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Chair: Mr. Peter Schiefke



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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Schiefke (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 115 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the committee commenced consideration of the main estimates, 2024-25.

Before we begin, I'd like to remind all members and other meeting participants in the room of the following important preventative measures. To prevent disruptive and potentially harmful audio feedback incidents that can cause injuries, all in-person participants are reminded to keep their earpieces away from all microphones at all times. As indicated in the communiqué from the Speaker to all members on Monday, April 29, the following measures have been taken to help prevent audio feedback incidents. All earpieces have been replaced by a model that greatly reduces the probability of audio feedback. The new earpieces are black in colour, whereas the former earpieces were grey. Please only use the black approved earpiece. By default, all unused earpieces will be unplugged at the start of the meeting.

When you are not using your earpiece, please place it face down in the middle of the sticker that you will find on the table. Please consult the cards on the table for guidelines on how to prevent audio feedback incidents. The room layout has been adjusted to increase the distance between microphones and reduce the chance of feedback from an ambient earpiece. These measures are in place so that we can conduct our business without interruption and to protect the health and safety of all participants, including our interpreters. Thank you all for your participation.

Colleagues, I would now like to welcome our witnesses. Appearing before us for the first hour, we have the Honourable Sean Fraser, Minister of Housing, Infrastructure and Communities.

Welcome to you, Minister. It's always a pleasure to have you here.

From the Office of Infrastructure Canada, we have Kelly Gillis, deputy minister.

Welcome to you. It's good to have you back.

We will begin with opening remarks.

Minister, I turn the floor over to you. You have five minutes, please.

[Translation]

Hon. Sean Fraser (Minister of Housing, Infrastructure and Communities): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Colleagues, I am pleased to be here to discuss the recent budget, and more specifically the measures to support infrastructure investments across the country.

[English]

It's good to be back. As I mentioned the last time I visited, I spent a few years sitting on this committee and find the work engaging. I'm glad to be able to continue to work with all of you to advance the work on behalf of Infrastructure Canada.

I'll obviously be focusing on some measures in the recent federal budget, but I'm happy to take what questions you may have from across the portfolio.

It's important to reflect on why investing in infrastructure is important. It has an opportunity to create jobs in the short term, certainly, but also to build stronger communities and more vibrant economies, if we make smart investment decisions that help set the stage for long-term economic growth and healthy, livable communities.

There are a number of different ways I can see this happening. You don't have to think too long before you come up with examples of the types of essential infrastructure the federal government funds in your communities. In fact, I hazard to guess there's not a member of Parliament here whose riding hasn't benefited from tens or perhaps hundreds of millions of dollars in federal infrastructure investment since 2015.

The different kinds of infrastructure that you'll see we tend to focus on includes municipal infrastructure, like water and waste water to help enable more housing output; public transit infrastructure to make sure people in communities both big and small can access the services and opportunities that set them and their families up for success; different kinds of road or bridge projects, which are essential for transportation networks in communities of different sizes; and climate-resilient infrastructure to make sure our communities are set up to withstand the challenges of more severe weather events with the changing climate. We're making investments to ensure that we have access to clean electricity not only to power our communities today but also to solicit industrial opportunities from clean-growth players in the economy who are pursuing clean-growth opportunities in Canada. There's also recreational, cultural and heritage infrastructure that makes our communities more vibrant and dynamic places to live.

As you go through each of these different types of infrastructure, you realize that, in most instances, there's some kind of corresponding federal fund to help out with the cost. I mentioned municipal infrastructure including water and waste water. This is essential not only to put people to work installing the pipes that are necessary for a functioning water and waste-water system, but also to make sure that we can build more houses and achieve what has become a major social concern for Canadians, particularly young Canadians, which is building out the housing stock to cure the supply gap that exists.

This is where the new Canada housing infrastructure fund comes in. It's a \$6-billion fund through which we're contributing to the cost of these municipal infrastructure projects. We're also negotiating with municipalities and provinces to ensure that, as we make investments in infrastructure, decisions are being taken at a more local level to ensure that we get the most out of the infrastructure that already exists. This is going to reduce the cost for municipal taxpayers but also make it cheaper for people to live in communities near services and opportunities and, frankly, the infrastructure that already exists.

Some of the ways we're going to do this include saying to our partners in negotiations that they can have access to this money if they adopt certain kinds of changes, including more as-of-right zoning, to make it easier to maximize the capacity of existing infrastructure. That includes placing a freeze on development cost charges, so that we don't just increase the cost of building new homes, which places the price further out of reach for people who are not already in the market.

The adoption of the designs in the upcoming national home design catalogue, and a series of other measures, will make it easier and faster to build homes and to reduce the cost pressures on the infrastructure.

Similarly, with public transit, we're not just saying we're transferring money carte blanche to build out a system with no federal input. We want to make sure that we have enough riders for those systems and we want to increase density within walking distance to those transit stations, so that we're building more sustainable public transit systems that allow us to get the best return for every dollar we invest.

When it comes to community and cultural spaces, it's important to me that we continue to invest, in particular in the green and inclusive community buildings fund, which received a top-up of \$400 million in the recent federal budget, on top of the \$4-billion program, which is helping ensure that communities have access to those vibrant community and cultural spaces.

There are a number of different funds that we continue to have on the table, whether it's the disaster mitigation and adaptation fund, provincially managed funds that are run through bilateral agreements such as the investing in Canada infrastructure program, or funds that support infrastructure that are run through other departments, like the national trade corridors fund or funds through Canadian Heritage for cultural spaces.

• (1110)

You'll see that this is a priority for the current federal government because we want to help with the cost of building communities, and we would be very happy to take what questions you may have on our plans to do so.

Thank you so much, everyone. It's a pleasure to be here.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We'll begin our lines of questioning today with Dr. Lewis.

Dr. Lewis, the floor is yours. You have six minutes, please.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis (Haldimand—Norfolk, CPC): Thank you, Minister, for appearing today.

I just want to turn to some of the issues you mentioned under housing. In the city of Toronto, since the Liberals signed their housing accelerator fund agreement in December 2023, housing starts have gone down by 21%. There were 6,568 housing starts in Toronto in the Q1 period of 2023. In the Q1 period of 2024, there were 5,188.

When you testified at the human resources committee, you confirmed that freezing or lowering development charges was not a precondition of any housing accelerator agreements. Can you confirm that freezing or lowering development charges was not a condition in Toronto's \$471-million HAF agreement?

Hon. Sean Fraser: First, through you, Mr. Chair, on the issue of housing starts in the first quarter, nationally, we saw an increase of 16%. We are seeing some downward pressure as a result of higher interest rates being priced into the system when people are looking to start or not start a project. That is why we continue to put more measures on the table, such as tax cuts, changes to municipal zoning and other measures to help speed up the pace of construction.

With respect to the issue of development cost charges, we've decided to do that through the Canada housing infrastructure fund. I'll note one point of contrast between our plans. The Conservative plan that was put forward includes no measures to address the issue of development cost charges. They're very real in terms of their impact on housing affordability and production, but we've chosen to do that a different way.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Minister, thank you.

I would like to move on to ask you about specific development charges, since you raised them. From 2013 to 2023, development charges increased in Toronto by 370%. On May 1, 2024, five months after signing the HAF agreement, Toronto raised development charges by an additional 20.7%.

The last time you were here at committee, you touched on this. However, I want you to commit today, Minister, to rectifying this and reimbursing those charges to homeowners in some capacity.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm sorry. Which charges do you mean?

You're talking about a reimbursement. There's no money that's come to the federal government to be reimbursed.

Could I just get clarity on what monies the federal government has received that you're seeking to have reimbursed?

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: The HAF agreement is specifically what I'm speaking about, Minister. You're familiar with that. Is that correct?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes, but as a point of clarity, the question asked for a reimbursement. You're talking about the housing accelerator fund, but you asked for the reimbursement to be paid to residents. I'm trying to figure out which money residents would have paid that you're now asking to be reimbursed.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: We know that taxes on development charges are a significant impediment to getting more houses built. Is that not correct?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes, I agree.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: It is a primary reason why projects are no longer pencilled out. Is that correct?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I wouldn't say it's a primary reason. It's one of several important factors.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: You have given \$4.4 billion without addressing this, and no homes have been built. Isn't that correct, Minister?

Hon. Sean Fraser: No, that's not correct. Neither the \$4.4 billion figure nor the fact that no homes have been built is correct. Both of those are incorrect.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Minister, isn't it a fact that the major impediment to building homes right now is these development charges? We have seen these costs increase, especially in the city of Toronto, by 370%.

You have not made a commitment to do anything to lower these costs for these residents. Will you commit to that today?

Hon. Sean Fraser: That's also false. In fact, this was a key feature of the recent Canada housing infrastructure fund.

I find it curious, as well, that the Conservative plan, which has been published and has draft legislation sitting and waiting to be

brought forward, has no measures that address the issue of development cost charges. We're literally the only party that has put forward a plan that includes specific measures to address them.

Again, if you're going to look for someone who has actually authorized these development cost charges, they're authorized for municipalities to use by provincial legislation. If you want to raise the issue with someone who has not been clear on their position, you can talk to your party leader, or perhaps you could write to the provincial Conservative government in Ontario.

However, when it comes to development cost charges, we have put forward a plan that will limit increases to the Canada housing infrastructure fund, compared to your own party, which, despite your questions today, has yet to put forward any plan to address these issues.

● (1115)

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Minister, that's not what the residents of Toronto are feeling.

Let me just ask about the CMHC situation.

Minister, how many CMHC staff have received bonuses? Did the CEO of CMHC receive a bonus this year?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't know the answer to how many staff members would have received bonuses.

I don't know if our deputy minister has that information.

Ms. Kelly Gillis (Deputy Minister, Office of Infrastructure of Canada): I do not. That would be through the board of directors of CMHC.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: There was \$27 million in bonuses in 2023 paid by taxpayers. These same taxpayers can't afford to buy these homes, yet they are paying executives and staff at CMHC for bonuses for....

There has been no increase in the homes built in 2023. Isn't that correct, Minister?

Hon. Sean Fraser: When it comes to compensation for those who work for Crown corporations of the public service, my view is that it should be independent of the elected levels. I think that's a recipe for disaster.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Don't you oversee that portfolio?

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Dr. Lewis.

Unfortunately, we're out of time there. I'm trying to respect everybody's time.

Next up, we have Mr. Iacono.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Iacono, you have six minutes.

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, Minister. It's always a pleasure to welcome you and to ask you questions.

The Canada Infrastructure Bank is delivering results, including clean energy investments. The bank is making investments in your province through a partnership with Nova Scotia Power and 13 indigenous communities. Can you explain the importance of that investment for your province?

Also, why do you think the Conservatives are opposed to supporting this kind of positive investment in First Nations communities and Atlantic Canadians?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Iacono, thank you for that question on very important issues in my province of Nova Scotia.

We have an opportunity to support communities in their vision for a very clean future. It's about using every opportunity for a green economy. Nova Scotia presents a tremendous opportunity. Comparable data from other provinces and elsewhere shows that electricity is not greener. However, communities have the ability to change the way they produce and use electricity, including indigenous communities. Through a new partnership with 13 Mi'kmaq communities, the Canada Infrastructure Bank is supporting investments in the creation of

[*English*]

clean energy storage sites for electricity by partnering with the utility, supported by the Canada Infrastructure Bank.

This is going to create economic opportunities for the communities that are participating in the initiative. It's also going to help launch a systemic solution to store more green energy as our renewable production goes up, but we still have a reliance on certain fossil fuels, including coal, which we need to transition away from quickly. This creates an enormous opportunity to support the economic imperative of helping Mi'kmaq communities that are seeking to grow, while at the same time greening the grid for everyone in order to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels and pursue additional industrial opportunities in the green economy.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Minister.

Minister, it's important to highlight the significant contributions of the Canada Infrastructure Bank across the nation. The CIB investments have resulted in a reduction of 8.3 metric tons of annual greenhouse gas emissions, investments in 46 indigenous communities, financing for 5,466 zero-emissions buses and broadband connectivity for over 434,000 homes.

Could you discuss the significance of these investments by the CIB throughout Canada?

Additionally, as you had also mentioned, what are the reasons for the Conservative Party's opposition to initiatives aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions?

• (1120)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Look, it's not for me to speak to the motivations that other parties may have. I know that there are notable Conservatives who have expressed support for the Infrastructure

Bank in the past and Conservative provincial governments that are now considering the idea of moving forward with their own complementary initiatives. To the advantages, I'm very happy to speak. This creates an opportunity to crowd in private funding to build infrastructure that serves a public purpose. It's an opportunity for us to solicit an initial private investment in projects that are going to achieve an important public goal and will help drive economic opportunities for Canadians as well.

When we see billions of dollars in money—that's paid back, by the way—invested in projects that can then, in turn, pull in billions of dollars of additional private capital, more things get done that otherwise wouldn't get done. The kinds of things that get done are high-speed Internet in rural communities, public transit in major urban centres, emissions-reducing projects in buildings and communities right across the country, and, as we discussed in response to your last question, economic opportunities for communities that too often have been left behind, including, as you raise in your question now, the opportunity for more indigenous communities to take part in a growing economy, particularly, a growing green economy.

From my perspective, from a social, economic and environmental point of view, the Canada Infrastructure Bank, given its recent uptick in volume and the pace at which it's operating, is checking the boxes on all three categories.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Minister.

You mentioned in your opening and in replying to my colleague across prior to this that we have a plan and they don't. Can you elaborate on that?

Hon. Sean Fraser: The answer I gave was in response specifically to development cost charges, given the questions that were coming in. Development cost charges create a very real increase in the cost of building, which is passed on through the economy in either higher home prices or a reduced number of homes being built overall, or both.

Despite the line of questioning we've seen, both today and by one of our colleagues, Mr. Aitchison, whom I have great respect for, at a recent committee appearance, there's not a plan from the Conservative Party to actually address development cost charges. They have tabled a housing plan. They have put forward legislation that their leader presumably will move forward with at some point, but it doesn't include anything for development cost charges.

I'm out of time, but I'm happy to pick it up should you wish to delve in further.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Iacono.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have six minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for being here today. You will only be spending one hour with us. I would have preferred that you spent at least four hours here, since there is much to say about your department, particularly in light of the last budget.

One item in this budget caught my eye, and that's where I'll begin.

The government announced its intention to use federal public properties to build housing. Post offices, vacant land and military bases are among the properties mentioned. That in itself may seem like common sense to many. There have long been questions as to why the federal government wouldn't dispose of its surplus properties. The government is finally signalling its intention of doing so, and we'll see what results that brings.

However, there are concerns that the federal government may decide not to comply with municipal bylaws. So, by retaining ownership of its land and granting leases to the Canada Lands Company, for example, the federal government would look after developing for building construction, while ignoring municipal bylaws and without consulting municipal residents.

Is that your government's intention?

Hon. Sean Fraser: No. Normally, I will seek opportunities to work with municipalities. It is not my role to impose regulations on them. However, if, during discussions with various federal government sources, we find available land to build housing on, we will negotiate the necessary terms with municipalities. The situation may vary from one project to another, but I will have to work with the municipalities.

• (1125)

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: So you intend to comply with applicable municipal bylaws for those properties. Is that correct?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I do not intend to circumvent local bylaws. However, if there are bylaws that make it difficult to build housing, we have programs for arguing why they should be changed. Those conversations are easier with Quebec than with other provinces, because we've reached a province-wide agreement there.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I ask because I saw a concrete example recently. A federal building is going up right in the middle of a heritage area in Old Montreal. The Department of Justice is not building it, but it will be a federal courthouse, which will include, for example, the Federal Court of Appeal, the Federal Court, the Court Martial Appeal Court of Canada, the Canadian Tax Court and other minor federal courts. The building will cost \$160 million, and its construction has begun even though residents in the area had no idea what was slated to be built there. The Government of Quebec was not aware of its architectural appearance, nor was the City of Montreal. No one was consulted, but the site is already operational.

So you can understand that when we see the federal government behaving like that, when citizens don't even know what's going to be built in a heritage neighbourhood and they see a 10-storey building suddenly appear, they have grounds to be concerned about what will be done under the programs announced in the budget.

Hon. Sean Fraser: As you well know, it varies from project to project. I don't know the details of that project at this time. If you would like more information, however, I can speak with my assis-

tants and we can get in touch with you. If you have any general concerns, you can contact my office, but I don't think it's a systematic problem.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: What I'm trying to tell you is that we are seeing concrete examples of federal buildings going up in very sensitive heritage areas without anyone being consulted. Neither citizens, nor heritage committees, nor the Government of Quebec, nor cities were consulted, yet a 10-storey building springs up in a neighbourhood. It's quite ludicrous, and I can't understand why the federal government would choose to operate like that.

What I would have liked to hear from you is that this situation makes no sense and that, when measures announced in the budget are implemented, you will make sure such situations do not reoccur, because people feel that the federal government has no respect for them. They feel that the government is remote and arrogant and that it could not care less about their circumstances.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I need to check the details of this project, but I have no intention of circumventing local bylaws. Working with local and provincial governments is important. In order to discuss this particular project, I would need to know the details. We can discuss it after the meeting, if you'd like.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: What I'm telling you is that municipal bylaws exist for a very specific reason.

In your last budget, you also announced that you intended to define real estate rules and planning regulations for every location in which housing will be built using federal funds such as the Canada Housing Infrastructure Fund, the Housing Accelerator Fund and the Permanent Public Transit Fund. However, not all of those regulations fall under federal jurisdiction.

So you will decide on behalf of the cities what will be built and where. Is that correct?

The Chair: There are 15 seconds left, Minister.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Barsalou-Duval, it's hard to provide an adequate answer in 10 seconds, but I think it's essential to work with our partners at other government levels to carry out projects and move forward with building housing for people, while respecting the jurisdiction of other levels of government.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister and Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

The floor is yours. You have six minutes, sir.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister and Ms. Gillis, for being with us today.

I met recently with sustainable transportation advocates. They expressed dismay that the latest budget contains a cut to a couple of key transit funds, the first of which is the zero emission transit fund, which is used to purchase electric school buses and electric transit buses. In their view, this fund has been reduced at a time when the impacts of climate change are being felt right across the country.

The commissioner of the environment and sustainable development has highlighted that your government is not on track to meet its emissions targets. Why is this government cutting back on the purchase of clean technology at a time when we need to be accelerating our action on climate change?

• (1130)

Hon. Sean Fraser: I have a different characterization of how you've just described things, because as we see certain programs come online, the total amount that we're investing in green public transit opportunities is going to significantly increase.

I can understand why looking at one fund in isolation can lead you to the conclusion that there's less money in this fund this year as compared to last year, but when you look across the system, which is what's most important to me, my concern is whether we are doing what we can to maximize the value for the investment to get the emissions reduction and improvements in public transit. I expect, depending on the specific projects that a municipality may apply for, there may be enhanced eligibility, as the permanent public transit fund comes online, to get some of the same projects done, because we've determined that it's a more efficient way to have the federal government support clean transit opportunities.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: These funds were announced at certain amounts, and now those amounts have been reduced, so I don't see.... The permanent public transit fund is also a fixed amount that's been announced. I'm wondering why the zero emission transit fund went from \$2.75 billion to \$2.4 billion. It seems like it should be going in the other direction, that we should be adding more money to these funds. Is it because it was undersubscribed? Is there not interest from municipalities in securing these investments?

Hon. Sean Fraser: As part of the effort when we were seeking to refocus government spending, we were looking at the funds that best delivered the outcome that we believed they were designed to achieve. When it comes to public transit, the reason that you're seeing such a ramp-up of the permanent public transit fund—which is the main way we fund public transit for communities—is that we think we can get more done that way.

Over the next number of years, particularly as the funding comes online in 2026, you're going to see a consistent, reliable program for the long term that municipalities can rely upon, rather than having a program that appeared for a short piece of time. That program is undoubtedly going to show some positive results, but our belief is that when it comes to supporting sustainable public transit in the long term, the public transit fund is a much larger-scale, consistent delivery mechanism.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: There are issues with the permanent public transit fund, but I'm not going to have time to get into them in this round.

Similarly, the rural transit solutions fund, which is one that impacts communities in the riding I represent, went from \$250 million to \$150 million. Three years after Greyhound pulled its service entirely from Canada, and we have poorer bus service across the country in rural communities than we have had in 50 or 60 or 70 years, the government is pulling back on the key offering that they promised was going to help communities recover from the withdrawal of Greyhound services. Why has the rural transit solutions fund been reduced? Surely the permanent public transit fund is not going to help rural communities deliver bus transport.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Certainly it should, and that's actually part of the way that we're.... Some of this policy work remains to be finalized, but that's actually one of the reasons that we want to make this shift. That fund, again, as a newer item that we moved forward with a number of years ago—also the one that my community can rely upon without a pre-existing municipally owned public transit system—didn't necessarily see the speed of uptake that I would have hoped for or thought would happen.

By establishing more reliable criteria as part of the permanent public transit fund that smaller communities are eligible for, which we're working to develop right now, we expect that there will be a simpler, more consistent way for communities to access public transit funding. For example, communities may need a small bus to do a loop around a smaller series of communities rather than a sub-way system or a rapid transit bus system. You should expect to see, as the rollout of that fund comes to life, that there will be a feature designed specifically for rural communities that will be longer-term and more reliable.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Moving to a transit challenge a little farther from the place that I represent, I know folks in Toronto are very concerned about the aging subway cars on the Bloor line. The province and the city had a plan to replace those cars, but Toronto had to cancel its RFP because the feds wouldn't come to the table with the funds required to make the purchase. This affects not only commuters but also people in Thunder Bay who work for Alstom, who would be manufacturing these subway cars.

Why has your government allowed this key transit infrastructure to crumble and left workers wondering about the future of these key manufacturing jobs?

• (1135)

Hon. Sean Fraser: When we're going to make major investments in a city's public transit system, which is primarily within a municipal or provincial range of jurisdiction, we want to make sure that we're setting it up for long-term success and that we understand what the long-term plans are. We don't have a pot of money on the side to pull out of just to put towards a problem as it arises when it comes to public transit.

Maybe others think that would be desirable. My view is that we should provide long-term sustainable funding for a long-term sustainable plan. That's where the permanent public transit fund is going to come in. We expect, although money flows in 2026, that we'll be able to book our first deals this calendar year because of the lead time to book and pay for some of the infrastructure required to build a system, so Toronto—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you very much.

The Chair: I apologize. I just want to make sure that everybody is getting the same amount of time.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I want to respect the time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

Next we have Dr. Lewis. The floor is yours once again. You have five minutes, please.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Minister, I want to ask you something specific about something that falls under your portfolio.

As the minister who is responsible for housing and accountable to the national housing agency, is the CEO of CMHC receiving a bonus this year?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't typically involve myself with the compensation of employees of Crown corporations.

I don't know about the status of bonuses. I would point out that there's an interim CEO right now and that it may be a unique structure.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Do you not see the budget?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm sorry. I could just as easily yield, although my deputy has just shared with me that it's a Governor in Council process and that the bonus hasn't actually been determined.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Do you think it's fair that the CEO of CMHC receives a bonus in a year when housing starts are down?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I think it's important that elected officials don't try to interfere with the compensation scheme set for public servants. I think it would be a bad practice. From my perspective, if there is a process that people were following, that process ought to be followed.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Performance could be dismal and your government would still think it's okay for public servants or CEOs of Crown corporations or agencies to receive bonuses, even though performance is abysmal.

Hon. Sean Fraser: The performance standards reflected in a given bonus structure should reward performance.

There are housing conditions that are challenging that may be inside or outside of a person's control. Again, once you have a pro-

cess designed to reward performance, that process should be abided by.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: When performance is down, there should be bonuses—is that what you're saying?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Those are your words, not mine.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Can we go back to one of your previous answers, Minister?

You stated that the \$4-billion housing accelerator fund that I referred to was incorrect, but that's actually on page 45 of the budget.

Are you going to correct that response, Minister?

Hon. Sean Fraser: You said \$4.4 billion. Four billion dollars were administered previously. Not all of that money has actually been spent, because most cases involve a municipality that only gets a 25% upfront payment so that we can protect against the risk that a community wouldn't follow through on the performance they've agreed to in the particular agreement, so—

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: How many houses have been built as a result of that \$4 billion that you referenced?

Hon. Sean Fraser: The specific funding leads to systemic changes that will have an impact over time. The communities that we've partnered with have indicated that over the next decade, they expect an increase of 750,000 building permits issued across Canada.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: We've seen property taxes and costs increase for homeowners in places like Toronto while the federal government is dishing out \$4 billion in a housing accelerator fund.

Will you commit today to not giving out any housing accelerator money to cities that increase development charges or other taxes on homebuyers?

Hon. Sean Fraser: When we deal with the development cost charges, we use the Canada housing infrastructure fund that was in the recent federal budget, not the housing accelerator fund—

• (1140)

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Is that a yes or no, Minister?

Hon. Sean Fraser: We're funding infrastructure differently. The housing accelerator fund agreement was not designed around development cost charges but around permits and zoning practices.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: There's no commitment today, then.

I'm going to move on with my questions.

Your government has set some pretty ambitious targets to build homes for Canadians. Your government's goal is 3.9 million homes in 2031. That's 1.096 homes that must be built every minute. That's 65 homes per hour.

We've been here for just over 30 minutes. Has your government built 32 homes in the last 32 minutes, Minister?

Hon. Sean Fraser: My view is that people who would suggest that a problem is impossible to solve shouldn't try to interfere with the person who's trying to actually solve it.

If your goal is to throw up obstacles every way, feel free. Have a field day. I want to solve the housing crisis.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: I just need an answer to my question.

Hon. Sean Fraser: My goal is actually based around what I think it will take to solve it.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Has your government built 32 homes in the last 30 minutes?

Ms. Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Sean Fraser: As I expect, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: I'm sorry. I have a point of order. We're going to stop the time.

Go ahead, Ms. Koutrakis.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: I just think that all of us around this table should be very respectful when we address each other, especially when we have a minister here who's very forthcoming, very honest and transparent, and who is trying his very best to answer us in a very respectful manner.

Mr. Chair, I think we should tone it down and allow the person who is answering the question to answer before we interrupt.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: May I respond, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis—

Mr. Angelo Iacono: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I have another point of order from Mr. Iacono.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: I'd like to also add to what my colleague has just said. It's also regarding translation.

When we have two people speaking at the same time, it becomes very hard for the translators. It would be important to allow time for the questions to be asked and time for them to be responded to so that translation can be done properly.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Iacono.

Mr. Strahl, do you have a point of order?

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC): Yes. It is on the same point of order, Mr. Chair.

Ministers are given the same amount of time to respond to the very limited amount of time that we have for questioning. We certainly don't need Liberal MPs policing our tone when we're questioning a minister who is accountable and responsible to Parliament for his or her portfolio.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Strahl.

I will say, colleagues, just as a quick reminder, that translation is extremely important. I want to remind everyone that we do need to give time for our translators to hear the question and the response. I know we're all trying to get in as many questions as we can to the minister who is here with us today. It occurs every single time, so I would just ask that we give the opportunity for the minister to hear the question and respond, and then we can start with a second question.

With that, Dr. Lewis, I'll turn the floor back over to you, and I'll add 15 seconds to your time. You have 45 seconds left.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: I'd like to comment on the point of order. Are you going to take that out of my time?

The Chair: No, I'll let you comment, but please do keep it minimal, because everybody still has questions they would like to ask.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Thank you.

I respect my colleagues' comments; however, there is nothing impolite about holding a government to account. That is my job as opposition. We have very limited time, and I will definitely try to be respectful of the translators, because they do need to do their job. I appreciate the comments.

The Chair: Dr. Lewis, I'll start your clock now at 45 seconds.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Minister, how many homes has your government built in the last 30 minutes?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's important to recognize that the government isn't the entity that is constructing the homes. We are putting incentives on the table to create changes to the rules that make it easier to build a home. We have funding on the table, but it's actually the private sector and non-profits that build the homes, not the government.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: How many projects has the Infrastructure Bank completed in the last seven years?

Hon. Sean Fraser: There were 56.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Are they completed?

Hon. Sean Fraser: There would have been an agreement for the funding to roll. Again, the bank itself doesn't complete the projects. It would finance the projects, so that would be how many it financed.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: You consider giving out money as “completed”, as a benefit and a result and as an outcome. Is that right?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Again, those are your words, not mine.

That's how many the bank would have financed. The projects would be at various stages of completion.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Varying stages—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Thanks to you, Dr. Lewis.

Next we have Mr. Fillmore for five minutes.

Mr. Andy Fillmore (Halifax, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, Minister and Deputy Minister, for joining us today.

Minister, I was very pleased, as many of us were, to see the discussion of federal lands in budget 2024 being positioned as a part of the solution to the provision of housing, including affordable housing in Canada.

You and I have discussed my proposal to use Canada Post lands on the Halifax peninsula, so thank you for keeping that in focus.

This idea of leveraging federal lands to address the housing crisis, through my lens, accomplishes two key things: It can mitigate the cost of land in transactions, which is a huge driver of cost for the end-user, but it's also going to improve the supply of land that's already serviced.

With those two things in mind, could you lay out for us what your department's plan is to use federal lands? While you're answering, could you also mention the challenges the program faces, the big opportunities that you see and what you think some of the timelines might be?

• (1145)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thanks. Before I go any further, I should acknowledge the advocacy work you've been doing on that specific parcel in Halifax, which helped inform part of the decision-making around what we want to do as we design some of these programs.

I think you've described it the right way. There are, largely, two benefits to having the strategy we've adopted around federal lands. The first that you mentioned is cost. There are certain costs that are within the control of governments or that the government can introduce a solution to, and there are others outside the scope of what the government can influence directly.

In the case of land, we actually have an opportunity to reduce the input cost, because the price of land, particularly in large urban centres, is driving up the cost and reducing the number of homes that are ultimately built. By putting land on the table, we can help reduce that cost, provided we get a good deal. If you sell that land off, you don't necessarily get the same value proposition because you don't pull the cost of land out of the input cost of construction. We're proposing, in most instances, to move forward with long-term leases offered at a low price to reduce the cost of construction in exchange for commitments around affordability.

On the supply piece, in addition to making land available that would not otherwise be made available, we have the opportunity to do more. More broadly, properties like the Canada Post project, which I know you're interested in, have an opportunity to contribute more supply, over and above the usual disposition process around federal lands. That's because when you enter into a leasing arrangement, you have an opportunity to expand the scope beyond properties that are declared surplus and to include properties that are not exclusively for housing and could still serve some other public purpose. When you look at the possibility of adding homes to a property that a Canada Post location could have, for example, you see that it could still serve as a Canada Post location, but it could also serve as a housing development. Where that's possible, we don't want to limit ourselves only to those that have to go through the lengthier disposition process, in which you also forgo the cost advantage of making lands available, without adding that input cost towards construction.

Mr. Andy Fillmore: Thank you. I appreciate the expansion of the idea there.

Staying with the notion that the federal government can reduce costs for municipalities, I recently spoke at the annual meeting of CUTA, the Canadian Urban Transit Association, in Halifax, and I can tell you that this group is very excited and very happy about the prospect of a permanent public transit fund. Increasingly, we're

hearing from municipalities that there's a sense they are bearing a disproportionate share of the cost of population growth and are having to build infrastructure and services, including transit systems, to support new population growth. I think this kind of federal program can help municipalities that have no ability to borrow money or carry debt and have limited means to raise money.

With that preamble said, how do you see the public transit fund helping to address the costs of growth that municipalities are facing?

Hon. Sean Fraser: This is really important, and FCM is doing some really interesting work around a new proposed municipal growth framework. Until we figure out the long-term shifts between levels of government to fund municipal infrastructure, we want to be there with money to help ensure they can pay for the assets that help achieve the different goals we all want to see: a more livable community and more opportunities for people to access employment and services, all the good things that come with a healthy, functioning transit system.

We wanted to put money on the table to ensure communities wouldn't have to consider the other kinds of costs that were discussed. I know that during a previous set of questions around development cost charges, property taxes were raised as well. Municipalities have a fairly limited number of tools right now, so if other levels of government—provinces and the federal government—don't step up with reliable long-term funding, municipalities will have to ask themselves where that revenue is going to come from, or they will have to choose not to grow, and choosing not to grow right now would be a horrible mistake. Canada is poised for enormous success, and it's going to be led, in a lot of ways, by cities and communities of different sizes. If we're going to expect them to achieve a level of growth that promotes certain national interests, we will have to make sure they're funded to build out supports to allow a community to thrive.

I would go on, but the time has been exhausted.

• (1150)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Fillmore.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, earlier I talked about the fact that you are interfering in the management of cities. To give you a more fulsome demonstration of this, let me read you an excerpt from the Union des municipalités du Québec's response to the tabling of the last federal budget, published in an article entitled "Budget 2024-2025: an attack on municipal independence":

Following the tabling of the federal budget 2024-25 by the Minister of Finance of Canada, the Honourable Chrystia Freeland, the Union des municipalités du Québec, or UMQ, denounced a number of attacks on municipal independence, particularly in land use planning and taxation.

The Union reiterates its major concern about the urgent need to renew the Gas Tax and Quebec Contribution Program (TECQ), mainly funded by the federal government, which expired on December 31.

"We deplore the fact that a number of measures introduced by the federal government encroach on municipal jurisdiction. When it comes to transportation, housing and infrastructure, adding conditions slows down the deployment of measures and does not take local realities into account. For example, waiting to renew the TECQ hinders the completion of infrastructure projects. It is high time for the federal government to stop adding new conditions and to come to an agreement with the Government of Quebec," stated Martin Damphousse, UMQ president and mayor of Varennes.

Do you think it's a good idea to start a war with Quebec municipalities a year before the federal election?

Hon. Sean Fraser: In my opinion, it's important to ensure that federal investments pay off. This is not an obligation for a community. We're making changes to make it easier to build housing. In my opinion, it is essential to remember that, if I make the decision to invest in creating housing or building infrastructure, it's important to get results. I think that's reasonable.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: What Quebec municipalities are telling you is that this budget does not suit them at all. In their view, it is blatant interference in their affairs. That is also what the Quebec Government is saying and what we are saying.

What will happen to that money if everyone says no? Are you going to keep the money in Ottawa? Quebec taxpayers pay taxes to Ottawa, and they need housing, like everyone else. That said, you do not wish to stay within the federal government's jurisdiction and you are encroaching on the cities' jurisdiction.

Hon. Sean Fraser: In fact, Quebec's Bill M-30 prohibits a municipal organization from entering into an agreement directly with the federal government. I have begun conversations with my Quebec counterpart in order to move discussions forward. The goal is to reach an agreement with the province to facilitate the construction of infrastructure and increase the number of housing units. Thus far, however, the discussions have been inconclusive. There is work to be done, and that's normal.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister and Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours for two and a half minutes please, sir.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I'm going to try to fit in two questions. Minister, I hope you'll be brief.

Page 50 of the budget says, "\$1 billion available directly to municipalities to support urgent infrastructure needs that will directly enable housing supply."

There are several rural communities in northwest B.C. that need to replace their waste-water systems. I think of Port Clements on Haida Gwaii and Fort St. James.

There are two aspects to this question. One is how you define "directly enabling housing supply", recognizing that communities also have infrastructure deficits and failing waste-water systems.

Second, what is the timing on this billion-dollar fund, and how can communities access it?

Hon. Sean Fraser: This funding will be spent this fiscal year. The process will launch, I expect, in the fall, and we hope to make decisions by the end of the calendar year. The process to apply won't open for a few months because we're now designing a program.

• (1155)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: That's fantastic.

I'm going to give my remaining minute to Mr. Morrice, who I understand has many questions.

Mr. Mike Morrice: Thank you, Taylor.

Thank you, Chair.

Minister Fraser, I'm surprisingly back to ask about the two-way, all-day GO between Kitchener and Toronto.

I want to start by saying thank you. I appreciate the time you and your team have been making to have conversations about calling for accountability from the province. In this case, funds have already been committed from the federal government. As you know, 40% of the project funds have been committed already. It's a project that was committed to over a decade ago, and we still don't even have a timeline from the province.

In my last conversation with folks on your team, they committed that in your next meeting with your provincial counterpart, this would be on the agenda. Can you confirm that this is the case, that it is on the agenda for that next meeting? Also, if you have a date for that meeting, I would love to hear about it. If that's not something you have top of mind, that's okay too, but I would love to know when that meeting is and whether a two-way, all-day GO between Kitchener and Toronto is on the agenda.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you.

The next meeting that's currently scheduled will be between June 26 and June 28, though it's possible that there could be an additional meeting sooner than that.

Because the agenda isn't formally set, it wouldn't be fully honest to say it's actively on it, but I'll commit to you here to make sure that it gets on, although it just may not technically be done from a formal point of view.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Morrice.

Next we have Mr. Barrett. Mr. Barrett, the floor is yours. You have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Minister, who is Andrée-Lise Méthot?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't know them personally. I understand they've held a few board positions within different federal organizations.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Ms. Méthot was announced as a member of the Canada Infrastructure Bank, appointed by the Trudeau government. She came from Sustainable Development Technology Canada, which is also known as the billion-dollar green slush fund. Part of the reason it's known as that is some of Ms. Méthot's work, including her financial interest in a group of companies that she voted to give \$42 million in taxpayers' money to.

Do you endorse her serving on the Infrastructure Bank?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I understand that this person has resigned, so there is no such service to endorse.

Mr. Michael Barrett: On what date did Ms. Méthot resign?

Hon. Sean Fraser: She resigned on April 16.

Mr. Michael Barrett: It is pretty plain that what we see is corruption, or it would be perceived to be corruption. People appointed by the government who are serving on boards are rewarded after it's revealed that there have been these kinds of insider dealings. Multiple other people on the board who were GIC appointments were under investigation by the Ethics Commissioner and were then appointed to the Infrastructure Bank, a larger pool of money with which they could further their own private interests and advantage themselves.

This individual offered their resignation. Was that following an announcement by you of an investigation into their dealings while serving on the Infrastructure Bank?

Hon. Sean Fraser: No, I've made no such announcement of that kind of investigation.

I would just urge caution. I don't know this person. I do know that there were some reasons to look into the work at SDTC. While inquiries are ongoing, to make allegations of corruption just in a general way, I think, sets a dangerous precedent.

I would urge caution on all members in advance of any explicit findings because of the impact that those kinds of statements can have on a person permanently throughout the course of their life.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Sure. I appreciate your caution, Minister, but Ms. Méthot's personal interests and the decisions that she took while serving on the SDTC board are a matter of public record. She then went on to receive what is a prestigious—

The Chair: Mr. Barrett, just one second, please. I'll stop your time. I have a point of order from Mr. Bittle.

Go ahead, Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Chris Bittle (St. Catharines, Lib.): I'm just curious about who Mr. Barrett is subbing in for. All of the regular members of the Conservative Party are here. If they're here, they're participating.

I was just wondering who Mr. Barrett is subbing in for.

Mr. Michael Barrett: On that point of order, Chair—

The Chair: I'm just going to respond to Mr. Bittle.

He can be present even if other members are here.

Mr. Chris Bittle: He can be present. Can he be participating?

The Chair: He can't be voting.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Okay.

• (1200)

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'm an associate member of the committee, Mr. Chair, and I'm able to participate as a member of the official opposition. If my colleagues are generous in sharing their opportunity to question the minister with me, I'm able to do that, provided I abide by the rules of the committee and don't cast a vote when regular members or permanent members of the committee are present.

The Chair: That is correct.

I'll turn the floor back over to you and I'll start your time. You have two and a half minutes left, sir.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'll go to Ms. Koutrakis.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: I'm questioning the relevance of this line of questioning, because we are here on main estimates. I'd like to find out what the relevance is.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis.

I'll ask all members to try to find a way to segue or explain the line of questioning as it relates to the main estimates.

With that, I'll turn the floor back over to you, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: It's beyond rich. One member of the government doesn't want me to even be able to ask questions, although it's of course established that I'm able to do so. Another member is saying that my questions aren't relevant when we're asking the minister responsible for infrastructure about appointments to the infrastructure board.

It screams cover-up when we're talking about questions of corruption that have been well reported in the media and are rightly concerning for Canadians who have a hard time paying their bills, and yet we have insiders who are lining their pockets while they have plum government appointments and are making decisions that personally benefit themselves.

Minister, would you be able to table for the committee, following your appearance, the resignation letter or official notice from the Infrastructure Bank showing that the resignation did in fact take place on the date that you indicated?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't have a copy. I'd be happy to undertake to request that the Canada Infrastructure Bank provide that to me.

Mr. Michael Barrett: That's excellent. The concern and the reason that I raise this, of course, is that Dr. Lewis very ably put questions to you about the completion of projects by the Infrastructure Bank, and so we have questions about the organization's efficacy and having confidence in it.

With respect to any future appointments, we'd of course expect that those appointments are given to people who have not been implicated in questions of self-dealing. However, will you commit today to undertake a review of decisions that Ms. Méthot participated in while serving on the Infrastructure Bank so as to be able to assure Canadians that no further insider dealing was undertaken by her?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm happy to look into it. Some of the elements might be properly administered by the bank in the first instance, as an entity that operates independent of government; but I have no reservations about looking into it. I think we all owe it to our constituents to make sure that there's not inappropriate use of taxpayers' money, even when it's run by an arm's-length organization and the money's paid back.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Barrett, and thank you, Minister.

Finally for today, we have Ms. Koutrakis. The floor is yours. You have five minutes, please.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being here with us today.

I just want to add to the question of my honourable colleague, Mr. Bachrach. We ran out of time; he shared his time with another colleague here.

I want to go back to the Canada housing infrastructure fund and the billion-dollar investment. Could you share with us how this fund will accelerate the construction of water, waste-water and solid waste infrastructures, which are critical to housing development? I'm specifically looking at how the fund will do that.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sure. There are two ways.

In some communities, the lack of infrastructure is a bottleneck to housing growth. They literally don't have the service capacity to add new homes in particular parts of the community, and they don't have the financial means to pay for those services to be established.

The first and most direct way is we're going to help pay for the infrastructure so they actually have the water pipe that will ensure that water comes out when you turn the tap. That's the most direct way. However, it's also going to have a very positive and indirect benefit: It will inspire more home building in a given community because we're restricting eligibility to communities that adopt certain kinds of changes that make it easier and faster to build homes, including freezing development cost charges; including adopting more as-of-right zoning, so you don't get tied up in council for a year to get an approval for a basic project; including adopting designs from the national home design catalogue that will make them easier to get through the process; including adopting changes to the building code that will help develop consistency in home produc-

tion through designs that are more affordable for the person to live in at the end of the day.

There are a number of different ways, both direct and indirect, but we're putting money on the table to incentivize changes to the rules, and that money can be used to build the infrastructure that makes it possible to build houses.

• (1205)

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: I'm wondering, Minister, about this. In my home province of Quebec, there is the M-30 law, which you alluded to earlier. How is your ministry working with the Province of Quebec to see how the Canada housing infrastructure fund could benefit that province? What is the relationship like? What are the conversations like?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's been very positive in my experience in dealing with my Quebec counterparts since I've had this portfolio, and in fact before. I find that for the most part, they want the same thing. They want to address the housing crisis as a provincial government, and they would like federal support to do it.

As a result of certain changes that make it more difficult to engage directly with communities, it can sometimes go more slowly than I would like or more slowly than it does with other provinces. However, ultimately, if we can find a partner at a provincial level who's willing to make certain kinds of changes, then we get a better deal.

There's an irony behind lots of these funds. Because they tend to be in areas of provincial jurisdiction, lots of the changes that are incentivized—though we have the authority to do it in this fashion—could be made by provincial governments without federal support; however, they weren't happening. We're creating incentives to inspire those kinds of changes, because we know that as a direct and predictable result, there will be more homes built as a consequence.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: How am I doing on time?

The Chair: You have two minutes left, Ms. Koutrakis.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Okay. Thank you.

We also know the importance of tying infrastructure dollars to building more homes near public transit. You've alluded to this in your answers to several questions. Can you share with the committee the importance of creating high-density housing close to rapid transit, and are those asks by various jurisdictions, provinces, territories?

Hon. Sean Fraser: This doesn't seem to get a lot of push-back, because most people see the good sense behind moving forward with this kind of an approach. The conversations will vary between provinces or in a given city, but I think it's going to be successful, for two main reasons.

One, there's a lot of money being put on the table in exchange for commitments to change certain rules, pursuant to my last answer, that will result in more homes being built.

Second, transit systems don't work if people don't live nearby to use them. If you actually increase density within walking distance to a transit system, you're setting up a system for success that won't require continued support for its operation, because it can be self-financing. If people who use the system live within walking distance of the system, more people will use it.

When you have those ridership numbers climbing up, the ability to fund and maintain the assets within the system will become much easier and the funding will be much more reliable.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Koutrakis.

Thank you very much, Minister and Deputy Minister, for appearing before us today and for so generously answering the questions posed by members.

Colleagues, I see the bells are ringing for a vote, so we will suspend until the vote is over, at which time we will welcome members of the department.

With that, the meeting is suspended.

- (1205) _____ (Pause) _____
- (1255)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

Colleagues, appearing before us in the second half of today's meeting, we have, from the Office of Infrastructure of Canada, Kelly Gillis, deputy minister; Janet Goulding, senior assistant deputy minister, community policy and programs branch; Alison O'Leary, senior assistant deputy minister, communities and infrastructure programs; Michelle Baron, assistant deputy minister, corporate services and chief financial officer; Marco Presutti, assistant deputy minister, investment, partnerships and innovation; and Lindsay Boldt, senior director, strategic policy.

I believe we have agreement to limit our questioning to one round.

We will begin that line of questioning with you, Mr. Davidson. The floor is yours. You have six minutes, sir.

Mr. Scot Davidson (York—Simcoe, CPC): Oh, good morning, or good afternoon. Look at that. We are pushing the day along here.

Could someone answer a relatively simple question? According to Stats Canada, what is the fastest-growing area in Canada now?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: There are a number of fast-growing areas in Canada, according to StatsCan. I don't have the exact community that is the fastest growing, but I have a—

Mr. Scot Davidson: The number-one fastest-growing community is actually East Gwillimbury in my riding of York—Simcoe, which I call the soup and salad bowl of Canada.

The minister was here earlier, and he said that the housing accelerator fund will address the housing crisis in this country and across the country. However, all of the northern six municipalities in York region received no housing accelerator funds, which is very concerning to me as a member of Parliament standing up for York region.

I had all six mayors reach out to me. They were very concerned about this. I'll tell you why this matters to me. I think everyone here would agree that the carbon tax affects rural Canadians disproportionately to urban Canadians. I'm in a riding where we have no subway, no transit and no streetcars. That matters, because the riding of the minister who was just here has been rolled back to rural as a result of census data, and my riding is now classified as Toronto.

That matters to me when I look at the housing funds because, first of all, we don't get the rural top-up now, which is very concerning for me. We are classified as Toronto. If the federal government is going to classify us as Toronto.... We didn't receive any housing accelerator funds, but Toronto received half a billion dollars' worth. I have a first nation in the middle of Georgina Island, the Chippewas of Georgina Island, that is on a boil water advisory. We're lacking infrastructure funds for that. We have no housing funds and we're not getting the rural top-up on the carbon tax.

I'm just trying to set the picture as to why people in my community feel like we're on the outside looking in. I wonder if you could comment on why none of the northern six municipalities in York region received any funds.

- (1300)

Ms. Kelly Gillis: I can't comment on the six in particular. What I can say is that in budget 2024, there was an additional top-up for the housing accelerator of \$400 million, so additional communities will get funding from that particular program.

However, that isn't the only program for housing. In budget 2024, there are a number of different programs that communities can avail themselves of that will benefit and incentivize the building of housing.

Mr. Scot Davidson: I don't want to interrupt, but for example, the town of Georgina... From a recent announcement, we've learned that out of 544 applications for the federal housing accelerator fund, only 179—approximately one-third—were selected for funding. Asking municipalities to dedicate significant resources to prepare this complex application with a low chance of success would seem to not be in the public interest.

That's from my mayors. They spent an enormous amount of resources with third parties. That matters because the smaller communities that are applying for these funds from the federal government are spending enormous resources on third parties that we don't want to see municipalities spending money on. The minister talked about fees going up and taxes going up. Now we're spending huge amounts of money to apply for these applications, and the towns aren't even receiving the funding.

The mayors have all told me that when they reach out to the government for a response on this, there is no response. They just didn't qualify, but they don't tell you why you didn't qualify.

Again, in the big picture, that matters because this Liberal government has increased the public service by 40%, yet we're seeing worse outcomes for communities like mine.

I'm trying to lay the picture out here for everyone and so that my colleagues across the table understand. In York—Simcoe, which is one of the fastest-growing ridings in Canada, we are on the outside looking in.

I wonder if you could comment on this. It's another example of red tape preventing meaningful projects from being funded in our communities.

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Thanks for the question.

What I can say is that with the work being done, they might have an opportunity to use the application for the additional \$400 million, and also use the thinking or thought process that went into that application to benefit from the changes. They might be able to expedite the building of housing in their community and benefit from the work.

CMHC has also posted best practices from the housing accelerator fund to have a larger ripple effect from the lessons learned by communities that are advancing different initiatives, in order to have an impact in communities beyond those that were funded.

Mr. Scot Davidson: The Town of Georgina, for example, applied to the green and inclusive community buildings program, but they were not selected for funding. In the letter, your department provided a contentious explanation for why they were not selected. There was no opportunity for them to clarify or even follow up on the application. I had a direct call from the mayor of Georgina on this. It was very concerning, in that they spent thousands of dollars on external consultants to provide the necessary energy reports. This was very involved, as you said. They were told the information was not satisfactory, and that was the justification for denying the funding.

I'm speaking here on behalf of the residents of Georgina who are asking why, again, they were denied on this. They were denied on the housing accelerator fund and denied on the rural top-up. I'm try-

ing to show you the urban-rural divide that this government currently doesn't seem to understand. That's becoming very concerning.

The Chair: Give a 15-second response, please. We're over time.

Ms. Kelly Gillis: For the green and inclusive community buildings program, again, there was a top-up. Both of these programs were significantly oversubscribed, and that's why there was a \$500-million top-up. That application can be looked at again through the additional funds provided in budget 2024.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Deputy Minister Gillis.

Next we have Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Rogers, the floor is yours. You have six minutes, sir.

Pardon me, Mr. Rogers. I believe you're on mute, sir. We'll get you to restart.

Perhaps, colleagues, if you'll permit me, I'll turn the floor over to Mr. Barsalou-Duval while we sort this out.

• (1305)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have six minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Gillis, thank you for joining us.

The last federal budget stated that the federal government aims to tax vacant land, which the minister also mentioned earlier in his speech. Generally speaking, it is up to municipalities to tax properties, since that falls under their jurisdiction.

Do you have a legal opinion on the constitutionality of such a measure?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: We are not proposing a land tax measure.

We want to use properties to build affordable housing, and we want to see how we can work with other levels of government to provide access to housing using federal properties in various provinces.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: The budget makes it very clear that it intends to tax vacant lands. Is there a legal opinion on the constitutionality of such a measure?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: That tax should be subject to a consultation with the Department of Finance. I don't have the details of that proposal.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Very well.

The last budget also mentions that you intend to work with the provinces so that they comply with the National Building Code if they want to make changes to their own code. I know that Quebec has its own building code, but not all provinces do.

Have you already drawn up a list of the changes you would like to have made to the building codes of each province?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Thank you for the question.

In terms of codes and standards, a task force is working with the National Research Council of Canada, as well as with resources from all the provinces and territories. It will complete its work in December 2025. The provinces and territories will then have the power to adopt the codes that were jointly established.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I'm trying to understand. You're telling me that the task force will finish its work in December 2025, but that negotiations are currently under way with cities and especially with provinces to obtain funding. With regard to the notorious Canada Housing Infrastructure Fund, changes to the provincial building codes are being requested, but we don't know what those are yet. So the provinces have to accept an unknown quantity.

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Provinces and territories are working together to make changes to the codes. They are the ones proposing amendments and are aware of all the discussions on the subject. We are in the process of establishing the program, which will be adopted once the provinces and territories have signed on. They have until January 1 to do so, as mentioned in the budget.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: That's if there is an agreement, obviously.

I would like to raise another point with you. The budget mentions that you would like to see a nationwide standard lease agreement. Quebec already has a standard lease created by its government. Does your lease template already exist, or is it still up in the air?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Thank you for the question.

We are currently establishing a consultation process. We will work very closely with provinces and territories to identify best practices and to determine what will be appropriate to use as a national standard within the provinces and territories. If Quebec has something excellent to use, we will propose it in our examples.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you. I have no further questions, Mr. Chair, and I'll give the rest of my time to Mr. Morrice.

Mr. Mike Morrice: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

Mr. Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: You have one minute and 40 seconds, sir.

Mr. Mike Morrice: That's wonderful. Thank you, Chair.

[Translation]

Thank you again, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

Ms. Gillis, continuing on my quest with respect to getting more information on two-way, all-day GO train service between Kitchener and Toronto, I really appreciated time with folks on your team and the information they have provided over the last number of months.

I understand that there is an oversight committee whose responsibility is to ensure collaboration between the federal government and the provincial government. As you know, I'm looking for more accountability from the federal government on the funds that have been allocated already to get this project built. We don't have a timeline yet.

Can you at least share more about how often this group meets, the substance of those conversations and how it's working towards completion of the project?

• (1310)

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Overall, regarding our programs, we have oversight committees at senior levels of government, at the assistant deputy minister level, that meet to go over the array of projects that we have with provinces and territories. For the project you're specifically referencing, we have another committee that's at more of a working level, a senior director level, that meets with Metrolinx and the province on a quarterly basis to follow up on the progress.

It is a large, complex project that's being done in phases. They've recently met, and they'll be meeting again in two weeks to continue to follow up to see the level of progress and make sure that there's appropriate oversight for the contribution agreement that we have with them.

Mr. Mike Morrice: Regarding those conversations of that working group committee at the director level, is part of that conversation with respect to accountability from the province when it comes to ensuring that those funds get spent in a way that has the project...?

As you know, we don't have a timeline from the province. The federal commitment was back in 2017. Is it part of the conversation from officials to ensure that as funds are being disbursed, commitments are getting made for ensuring the project will be completed?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: There are oversight and accountabilities for all parties. We, Metrolinx and the Ministry of Transportation Ontario are there for the discussions on the progress being made.

Mr. Mike Morrice: Could I ask you to table the schedule for those meetings in 2024?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: I will follow up to get you whatever we have on the schedule, yes.

Mr. Mike Morrice: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have Mr. Bachrach. Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours. You have six minutes, please.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our officials for being here for the second hour.

The community of Houston in northwestern B.C. recently got news that Canfor, a large forestry company, isn't going to rebuild the sawmill in their community, as previously promised. It's a decision that's going to have serious economic and social implications in that community. This is a community of about 3,000 people.

One key social service provider in Houston is the Dze L K'ant Friendship Centre. They're working to replace and rebuild their building, which provides services for families, seniors and elders. They provide child care, counselling and a whole suite of social services that are going to be needed even more, given the economic news. They received a funding commitment under the green and inclusive community buildings fund. However, construction cost escalations since that time mean that now they're at a point where they have to dramatically scale back the scope of the project to fit within the budget, yet they need the original project to be built. They're put in this really untenable situation.

How does Infrastructure Canada approach situations like this, when construction cost escalations outside the control of the proponent make the original project, which met the need of the community, unfeasible? Is there room to work with the proponent to ensure that the objectives of the original proposal are met?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: What we can do will vary, depending on the type of program that we have, as well as the stage and phase of the project and where it's at. For that particular project—although I don't know the details of it—the proponents can certainly follow up with us, and we'd be happy to work with them on determining what the options could be.

Do we have funds on the side for cost escalation? No, but what we can often do is look at different options, whether it's phasing or future opportunities. As well, within ICIP—the investing in Canada infrastructure program—we might have different opportunities, so what we can or cannot do really depends on the program as well as the stage of the project.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I'll certainly follow up. This is the green and inclusive community buildings fund, and I think this is a situation that many proponents are facing. In this particular small community, the implications for the provision of social services are really important, particularly for the indigenous population, which is their focus, of course. I'll follow up with you on that.

To shift to transit, the minister's responses to my previous questions indicated this shift towards the permanent public transit fund and away from some of the specialized transit funds that have been in place in the past—the zero emission transit fund and the rural transit solutions fund. When you add up those targeted funds, plus the ICIP transit stream, is the permanent public transit fund, at \$3 billion a year, going to be an increase beyond what those programs were providing in the past?

• (1315)

Ms. Kelly Gillis: In the investing in Canada infrastructure program—ICIP—there was approximately \$20 billion for transit. Then, when we look at some of the targeted funds of \$2.75 billion for zero emission, \$250 million for rural, and then the active transportation fund for \$400 million, that would be just under—I'm just going to add in my head—about \$23 billion to \$24 billion. Ten years of the permanent public transit is \$30 billion, so if you look at it over a period of time, then you are looking at significant investments in permanent public transit.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Sticking with the transit theme, I was surprised to learn that the actual transit service capacity across the country has gone down. In 2022 the service capacity was 7% lower than in previous years. At a time when billions are being invested in capital, the actual ability of transit authorities to deliver transit services has decreased. How does the federal government view this challenge?

The idea here is a mode shift of getting people out of their cars and onto public transit and ensuring that people can get to work, go shopping and do these trips that they have to do, yet it seems to really be compromised by the fact that transit authorities can't provide the service with the budgets they're given. What's the role of the federal government in ensuring that those objectives are met?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Investments in public transit, for many reasons that you've already stated, are very important. We've come out of an unusual time, in the country and in the world, of a pandemic, when people were not using public transit and were working from home. There were shifts on the fare box from that period of time.

We work very closely with transit authorities and communities on what their plans are for the future, and the need, as we look at a growing economy, for the mobility of our communities and for investments in permanent public transit. When we look at the capital plans for communities across the country, we see that they're significant, and I know that this particular program will help them achieve those objectives.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: In 15 seconds, just to comment, it seems like the demand has rebounded but there are still transit assets that aren't in service. There are 1,700 fewer buses in service than before. In fact, there were fewer buses in service across the country in 2022 than there were in 2013, and it seems like the challenge is operating funds. The challenge isn't ridership; the demand has rebounded, but the operating support isn't there.

That's the ask: It's for the federal government to look closely at that, given the emissions reduction objectives and given all of the promises of public transit.

I understand you're not going to have time to respond, but I just wanted to give you a clear indication of where I was coming from.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for your forbearance, as always.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

Finally for today, I'll turn the floor over to Mr. Rogers. I believe the audiovisual technical issues we were having have been resolved, so the floor is yours, Mr. Rogers, for six minutes, please.

Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.): I apologize for that, but anyway, we're back, and I just want to say welcome to the officials.

I have a couple of questions around infrastructure in particular.

Back in early 2000 and later in 2000, I was mayor of two different municipalities. One of the issues was always about infrastructure, and particularly about rebuilding infrastructure after major storms and hurricanes. We experienced, in about a 10-year span, at least three of these, which wiped out roads and buildings, bridges and culverts, and so on and so on.

What I want to ask you, Ms. Gillis, is to explain the work that Infrastructure Canada is doing to create and invest in sustainable infrastructure that will withstand some of these storms. Also, what is currently known about the state of Canada's infrastructure, particularly infrastructure that's vulnerable to major storms and climate change and so on?

• (1320)

Ms. Kelly Gillis: That is something that we definitely focus on significantly. I like to describe it as a value chain, because we know that if we continue to build the way that we've built in the past, our infrastructure won't withstand the climate shifts that we're already living through and that we're going to live in during the future.

Infrastructure Canada has invested and worked significantly with the National Research Council, provinces and territories, and the Standards Council on resiliency and the kinds of building materials and the kind of code we should be building towards as we look at our infrastructure.

We've also been supporting climate tools through the FCM and what we're going to be releasing in the fall, so that municipalities that often have very limited staff have more capabilities to access the information and the technology that they need to understand their critical infrastructure and understand what investments need to be made.

Then, of course, we've had the disaster mitigation and adaptation fund, which has supported just over 100 projects for over a couple of billion dollars, and actually, this past Friday, more proponents were informed of their success in receiving funds through that particular program for just under a billion dollars.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Ms. Gillis, you mentioned the disaster mitigation fund. That's extremely important to the rural coastal communities where I live in Newfoundland and Labrador, in Bonavista—Burin—Trinity. We have many small fishing communi-

ties and towns that are vulnerable, and exposed coastlines that have been ravaged by some of these storms, so that's extremely important going forward.

I'd also like you to share with the committee how programs like the green and inclusive community buildings program are benefiting Canadians across the country. Maybe you have a specific investment that is particularly impactful that you might want to share with the committee.

Ms. Kelly Gillis: With regard to the importance of community services and community hubs, whether it's providing health services or areas where people and kids can gather and play sports, especially in our rural communities where it often is a focal point for the community, that particular program has been able to help a number of communities across the country with those investments.

I don't have an example right at hand right now, but we have a map on our website that showcases all of the investments within that particular program with a lot of details of what the overall project values are, what our funding is and the status of each of the projects.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Thank you very much for that.

As a former member of the FCM in four previous years, I really appreciate the focus our government has put on developing infrastructure funds to support municipalities and communities across the entire country, because it's crucially important that we maintain the infrastructure in these many small rural communities.

Just last week, for example, I was able to announce a couple of projects under the housing accelerator fund for the towns of New-Wes-Valley and Port Rexton. It was for a total of around \$1.4 million to allow these towns to put in the infrastructure and do the planning and strategizing needed for future housing developments in their communities.

These are small rural communities. I know that sometimes it gets frustrating, because these are small communities, but these are the communities that provided the leadership. They are municipalities that filled out the applications, and they were successful in this case. I truly appreciate that, because there are 256 small communities in the riding that I represent. To have a couple of these acknowledged, as small as they are, is truly appreciated.

Again, on these infrastructure programs, I'd encourage you to keep the focus on that as we go forward, particularly for small rural communities.

Mr. Chair, I'm not sure if there's time left, but I just wanted to make those comments.

• (1325)

The Chair: We appreciate those comments, Mr. Rogers. You even got a "Hear, hear!" from the room. I wanted to share that with you, sir.

Unfortunately, the time is up.

Colleagues, I do see that the bells are ringing for a vote. Before we adjourn, colleagues, we do have some quick housekeeping.

First, do I have unanimous consent to vote on the main estimates in one motion?

I see no objection, so we will proceed.

CANADIAN AIR TRANSPORT SECURITY AUTHORITY
Vote 1—Operating and capital expenditures.....\$1,194,373,969

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

CANADIAN TRANSPORTATION AGENCY
Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$50,218,650

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT
Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$1,010,983,880
Vote 5—Capital expenditures.....\$248,381,570
Vote 10—Grants and contributions.....\$2,115,729,155

(Votes 1, 5 and 10 agreed to on division)

MARINE ATLANTIC INC.
Vote 1—Payments to the corporation.....\$159,010,958

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

OFFICE OF INFRASTRUCTURE OF CANADA
Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$257,762,976

Vote 5—Capital expenditures.....\$18,774,480
Vote 10—Grants and contributions.....\$5,541,224,138

(Votes 1, 5 and 10 agreed to on division)

THE FEDERAL BRIDGE CORPORATION LIMITED
Vote 1—Payments to the corporation.....\$17,923,000

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

THE JACQUES-CARTIER AND CHAMPLAIN BRIDGES INC.
Vote 1—Payments to the corporation.....\$262,413,187

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

VIA HFR – VIA TGF INC.
Vote 1—Operating and capital expenditures.....\$45,254,000

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

VIA RAIL CANADA INC.
Vote 1—Payments to the corporation.....\$1,159,349,066

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

WINDSOR-DETROIT BRIDGE AUTHORITY
Vote 1—Payments to the authority.....\$951,657,774

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Thank you, colleagues.

The meeting is adjourned.

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