as minister, in those two programs.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I think what's most important about this, as a starting point, and I'm happy to provide some examples—I'm actually happy to put them in for the record in written form. The starting point here was born from, at the time, Regional Chief Archibald and her legacy to establish wealth and prosperity tables that would go on to design Indigenous-led policy options for the government to proceed with, that reflected their interests, the state of economic development at the community level—the capacity pan-regionally or pan-provincially to do that.

Regional Chief Archibald left, of course, to become the national chief. Her capable replacements, Regional Chief Hare and now Regional Chief Benedict, have remained committed to those prosperity tables, as we have, to put the designs on two things: a process derived from that table and First Nations political leaders and business leaders to ensure that their voices are not just heard, articulated and expressed in policy options for us to consider and fund, which, in the case of that \$25-million program I spoke about, is what we did, but also to impact the policy contours of the Indigenous Community Capital Grants Program and the kinds of things that we would be committed to funding. We've been able to develop the Antoine Algonquin Community Services Corp.—this is a 5,000-square-foot building in Nipissing that serves those

interests. We have the Constance Lake First Nation's design for a multi-purpose community centre.

Community centres in the smaller First Nations communities provide a number of important functions for the benefit of the community. They can serve as a building space for training programs, for economic development activities and various other activities. So whether it's through the capital grants program or, as I said earlier, from the complementary work that the Ministry of Northern Development does through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, they provide, in many instances, further support for some of these projects. I know the member from Kiiwetinoong was very pleased with the kind of growing support and profile of support for First Nations communities in that kind of infrastructure.

Along the same vein, Northwest Angle 33 in the Kenora-Rainy River riding detailed design of a multi-use building—increasingly, they're looking for a one-stop building, well-built, but with the kind of space to provide options for various different forums, especially consultation, in and for their community.

One of my favourites is the Ontario Native Women's Association. Cora and I do important work together. We are working on the detailed design of an urban Indigenous women's cultural healing centre. The \$150,000 there, as Cora will tell it better than anybody, is crucial for them to design and develop the kind of infrastructure that enables and empowers women—particularly women who are leaving their First Nations communities, often with young children—to find their way and navigate in bigger city centres, for a variety of reasons, whether it's an economic or job opportunity or education.

So these are a few examples. We also provide funding through that program for recreational infrastructure. This is about a quality of life in our northern communities writ large. Whether you're a township, a municipality or a First Nations community, our commitment is to ensure that families growing up and young people living there have the quality of life, which means access to youth centres, access to recreational infrastructure, that sometimes I think, frankly, we take for granted in, certainly, southern Ontario and parts of southern-northern Ontario, as I like to refer to it, as a region—more than 800,000 square kilometres large. It's an incredibly diverse program—or programs, and I featured but a few. Suffice it to say that, again, the contours of this program and the funding that goes out is driven by the priorities of the First Nations communities and/or their businesses. This is not a paternalistic approach. It is driven by the expressed views—expertise, if you will—of First Nations political leaders and First Nations business leaders. We feel it has put us in a great position to envision—going to our friend's question earlier about Greenstone—policy options to really build out new areas of growth and make sure that they include First Nations communities and First Nations businesses as full partners in equity and legacy infrastructure, not just for the benefit of their communities, but for the benefit of the young people who would build those legacy infrastructure projects.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): MPP Riddell.

Mr. Brian Riddell: How much time is left, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): You have four minutes and 41 seconds, sir.

Mr. Brian Riddell: Minister, thank you for your presentation today.

My question is in regard to the painful legacy of the Indian residential school system and how it has continued to negatively impact Indigenous communities.

Ontario has made significant investments in mental health and addiction services for First Nations communities across the province facing social emergencies and crises. As minister, can you describe the impact that these investments have on Indigenous communities and outline our government's plan to continue their support?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for this question. I realize we only have a couple of minutes, so I'll endeavour to highlight the program options and the spending that's tied to them.

I would say to you, first and foremost, that this is not just very personal for me, as somebody who has lived and worked in isolated and remote First Nations communities for close to a decade of my life, much of that in northwestern Ontario—but in becoming the Minister of Indigenous Affairs, as it was at the time, and discussing this with caucus and then cabinet colleagues, we have gone on to, in fact, lead the nation in no uncertain terms.

It was the province of Ontario that committed \$92.4 million to support the identification, the investigation, the protection and the commemoration of burials at former residential schools across the province—18 of them. It included \$32.1 million announced in the 2024 Ontario budget, which provided for \$17.1 million in funding for Indigenous communities for work related to planned and ongoing Indian residential school burial investigations, and \$15 million to support Indigenous communities in responding to the mental health, addictions and trauma impacts of this difficult work.

I've had a unique experience; it isn't one that most folks have been exposed to. In my private practice as a lawyer, prior to my time in both chapters of my political career, I represented Indian residential school survivors in their individual applications for various forms of abuse. I was a signatory to the Indian residential school agreement, and subsequent to that, I have made it my business to attend forums with survivors and ensure that I and this government are visible, that we are participants in the experiences and the stories that survivors tell, and that this is backed up by meaningful resources to ensure that this important work continues. The work is not done. There will be further investments required.

I'm confident, in working with our caucus colleagues and our cabinet, that we remain committed to supporting the process, the programs and services required to support—in my respectful view, one of the darkest, if not the darkest, chapters in the history of this country—and for our part, as the province of Ontario, to ensure that the 18 Indian residential school sites have the resources they need to support not just the survivors but, importantly, family

and community, who have struggled in significant ways with the legacy of Indian residential schools.

1400

Providing real infrastructure, bricks and mortar, as well as programming and support centred on mental health and addictions targeted for those survivors doesn't just come from my ministry. It comes, importantly, from a couple of different ministries, but most notably, the Ministry of Health and the great work that the Associate Minister of Mental Health has done with respect to First Nation communities.

Mr. Brian Riddell: Thank you for your answer.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): There are 11 seconds left, but I don't think that would permit time for another question and response—if you would agree.

Mr. Brian Riddell: I'll let that go, sir.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Okay.

We have another round of questions from the official opposition.

MPP Mamakwa, I understand that you want to ask your question in your official language. Is that what you would like to do?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: No. I'm okay.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): You would like to make a statement in your official language. Is that correct?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I may go into my language every now and then, but I will translate for myself.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): You'll start in English. Is that correct?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Yes.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Okay. You may start then, please—to the minister. The standing orders of the Ontario Legislature permit this.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch. Thank you, Minister. I've been listening intently on the information that you provided based on the estimates briefing book on the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs.

I'm going to ask this, regarding when we talk about expanding—I'm just wondering, how much did the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation spend on National Indigenous Peoples Day in June?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, the expenditures are reflected, first of all, in the ceremonial aspects of it. Internal to the government, obviously, it is, through the public service, a holiday. We provide support for a variety of activities, especially for the public service to engage in the kinds of education programming to create and raise awareness for the folks who work in our public service. These are the kinds of things that are very much a work in progress. The day itself has become something that actually is reflected in activities over the course of the week that that day is situated in. In fact, if you tie it to important days acknowledged by the province in June, our support for activities covers a variety of different events.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I think we need more than just activities.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I didn't hear that; sorry, Sol.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I think we need more than activities, when we talk about National Indigenous Peoples Day.

I want to go to my next question. How much did the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation spend on Orange Shirt Day, also known as the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation—similar question.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'm sorry; I missed the first part.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Orange Shirt Day—how much did you spend?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, I have the same answer with respect to the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. This continues to be a growing opportunity to raise awareness across the province. The Ministry of Indigenous Affairs provides funding to different First Nations communities across the province that provides the flexibility for them to use resources on activities that they determine—so they aren't necessarily reflected in a detailed analysis that would come from those estimates, and, similarly, the discretionary spending from First Nations organizations, whether treaty organizations or the like. I'm pretty sure you wouldn't want me to say that we control that spending. The right answer is that we continue to support the kind of flexibility for those communities and the various organizations to hold and to host, for the benefit of their own community members but also for the public, to increase the awareness of the importance of not just truth and reconciliation, not just Orange Shirt Day—but actually in hopes and aspirations to celebrate the tremendous contributions of First Nations peoples to the province of Ontario.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch, Minister.

You spoke at length on the previous questions from the government about former Indian residential school sites and how we look at the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.

Would you support a statutory holiday for the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in Ontario?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Funny; I was just talking to a guy about this a couple of days ago. Oh, it was you. Sorry. Gosh, I'm getting old. My memory is not just as sharp as it used to be.

As we discussed in our phone call and I think in a number of friendly discussions, this is a work in progress. It is one where I would take the counsel of and the advice of First Nations leadership. I pointed out to you that I had, as a matter of fact and record, discussions with a number of First Nations leaders, including and most notably the previous regional chief, whose own view at the time was that this ought not to be a holiday until every last child was accounted for through the process that Ontario has led the country in around the Indian residential school legacy. It's not my position to take a side on that, frankly, but it is my responsibility to balance the interests where there may be a difference of opinion. As you already know, the Ontario public service has this as a holiday to synchronize the federal public service's holiday. So there's an evolution going on here that points in a direction, but I still have to satisfy the groups of people I speak to, and, as I mentioned,

it includes First Nations leadership. There's a timing element to this for them, and that has to be respected. As I understand it, you have your own views and position on the importance of a holiday.

I just want to say this: We would not want to move to a holiday that would detract from what's actually going on right now, where kids are in school on that day, spending—in the case of my own little girls—almost the entire day, if not the entire week, learning about these experiences. Would we want to take one day off from that? Would a holiday dial back the resources? You go on LinkedIn and see what the private sector has invested in these—in raising awareness internally to their company for those workers. Is the answer giving them a vacation day for that?

1410

I think we would be keen, as a government, to pay careful attention to what the uptake was of the current services that we provide—at least online, and in other forms—for public service workers and understand what it is they do on that holiday. Would it be useful to canvass them and say, "We're just interested in trying to understand what meaningful activities you participated in on that day"—to gain an understanding and an appreciation of what an absolute vacation day would do to advance the profile of truth and reconciliation? It sounds like a debate; it sounds like a robust one, and it sounds largely positive to me. We understand that some jurisdictions recognize it as a vacation day; others don't, and there are a variety of reasons why. It sounds to me like we need data, feedback and consultation to try to understand better whether, in fact, a vacation day in the absolute form is required.

The final comment I would make on this, if you'll indulge me, is, as the grandson of a decorated World War II veteran—five years of service in five theatres of war—we saw that Remembrance Day increasingly and then at one point no longer became a vacation day outside of places like public service. What has evolved has been renewed efforts in schools and in the workplace, and the flexibility to provide moments in the workplace or in the community to celebrate the incredible sacrifice that was made in and at that war and other wars prior and subsequent to it. So, in effect, the fact that it's not the purest holiday it used to be, some would say, has benefited, especially younger generations—an opportunity to be in a classroom and learning about the sacrifices, as opposed to a vacation day, when they might not otherwise engage in those activities. Is that a fair response? I wonder. I know I'm not supposed to ask questions. But it's rhetorical.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): MPP Mamakwa.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Thank you for the answer. I know that's a typical response that I've been getting from non-First Nations Indigenous people who have no experience with Indian residential schools, on the treatment of our people.

I think there is an opportunity here, even further, to have it as a holiday. But further, if you're worried about education, I think maybe we should start looking at September

as an orange shirt month so we can continue that—not just for that particular day.

I want to go back to my line of questioning with regard to the estimates. How much did your ministry spend on consultations to determine the new name of your ministry? Adding “First Nations Economic Reconciliation”—how much did you spend?

Hon. Greg Rickford: First of all, we have only recently stylized “First Nations Economic Reconciliation,” and it was born out of—and I’m happy to use up the time to list the number of economic projects that have been funded through various programs of my ministry, and as I mentioned, the ones that are complementary from the Ministry of Northern Development.

In fact, quite recently, we have engaged in a couple of key activities in areas where there is surging opportunity for First Nations communities, whether it’s with respect to Volkswagen and the development of a world-class manufacturing facility in St. Thomas, Greenstone and/or the development opportunities in the north. Those kinds of funds would be reflected in future estimates, and they may not necessarily come from my ministry, because “First Nations Economic Reconciliation,” since we stylized the title there, is now in the process of assessing, based on engagement with First Nations communities, how much we would specifically allocate in my ministry and how much we would identify existing and new resources from all the other ministries on a go-forward basis. So it’s very new. It’s not going to be reflected in the estimates here today because, in some instances, it would be drawn from contingency; others through existing allocated funding in other ministries that I don’t have at my fingertips here, obviously, for good reason.

Increasingly, the ministry is being recognized as a central agency with respect to things like the duty to consult and, importantly, economic projects of such a significant scale—and importantly, beg us and compel us to ensure that First Nations communities are parts of those projects; for example, Hydro One’s major corridor projects and the 50% equity position rule that exists for them.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: How much time?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I’ll stand down there, because the member knows I could go on for a very long time about this—

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

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch. Thank you. I was going to ask for a definition of what economic reconciliation is, but at the beginning of your presentation, I think you described it.

Dr. Eva Jewell at the Yellowhead Institute identified the rhetorical move to the concept of economic reconciliation by conservative politicians as being about “creating conditions for Indigenous peoples to be more aligned with the capitalist system.” The Yellowhead Institute has argued that the concept of “economic reconciliation” has no direct connection to the 94 calls to action; the term is not mentioned in the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the concept is only referred to in one

subsection of the 92nd call to action. It sounds to me that economic reconciliation is like fake reconciliation, when I think about it, when I look at what you’re describing.

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

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: That’s what I was going to ask again. I would like to be able to get a written response on those three numbers that I asked for. How much had the ministry spent on national Indigenous day, Orange Shirt Day, but also the consultation to be able to determine the new name of “First Nations Economic Reconciliation”?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Earlier, in my summary to the members, I indicated the process to follow, and the deputy minister and his staff are diligently making notes of what I suggested. So, to your request—I’m sure that they made notes about that.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Your question, please? You’ve got four minutes and 23 seconds left.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Sorry; that wasn’t a question.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: No, that was a question on the written response, and then I’m going to the next one.

Interjection.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I’m having trouble concentrating because there’s a member here who’s speaking simultaneously with the member who, importantly, has the floor. Just so I can concentrate—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): All right. Thank you, sir. Next question, please.

1420

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: The Attawapiskat First Nation chief, Sylvia Koostachin-Metatawabin, is advocating for reserve lands, currently landlocked, to be expanded from 129 hectares to over 3,000 hectares. This change is urgently needed to address the housing crisis, which is interconnected with other issues, including the mental health crisis and opioid addictions.

My question is, when will this government of Ontario stop stalling and take action to accelerate the expansion of Attawapiskat First Nation’s reserve, and in doing so, address their housing crisis? Because they are continuing to beg for lands on their own lands.

Mr. Steve Clark: Point of order, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Do you have a point of order, MPP Clark? You need to put your hand up, please. I can’t interpret if you have it or not.

Mr. Steve Clark: My apologies. My hand is up.

I didn’t hear anything to do with the estimates that are before this committee this morning or this afternoon, with the member from Kiiwetinoong—again, Chair, if you can give some advice to all members that the questions need to be on the printed material that is before us this afternoon.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): I did at the very beginning of the meeting—two paragraphs devoted to that.

And I have a note here just reminding me to ask to make sure that you bring it back to the estimates—you’re straying outside of it.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Where in the estimates is that type of work, where you start the process of—what’s that

process called where you work with the First Nations, with the feds, and the province to be able to address—is your ministry part of that process? Are there resources there to determine those?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes, it is. In fairness, we're probably stretching this discussion a little bit, if it's squarely on the estimates. But I can say, as a ministry, we are very much seized of this question.

If I can say pointedly, the answer to his question, if I was to breach the rules of this committee, would be to say, on the matter of ATRs—not soon enough. We have prompted recently—as I think of it, this morning and a couple of weeks ago—with the regional chief on at least refreshing, resetting or re-establishing a table for ATRs in general as they pertain to the province of Ontario, and use that as a way of identifying specific communities that are, if I can say frankly, bogged down in the ATR process. As the member opposite knows from his own vast and rich experiences, in particular from the isolated and remote communities, this, for the federal government, has not necessarily translated into a priority that is reflected in speedy ATR processes—in fact, it's long in general, but it's always almost shorter for communities that are not isolated and/or remote. So that challenge the federal government has is that any table that they would attend—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Minister, the time is concluded for the questions from the opposition.

We're now going to go to the government members. MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Minister, I'm going to circle back to some of the things that you talked about earlier. In particular, under the Indigenous economic development programs, as well as my original question—you talked about some of the legacy infrastructure from Greenstone. You talked about Watay Power. You talked about the urban Indigenous women's healing centre and the Constance Lake community centre. All of those things would be built using skilled labour. We have a challenge right now, across all of Ontario, with skills development for individuals and getting more people into the skilled trades.

Do you believe that Ontario has put enough of a focus on apprenticeships and skills development and that that will actually increase the long-term career opportunities for Indigenous youth in skilled trades—because as you mentioned so many different programs or projects that will be touching on First Nations across all of Ontario, it would seem to me it is a logical step to say that the Indigenous community itself and the members of those communities should be able to partake in those career opportunities. Do we have opportunities, then, for the education for those individuals, so that they don't just have a job but they have a lifelong career to build the province?

Hon. Greg Rickford: The short answer is yes, but with a “but”—in my respectful view, the yes comes in the form of saying there are a number of different activities that we are doing to ensure that especially First Nation youth have, as a point of departure, an opportunity to do one of two things or both simultaneously, and that is to be involved in

a workplace environment that is complemented by skills training.

Back in my federal days—there's an organization out of Sioux Lookout that the member from Kiiwetinoong would be familiar with, the Sioux Lookout Area Management Board. The important work that we did there was to reconcile the fact that many of the years and many of my friends from those First Nations communities were building homes, construction, doing the electrical work, building power lines, working to establish telephone networks at the time—boy, that's dating me—and various other kinds of infrastructure in the project. They were doing Red-Seal-like work but not getting the recognition for it towards a Red Seal. So one of the things that we did at the time was to ensure that we had a path forward for them to reconcile those skills. The province of Ontario is still engaged in those kinds of activities across the province, primarily through First-Nations-operated management boards or other organizations, as they might be called.

The other important thing that we do—I might get taken to task for talking about northern development when we're squarely here—is, we provide an Indigenous Internship Program to situate Indigenous people in the workplace for an experience that may lead to a skilled trades training process.

But I think the most important thing that the government is doing now, and I would have to gather a specific financial resource on this—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Yes?

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I just want to highlight for the committee that the government question and the minister's answer is not related to anything that we're seeing in the estimates. So, just as much as the rules have been asked to apply to us—I'm going to suggest that the government follow the rules of this committee.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you very much. Minister, just bring it back to—

Mr. Dave Smith: On that point of order—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): I'm making a ruling. Go ahead.

Mr. Dave Smith: Sorry. On that point of order: We were talking about the expenditures of the ministry, specifically on projects like this. So, yes, having a workforce—going back to those expenses—is part of the estimates.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Point of order, Mr. Chair—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): No. We're not going to have cross-debate on it. My ruling is that the minister's response is appropriate. I would have said that before I took it. We're not going to have cross-debate. Understood? Thank you.

Go ahead, Minister, please.

Hon. Greg Rickford: The most important thing that we can do, and this goes to the member opposite's question moments ago, around the meaning of First Nations economic reconciliation, as we build out this ministry—I mentioned earlier an enterprise-wide approach, which

couldn't and wouldn't be reflected specifically in any estimates, except to say that the training component through the ministry of skilled trades and other things—it's kind of like one member's riding; I can't always remember the name of it, but I try my best.

In any event, more pointedly, these projects in my ministry and our resources are, in fact, dedicated to ensuring that there are carve-outs for First Nations training opportunities—the east-west tie, Watay Power. Some of the projects that are in progress right now through other ministries, one of them in mine—under northern development—focus on specific allocations of resources. Granted, they're not reflected in these estimates, but they do reflect, as a policy option and moving forward, my intention to be able to clearly articulate in financial terms the commitment to ensure that First Nations people have an opportunity to be trained on any given project. That's the role of our ministry as an increasingly, I mentioned, central-agency-type ministry. What is it translated to? Members would all recall the east-west tie. The entire labour force to build that corridor were First Nations. How cool is that, right? The 300 or 275 folks who built that line have moved into other jobs, building corridors or the skills that they developed, Red Seal or otherwise—whatever they were tracking for—to build legacy infrastructure. That's the role and responsibility of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation—to ensure that skills training is an essential part of it.

Then more squarely in my ministry—and I didn't go over all of them, but I've got a long list here—many of them include not just community centres for the purposes of providing real space, but some of them are actually education centres, through my ministry, to give and provide First Nations communities and/or their organizations that focus on these things the opportunity to deliver education, skilled trades and training opportunities. Not all of that comes from my ministry, and so the intervention that it's not fairly reflected in the estimates may be true, but it is fairly reflected in the work that we do to ensure it's there and in the list of projects that I'm happy to provide here, especially since a number of them are in the riding of Kiiwetinoong—the kinds of bricks and mortar that we're building to support them, in the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation and the Ministry of Northern Development.

1430

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

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Thank you very much, Minister and Deputy Minister, for your attendance today and for outlining all the important work you're doing.

Minister, I was up in your riding of Kenora, or part of your riding in Kenora, two Februarys ago for the opening of the Kenora Justice Centre. That's an example of a collaborative project with the local Indigenous bands. They own the property, and the province is running the courthouse. I think—going to your last question—where your ministry gets involved is the wraparound services that are in the courthouse to help treat the root causes that

are bringing these Indigenous, largely youth, and elders, into contact with the justice system. I'm wondering if you can talk, 18 months out from that opening, about how that justice centre is working and the impacts we're seeing from the wraparound services that are being provided.

Hon. Greg Rickford: It is true that we support the wraparound efforts, but my ministry is also closely tied to the Ministry of the Attorney General, where we coordinate service and programming, with the intention of ensuring that when Indigenous people interface with the justice system, we have optionality outside of a jail. Those statistics are still exceptionally high.

In Kenora, the justice centre—as you know, was a model and a pilot that identified a couple of different places in Ontario where the application of an integrated justice model that provided various supports that over the course of time we had recognized could (a) mitigate the impact and trauma associated with the justice system, but (2) provide a path forward for supports that would create not just an option other than jail, but a path towards a life with the tools to provide not only for that person, but potentially for their family and serve their community better. In the case of the justice system model, then, Kenora was identified as one of the first areas, because it recognized that—way different from the experience in Toronto, for example—we had an opportunity in Kenora to focus on the kinds of supports and services that are required for First Nations to get the supports they need; to demonstrate to the justice system that they were there, that they could be provided, that the individual would take advantage of them, that they were Indigenous-led. So all of the services are primarily led by local First Nations organizations. And it's working. The data that is coming out of it, including commentary from lawyers and judges who preside in that centre, is very positive. It has been very well received. In fact, other regions are paying close attention to the model in Kenora.

One of the things that we're working on with First Nations in other areas—we mentioned Greenstone—are elements of that model, particularly around the kinds of services and support programs that we can provide that are independent of the justice system model but have proved to be working in the justice centre. Again, whether it's the transformation of bricks-and-mortar buildings that represented something negative—for example, an OPP station in Greenstone, recognizing that the building could be transformed for a host of different programs and services for the benefit of First Nations community members, in and around the Greenstone area, as expressed by the First Nation leaders, could be used for other purposes. Those purposes and the services and programs manifestly come from the justice centre experience in Kenora.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: My supplementary: This happened 18 months ago, but as you've been talking today about the evolution under the economic reconciliation, the wraparound services and the supports that are being provided and the diversion from the justice system—is that all part of that economic reconciliation model?

Hon. Greg Rickford: As I said before, the First Nations economic reconciliation piece of my ministry is still very much a work in progress. The allocation of specific resources and targeted ones in future estimate committees will, I'm sure, be the source of lively debate, but as it stands right now, the exercise is to identify the current activities. We've been, obviously, pleasantly surprised, as a ministry, by the number of ministries that are taking these kinds of activities seriously and resourcing them appropriately, but identifying how then the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation can complement, top up or enhance those through more targeted programs and services in our ministry moving forward.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): MPP Riddell.

Mr. Brian Riddell: Time check?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): You have four minutes and 42 seconds.

Mr. Brian Riddell: Minister, I was quite interested when you mentioned the Watay Power transmission project. It's quite impressive—24 communities coming together to power 17. Can you explain some of the benefits, besides clean energy, that it's going to provide to these communities?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, yes, but I'd like to stay within the framework of what my ministry does and what we see and the resources that we currently spend on them.

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To be clear, Watay Power got the green light from this government in my capacity, at the time, as the Minister of Energy and the Minister of Indigenous Affairs. We think that was an important pairing. Certainly, having lived in the communities along the Watay Power corridor for a number of years of my life, I had a deep appreciation for the value of that. But moving forward, the role my ministry plays in this is coming through the winter roads network.

We spent some time with the member from Kiiwetinoong discussing the additional resources that we're putting into the winter roads, and I think the consensus was that he was very pleased that we were tracking to replace critical infrastructure for the winter road network, bridges and culverts, especially for the farther north communities like Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug—a culvert that was essential for a bridge for the winter road network. I remember talking to Chief Donny Morris at the time and engaging in a great and thoughtful conversation about how it's important to do those upgrades through our Winter Roads Program, but also for another important purpose, and that is to respond to almost a unanimous consensus among First Nations leadership in Nishnawbe Aski Nation territory to develop all-season roads. I've had several meetings about this, and they're transformative, because while Watay Power was an extraordinary opportunity for us to electrify communities, create stable critical infrastructure, get off of diesel power—horrible for the environment and brittle at the best of times as a source—to provide economic opportunity in those First Nations communities, to connect them with moving forward the

prospects of building, through our winter road network, in some instances, corridors that would provide for road access, electrification or some kind of hybrid transmission, as the Ministry of Energy and Electrification is working on—broadband.

This is not coming from me. This is coming from the First Nations leadership in the NAN territory. I think that's important. It's inspired by their own priorities and a bold recognition of the fact that there are several things that have impacted—including, and importantly, climate change—on the durability and the length of time that winter roads exist. And now a more serious conversation is developing around winter road networks, which are dealt with explicitly through my ministry—to support discussions for critical legacy infrastructure to support the ongoing viability of those communities, particularly the remote and isolated ones.

Mr. Brian Riddell: Thank you for your answer.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Thank you, MPP Riddell. You have 22 seconds left, but that's not enough, I would suggest, for a question and response.

We have a little over 16 minutes, and we're back to the official opposition—questions on the estimates, please.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I want to talk a little bit about the Indigenous affairs capital program delivered through the Indigenous Community Capital Grants Program, with the stated aim to support projects related to building or maintaining Indigenous community infrastructure—it talks about \$6 million. Why is the funding for the Indigenous Community Capital Grants Program limited to only \$6 million? And how many distinct projects benefit from this funding pool?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Let me be perfectly clear. Very, very recently, obviously, we announced \$9.2 million in grants and funding to support economic development through three programs: the Indigenous Community Capital Grants Program; the Indigenous Economic Development Fund and economic diversification; and the Regional Partnership Grant. In their aggregate, community capital projects that contribute to a sustainable social base and support economic participation in and on Indigenous communities—so that can be on- and off-reserve—are a central feature of the capital grants program specifically.

If the member would like, I can do one of two things. I can identify, project by project, what they are for his benefit; I can also provide them for him in writing, if he doesn't want me to go through each one. There are a lot of them in his riding, and I know he has been highly supportive of them.

Would you like me to break down that program?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Here's where I need your support—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): MPP Mamakwa, your question please.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: So 20 of Canada's 30 remaining boil-water advisories in First Nations are in Ontario—20 out of 30 are in Ontario. The people in Neskantaga First Nation have been living with a boil-water advisory for 29 years.

Last week, Liam Casey with the Canadian Press published an article about Neskantaga, where there is also inadequate housing, no high school, high rates of suicide, and an opioid crisis. One person he interviewed, Maggie Sakanee, said, “I’m always thinking about water, how to get it, when to get it, will it be enough, is it really safe. It’s tiring.”

How much funding from the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation is directed to ending the 20 long-term boil-water advisories in Ontario?

Hon. Greg Rickford: First of all, on the matter squarely with respect to water quality, it’s addressed through the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, and any role that the Ontario government plays is primarily through, and would be reflected, in those estimates. I’m thinking of the OCWA program.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Is that zero then?

Interjection.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Yes.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): I want to hear the answer.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Same here.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Let’s hear the answers. Thank you.

Hon. Greg Rickford: That’s important because it deals with the technical elements of water quality on-reserve. As the member knows, the federal government is primarily seized with this, but Ontario consistently and persistently provides economic support, whether it’s design or technical support services for water quality on-reserve, to complement the infrastructure investments that occur on or in the community. Furthermore, for any services provided off-reserve to monitor a collection of communities, for example—so it wouldn’t be reflected in my ministry but rather, appropriately, through the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks.

That said, obviously, resources that aren’t reflected as a line item—but in terms of human resources, time spent discussing myriad opportunities and challenges including water and water quality, in my role as the minister, is to support those discussions, especially as they are implicated in the design of any programs or policy options to develop legacy infrastructure for those communities, which include Neskantaga.

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

MPP Mamakwa, please—to the estimates.

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Mr. Sol Mamakwa: That’s what I was asking—how much funding, and I think I got my answer, with zero.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): You strayed out of the estimates. Narrow it down, please.

New question, please. MPP Wong-Tam.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you, Minister, for being here. I recognize that words without action are simply going to ring hollow, and I know that you’re a man of action, so I’ll look forward to hearing about the actions

that this government is taking to meet its TRC obligations. So I’m going to start off with that.

What role and specifically where in the estimates will I find the government’s TRC commitments to ensuring that its obligations are met? How do you track this progress, and where is this progress being publicly published so we can all see this progress?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, first of all, let me start out by saying that my ministry plays a lead role in ensuring that the recommendations are achieved, and if they are not, that we’re in pursuit of them. You’ll see by looking at the estimates that the ministry itself, in terms of the services and programs that it provides, is a relatively smaller ministry, but in fact, the lion’s share of our work is ensuring that other ministries that are implicated in those recommendations are tracking for them, so it would be normal for them not to—technically, as a recommendation—have a corresponding line item. I know that you’re very keen not just on estimates but good policy choices for any government, but in this particular instance, you might not expect it—to see a recommendation have a corresponding resource attached to it through my ministry. It’s why I said earlier that we are more akin to a central agency that coordinates good policy options that include making sure that we are tracking well for recommendations from various reports, not just the one you spoke of.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Minister, I recognize that when it comes to the truth and reconciliation file, you are the go-to guy. This is where the buck stops. If you want me to speak to other ministers about how they are delivering on the TRC recommendations, I guess I will have to do that at a different time. But—

Hon. Greg Rickford: No, you don’t have to. I’m happy to unpack it for you—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Very good. So let me give you another question that probably might be a little bit easier for you to answer. I suspect you will know this off the top of your head because I suspect it will be an issue that dominates your daily briefings. With respect to outstanding and active land claims, with respect to treaty negotiations that you are directly involved with—how many are outstanding today?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, let me just say that we have settled more land claims, flooding claims, and as I mentioned, treaties, negotiations—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Active, Minister?

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): MPP Wong-Tam, let’s listen to the answer, okay? You’ve asked your question. I want to hear the answer.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Point of—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): Stop now, please. You’re going to be out of order.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Point of order, Chair: I just want to make sure that I get the answer—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): You are now out of order.

You asked the question. Your question has been put. I’d like to hear the answer, please, from the minister.

Hon. Greg Rickford: These are very complex processes, and we have endeavored to ensure, through appropriate consultation and through the extraordinary work of our ministry and other ministries, that they're dealt with.

I think there are 50 active claims out there, but in actual fact, it's more important to understand—if your questions are tied to the estimates—the significant resources that have been made to settle historical ones. You haven't had the opportunity to attend ceremony for those, but I might be inclined to invite you to one or check with the community to see if you are welcome to come. I suspect that they would love to have you there, because they reflect the kinds of historical grievances that First Nations have articulated through specific claims, land and/or flood, or in the case of the Robinson-Huron Treaty, historical agreements between the federal government, the provincial government and a group of First Nations—or a specific one, in some cases. I think we've settled 18 of them since 2018. It has no basis for comparison in any government, regardless of their political stripe over the course of several decades—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you, Minister—

Hon. Greg Rickford:—since they started to become an instrument for—

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): MPP Wong-Tam, you have four minutes.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you, Minister.

With the 50 active claims that are still outstanding—in the estimates book, it says that you have put aside \$2.5 million in funding those negotiations. That was in the 2023-24 estimates book. How much is set aside for this year?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Sorry; for 2023-24?

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Yes, 2024—how much is set aside?

Hon. Greg Rickford: We've already booked—I think you pointed out the amount. We base it on the number of active cases and the resources required to address those individual claims. Any time that we have cost overruns, I would go to the Treasury Board for additional resources, should they exceed what any given fiscal year's allocation would be. I have never, in my entire career, faced a situation upon the signing of an agreement where the resources, since 2018, dedicated to support those negotiations have been an issue.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Minister, are you saying that you have the same amount allocated this year as you do for last year? Is that the answer?

Hon. Greg Rickford: It depends on how many active cases.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: You said 50.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Because we've settled 18. Now we don't have 68. I know the importance of mathematics to the official opposition party and how they address it—but 68 minus 18 equals 50. And especially, the two or three that we've settled in the past few months reduce that number. Does that mean that the number will go down? It may not. Things are becoming more expensive. Any time lawyers are involved, prices are in play. We want to ensure

that those First Nations—and I know the member from Kiiwetinoong would want to know that good lawyers are representing those communities in those claims. We've seen them very regularly on resources provided by the province of Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Lorne Coe): I'm going to allow one more question from MPP Wong-Tam.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you. I'm prepared to move on to a second question.

I would encourage the minister that if you don't have the information readily available—I'm going to make the request that everything that is not answered today, please provide that to us in writing. It is oftentimes difficult to track all these particular responses, especially when there are a lot of words attached to it. What I'm looking for are, specifically, numbers.

I want to ask you about transfer payments. Minister, because I don't have a lot of time, can you explain this to myself—and I think this might be of interest to a lot of Indigenous community members; certainly, for First Nations. Transfer payments are obviously important. We recognize that communities have to run services that their people rely on, whether it's health-related or education, housing, transportation—everything is critically important and every dollar matters. These communities can stretch a dime into a dollar.

In the ministry's public accounts for 2023-24, there are transfer payments that went to Facebook Canada—that was \$191,000 and more; Google received \$578,000, more than half a million dollars, from the government, and Pinterest received close to \$85,000. Can you briefly, without running the clock, explain to myself and the committee, why are the transfer payments set out this way? Also, why is Google receiving a larger transfer payment than most First Nations communities?

Hon. Greg Rickford: First of all, I don't run the clock. With all due respect, I've spent most of my adult life working as a nurse and a lawyer and a politician seized of matters related to First Nations people. It's an incredible amount of pride that I say that with—and if you want to chalk it up by running the clock, that's available to you, but I don't think it advances the important discussions we have. The person next to you has never approached any discussion he has had with me in that light.

That said—

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: You have 15 seconds.

Hon. Greg Rickford:—I am focused on the transfer payment agreements from my ministry that make the difference for the communities, whether it's programs and/or services. And I can tell you that our transfer payment agreement process is fast, efficient and effective.

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

Thank you for the questions.

This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs. 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, ministry administration program, carry?
All those in favour? Opposed? It's carried, Madam Clerk.

Shall the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs carry? All those in favour? Opposed? Madam Clerk, that carries.

Shall the Chair report the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs to the House? All those in favour? Opposed? It carries, Madam Clerk.

Thank you to the staff alongside me who are helping me through all the estimates—the 12 or 14; I lost track.

Thank you to the committee members who participated so well today.

Thank you, Minister, to you and your staff, for your responses today.

The committee is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1502.

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