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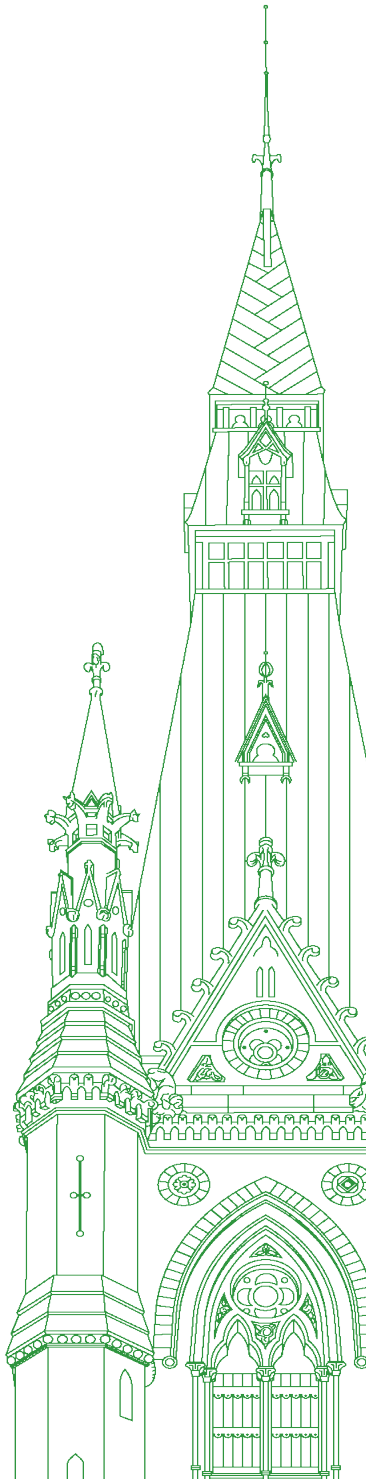
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Chair: Terry Sheehan

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

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● (1540)

[*English*]

The Chair (Terry Sheehan (Sault Ste. Marie—Algoma, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome back. I call this meeting to order.

We have a little bit of a late start, so we want to get on with the testimony and the questions. We had some votes that just put us back a wee bit. The chair will try to get us back on track.

This is meeting number 42 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs. We are gathered here on the unceded territory of the Algonquin nation. *Chi-meegwetch*.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee is meeting on affordability challenges in northern Canada. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person and also remotely using the Zoom application.

Before we continue, I will ask all in-person participants to consult the guidelines written on the cards on the table. These measures are in place to help prevent audio and feedback incidents and to protect the health and safety of our wonderful interpreters—thank you very much for all you do. The QR code on your desk here links to an awareness video.

I would like to make a few comments for the witnesses and members: Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, please click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you're not speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. Those in the room can use your earpiece and select the desired channel.

I understand that those on Zoom have passed the sound check. That's great. I will also remind you that all questions should be addressed through the chair.

Members in the room, of course, raise your hand and I will call on you. Turn your mics off when you are not speaking. Otherwise, you will have feedback.

Welcome to the witnesses.

In the room, we have the Honourable Ted Laking, Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources for the Government of Yukon.

Thank you ever so much for joining us.

By video conference, from the Government of Northwest Territories, we have Caroline Wawzonek, Minister of Finance. Also by video conference, from Municipalité de L'Île-d'Anticosti, we have Hélène Boulanger, mayor; and Mathieu Gravel, director general.

Each group will have five minutes, so we'll have 15 minutes of testimony. When you have about 30 seconds left, I'll just say, “30 seconds”. That will help you wrap up. During the question and answer period, you can get out any remarks that you did not get out in your prepared statements.

We're going to start online with the Government of Northwest Territories.

Please go ahead, Minister.

Hon. Caroline Wawzonek (Minister, Department of Finance, Government of Northwest Territories): Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Good afternoon, everyone.

[*English*]

Keeping in mind the five-minute time limit, I might reorganize how I plan to tackle this.

Thank you for the introduction. As noted, I'm the Minister of Finance and Minister Responsible for Strategic Infrastructure, Energy and Supply Chains. Between those two portfolios, I often come upon questions of affordability here in Canada's north.

I have a little bit of history for you about some of the past interventions that have happened on this cause, as well as some numbers and then some proposals. What I really want to do is get to the proposals and solutions I have for you, so I'm going to be very mindful of my time.

Briefly, I want to read a couple of things to you. One of them is the following, which might sound familiar given some of what's going on these days politically:

> ...there's a strong sense that the North is in a fragile state of transition. The promise of substantial economic development is just starting to be realized, but clearly there will be costs involved. In many respects, the lack of sufficient infrastructure combined with serious challenges in health care and education and a host of other social issues may well be a serious barrier to economic development. And the risk that too many northerners, particularly Aboriginal and Inuit people, are ill-prepared to benefit from the anticipated prosperity economic development can bring, is very real indeed.

That, if you want to look it up, is from 2006, which was the last time there was a panel struck to study territorial formula financing. If it sounds familiar, it should, because we are facing very much that same challenge today with the focus on the north having been renewed.

The studies are not new to the people of the north. The awareness of the issues—infrastructure, fundamental structural barriers—really hasn't changed. They've been studied many times. I'd also commend to you the Arctic and northern policy framework from 2019, which, again, had all three territories, as well as Inuit Nunangat, submit chapters speaking to these very same issues of structural barriers and structural impediments that impact affordability in the north.

I'll give you a few numbers before I get into where I want to land with some suggestions for you. A lot of these can certainly be provided upon request. They come from various studies by Statistics Canada.

Total living costs are 23% higher in Yellowknife than in Edmonton and 50% higher in regions outside of Yellowknife than in Edmonton. That's from the 2025 federal isolated post index. That's how they look at how they pay public servants, and it shows why they have to pay them more just to get by.

Basic necessities, as measured by the market basket measure, cost 36% more in Yellowknife than in southern Canadian cities, again noting that Yellowknife is really the “baby” north, if you will, and costs rise exponentially once you get outside of our capital city. Living costs in two of the communities here in the north, Fort Good Hope and Ulukhaktok, are 83% above Edmonton's living costs.

Two of the biggest drivers are transportation and energy. Energy costs for power and heat are double the national average in the north. Household spending on in-home energy is the highest of all provinces and territories here in the Northwest Territories, where it's 2.4 times higher than the national average. One in 10 households faces energy poverty, meaning they're spending a certain proportion of their income just to heat their homes and provide energy to their homes.

I can tell you that the government is also affected. Our ability to provide basic services is impacted by this. Because it is such an issue just to keep people managing their households, it's a significant driver of our costs and expenses. We provide over $18 million annually in subsidies directly to residents to help stabilize energy. That's for various subsidy-type programs.

Our government alone in three years has spent over $105 million because water levels and fuel costs are driving the cost of energy for us. We remain highly dependent on diesel. There are different and disparate hydro systems here in the Northwest Territories, two of them, and they're not linked. Low water in the one is a significant driver of diesel costs, because every system in the north has diesel as its form of redundancy.

With that, again noting that there certainly are many more numbers and you may well hear them from my fellow witnesses here today, I want to leave you with three specific thoughts on what you might conclude in your recommendations.

● (1545)

The first is that there's been a directive to do a northern health care review. It was directed in the federal budget last year, but it is now delayed. Accelerate it. Don't let that work go unfinished. It's important.

The second is to finish everything that you start. Roads started to be built here in the 1950s, and they ended without being concluded. We are back today in another time under the Major Projects Office with two roads being built. Don't let this go unfinished. You must put the dollars, the political power and the clout behind it.

The last one is about energy. Shifting to heat pumps is fine. That's great. NRCan's own website says that they won't work in the north. Don't do those things without looking to solutions for the north at the same time, like biomass, wood stoves and even putting a chill on LNG. If we could get our communities on LNG, that would give them an alternative to diesel.

Don't just announce things on a large scale without thinking through the impacts on 40% of Canada's territory. There are solutions. Don't delay, and finish what you started.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next, we have Minister Ted Laking from Yukon.

You have five minutes.

Hon. Ted Laking (Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources, Government of Yukon): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the members of the committee for the opportunity to appear today.

I want to begin with a simple message: Yukon is approaching a point where the cost of living is threatening our ability to retain families, attract workers and grow our economy. In September, inflation in Whitehorse reached 6.1%, nearly double the national average of 3.1%.

On top of rising grocery, housing and transportation costs, Yukon families are facing electricity rate increases totalling 34% between 2025 and 2027. Heating your home is not a choice when temperatures reach -40°C, and at some point people are forced to make difficult decisions.

The challenge of affordability in Yukon is intrinsically tied to our electricity system. We are not connected to the North American electricity grid, and we must generate our own power, maintain our own infrastructure and meet enormous and growing winter demand. The costs are extraordinary and they are shared by a relatively small number of ratepayers. In southern Canada, the cost of a major electricity investment can be spread across millions of customers; in Yukon, those same kinds of investments must be paid for by just 24,000 ratepayers. Right now, for an average household, the 34% rate increase facing Yukon families could mean an extra $235 per month.

I want the committee to understand what is driving those increases. It is the cost of keeping aging infrastructure safe, replacing equipment that has reached the end of its useful life and building the generation capacity needed to keep the lights on. We must make these investments. In a Yukon winter, electricity reliability isn't a convenience, it is a matter of public safety. Last December, when temperatures plunged to approximately -45°C, our electricity system came dangerously close to rolling blackouts in the city of Whitehorse. Industrial customers had to disconnect from the grid and generate their own electricity to help keep the system stable.

That brings me to the reason I'm here today. We need federal help with the costs Yukoners are already facing, and we need federal help to prevent the next wave of necessary infrastructure investments from making an already difficult situation even worse. The 34% increase I've described is the cost of investments we have already had to make, but our assessment of Yukon's electricity system shows that we are facing more than $1 billion in additional infrastructure requirements over the coming years. Without significant federal investment, Yukoners could face another 53% increase on top of what families are already being asked to absorb. For the average family, that would mean another $2,100 annually.

We've looked carefully at what Yukon can reasonably contribute. The reality is that we cannot afford to make these investments on our own, and neither can our ratepayers. Without sufficient electricity, we face difficult decisions about whether we can connect new housing, support growing businesses or provide the power required for major industrial projects. We are approaching a point where a shortage of electricity could dictate whether the Yukon is able to grow at all.

Addressing Yukon's electricity challenges is in the national interest. Reliable and affordable electricity is essential to attracting families, workers and investment, but those national objectives require infrastructure. It would be unreasonable to expect a small northern population that's half the size of Sault Ste. Marie to shoulder those full costs on their own.

Yukon is a place of extraordinary opportunity, but opportunity means very little if families cannot afford to live there, businesses cannot afford to operate there, and industry cannot access the infrastructure it needs to grow there. We cannot build a stronger Canadian north by pricing northern Canadians out of it.

We have brought these concerns to the federal government and have had encouraging and positive discussions to date, but what I'd like to leave the committee with is that Yukoners cannot afford to carry these costs alone. We need the federal government to help address the increases families are facing today.

With that, I welcome questions. Thank you.

● (1550)

The Chair: Thank you very much. Thank you for throwing Sault Ste. Marie into your testimony as well.

Next, we have Mayor Boulanger for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Hélène Boulanger (Mayor, Municipalité de L'Île-d'Anticosti): Good afternoon.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Members of the committee, thank you for giving us the opportunity to bring the voice of the people of Anticosti Island to your study on affordability in northern Canada.

In September 2023, our island was added to UNESCO's World Heritage List. This designation is a tremendous source of pride for our small community of approximately 200 residents and serves as recognition of the outstanding universal value of our territory.

However, behind this international recognition lies a reality that is much less well known. On Anticosti, no road connects us to the mainland. To travel off the island and access certain services, we rely entirely on marine and air transportation. That dependence has very real economic consequences.

Our goods are supplied by ship once a week for 10 months of the year. Every item consumed on the island must be transported by boat. Those additional transportation costs are systematically passed on directly to the cost of goods and services available to residents.

On Anticosti, remoteness and isolation are measured not only in kilometres, but also in dollars.

The federal government recognizes these unique circumstances and already provides certain mitigation measures, including tax deductions for residents of prescribed northern and intermediate zones. The Canada Revenue Agency's website states: “These deductions provide relief to those who live in a prescribed zone and recognize that such individuals are often faced with a higher cost of living, environmental hardships, and limited access to services”.

To qualify for these deductions, individuals must reside either in a northern zone, known as zone A, or in an intermediate zone, known as zone B. Eligible residents of zone A may claim the full amount of the deductions, while those in zone B may claim half. Anticosti Island is currently classified as intermediate zone B.

Our objective today is to demonstrate that the current classification of our territory does not adequately reflect its realities and should be corrected.

The federal government nevertheless recognizes the unique challenges associated with our remoteness. Anticosti is one of the 124 isolated northern communities eligible for the retail subsidy component of the nutrition north Canada program. Despite that recognition, Anticosti is the only one of the 23 Quebec communities eligible for nutrition north Canada that is not classified northern zone A.

Anticosti also appears on the list of 114 Canada Post air stage service offices. According to Canada Post's website, these offices "exist because a practical surface transportation alternative isn't available in the area. These offices are generally confined to remote or isolated communities", and yet Anticosti is the only one of the 22 Quebec communities with such an office that is not classified northern zone A.

Those two inconsistencies become even more striking when one considers that we're supplied by the same vessel and served by the same air transportation links as the neighbouring lower Côte-Nord communities, all of which are classified northern zone A.

Two federal programs therefore recognize the unique challenges associated with our remoteness, yet the federal tax system continues to treat Anticosti as an intermediate zone. This is a clear inconsistency that warrants correction.

A recent precedent demonstrates that such a reclassification is possible. In 2025, the federal government reclassified the Haida Gwaii archipelago in British Columbia from intermediate zone B to northern zone A. That decision followed sustained efforts by representatives of the archipelago, who highlighted its remoteness, the cost of living and difficulty accessing services. Those considerations closely mirror the realities of life on Anticosti Island.

We're not asking for special treatment. We're asking that Anticosti's tax treatment be made consistent with the comparable realities of its isolation and with the recognition already afforded to it by the Government of Canada through other programs.

Accordingly, we ask this committee to recommend that the Government of Canada amend section 7303.1 of the Income Tax Regulations in order to reclassify the territory of Anticosti Island from intermediate zone B to northern zone A.

● (1555)

This change would not eliminate the challenges associated with our island status. However, it would provide meaningful financial support to eligible individuals who choose to live and work in our small community.

Mr. Chair, members of the committee, thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

We're going to jump into the six-minute round, and first up is MP Zimmer.

Go ahead, Bob.

Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thanks to our witnesses for coming.

My questions will be for the Honourable Ted Laking.

I want to ask you to respond to these questions not as the minister, but as a Yukoner. You were born and raised there, Ted. Is that correct?

Hon. Ted Laking: That's right.

Bob Zimmer: Where were you born?

Hon. Ted Laking: Dawson City.

Bob Zimmer: You currently live in Whitehorse.

Hon. Ted Laking: Yes.

Bob Zimmer: Right on.

As Mark Carney recently said in the House of Commons, "Affordability is the best it has been in over a decade."

I want to list some of the food prices. You already talked about inflation being higher than in most areas of the country. These are just some examples. The price of sirloin steak, for one kilogram, is $48.92. One kilogram of ground beef is $21.51. One kilogram of pork chops is $20.55. One kilogram of chicken costs $13.48, and even potatoes are $16.32.

Minister, is food, electricity or housing cheaper since Mark Carney became Prime Minister?

● (1600)

Hon. Ted Laking: I don't have a time horizon on all the cost increases that we've experienced in the north, but certainly I can say, as I referenced in my testimony, that between 2025 and 2027 we have seen our electricity rates increase by 34%.

This past fall, one of the announcements that we unfortunately had to make was that some of the turmoil associated with fuel costs globally has put significant further upward pressure on our electricity rates, which resulted in further increased rates that came into effect this past fall.

Certainly, between 2025 and 2027, we have seen increases to our electricity rates, and we've seen the fuel costs associated with diesel and LNG drive up costs further.

Bob Zimmer: Ted, you're a dad, so I want to ask you this: How much does it cost your family to buy food? How many kids do you have?

Hon. Ted Laking: I have two kids. We spend approximately $300 a week on groceries—

Hon. Ted Laking: —but that's one example. What I can say is that we've heard from Yukoners that everybody's feeling the pinch, whether it's at the pump, in their electricity bills or at the grocery store. Some of the solutions that we brought forward are for how we could push that pressure down on the electricity rates.

Bob Zimmer: Wow.

Bob Zimmer: I'm getting to housing here, and it relates to what you talked about, because not only are energy costs very high in the north, but you're at risk of blackouts. You were at risk even last winter. That problem hasn't gone away, as you alluded to in your points.

I'm going to talk about housing. We have recently seen Mark Carney drop his housing promise of building 500,000 new homes per year. On top of that, the housing minister's department averaged $20,000 in bonuses each. I have a Blacklock's article pointing to that. We saw yesterday that Mark Carney gave the Dominican Republic $8 million for housing in that country.

I know you've been an advocate for housing in Yukon for many years, and I know you personally saw in Whitehorse a low-income housing project under the previous Liberal territorial government balloon in cost to where hotel room-sized residences ended up being $750,000 per unit.

Is there still a housing shortage in Yukon?

Hon. Ted Laking: Yes, there certainly is a significant demand for housing in the territory and a shortage of supply, which we've seen put upward pressure on the cost of housing.

One of the challenges I referenced in my opening remarks, which I think we'll probably see across the country and certainly in the territories, as my colleague from Northwest Territories referenced, is that population growth has put significant strain on our infrastructure. When it comes to electricity, one of the things that we know is that eventually, if we can't solve the problem, we will have to look at ways to limit growth or look at whether we can connect more to the grid.

Bob Zimmer: I appreciate your message. You've come here with concerns around energy and food. It's really sad when food and housing become secondary to what you're talking about, because in Yukon, it gets very cold. I'm not that far away from you in Fort St. John, but still, when you're in Whitehorse or Dawson City or even further north, it really isn't an option to lose power. You said before that with these blackouts, you can't just leave it running despite the warning. If that happens, then even more destruction happens to your infrastructure.

What message would you like to give the government in my last seconds here about how much you need it to provide this injection of funds into your infrastructure?

Hon. Ted Laking: As referenced in my opening remarks, my belief is that the Yukon territory has a significant amount of opportunity and willingness to contribute to the national cause and to be a part of national solutions, but the foundation of what any government wants to accomplish is energy. If the energy is not affordable, it will be difficult for us to attract workers, to attract families and to keep people. Certainly, with some of the age of the infrastructure and the challenges that come with the cost to address it, it's beyond the capability of a small government such as our own to address this alone.

● (1605)

The Chair: Thank you.

Next, we have MP Hanley.

Go ahead, Brendan.

Brendan Hanley (Yukon, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for coming and for this testimony.

I also will focus perhaps entirely on you, Minister Laking. My questions will be to you as a minister but also to you as having previous experience on the city council for Whitehorse and as a member of the Association of Yukon Communities. I think you know well the implications for urban and community growth, and not just from your current role as minister.

You talked about opportunity. Toward the end, you talked about tremendous opportunities for Yukon. I'd like you to expand on that. I also just want to note that on that theme, there's a consortium of business leaders from the Yukon here today, actually, promoting leadership, modern governance and the effect of having modern treaty nations that are leading the way through economic development.

When you think of opportunities, can you expand on those opportunities and how they relate to the energy security you are seeking?

Hon. Ted Laking: I think what is important to know is that we have a very educated workforce in the territory. We have a lot of amenities, with reasons and a desirable location for people to live here. That's a great opportunity to help us attract people who want to live and stay in the territory. We have modern treaties that allow us to have certainty when we want to provide pathways for industry to come to the territory and understand what it's dealing with and how the rules would work in the territory.

What we've heard in our discussions with businesses but also regular Yukoners is that one of the limiting factors that would hold people back from wanting to stay in the territory or to expand in the territory is the cost or the affordability of electricity. I think you'd find a similar message between our government and those businesses that are here in the territory and other businesses in the territory as well. The need to plan for and address electricity system needs is essential for growth.

I'll say a final piece on the opportunity. I think it's no secret that the Yukon is blessed with a lot of mineral potential and wealth. As I mentioned, last winter we were starting to contemplate the potential of blackouts in the city of Whitehorse. At that point in time, we had already started to require industry, some mines, to disconnect from our electricity grid. That sends a negative signal to potential investors. We'd like to be able to address that and ensure that those who want to grow the economy in the territory have access to the energy they require.

Brendan Hanley: Thank you.

If time permits, I might come back to the theme you left off with, but I want to maybe to talk a bit more about what you mentioned with regard to the positive conversations with the federal government. I know that you and your team and your officials, and of course the premier as well, have been engaging quite frequently with the federal government.

Can you give me an idea of the depth of engagement and also how the current requests for assistance with the energy infrastructure fit with Canada's electricity strategy and with our goals to build Canada?

Hon. Ted Laking: We've spent a significant amount of time as the Government of Yukon engaging with the federal government, from the political level down to the operational level within the departments. I've spent quite a bit of time down here in Ottawa over the last half year, engaging with my counterparts, but so too have officials from various departments. As well, of course, our premier has been engaging directly with the Prime Minister.

One of the things we were very pleased to see coming out of the federal government recently was the national electricity strategy, with the goal to double the nation's electricity generation capacity. We think that's a really good idea. The plan and the proposal we put forward to the Government of Canada would double Yukon's capacity. We like to think of it as that we've gift-wrapped the Yukon solution for the Canada electricity strategy.

One of the things we were happy to see in that strategy specifically was that there was a direct reference to these challenges the Yukon is facing in the potential for rolling blackouts. We felt that we had been heard on that. Of course, now we're continuing to try to refine our proposals so that we can address some of the cost pressures.

● (1610)

Brendan Hanley: You have 25 seconds to elaborate on the critical mineral potential. Let's talk about medium-term critical mineral potential.

Hon. Ted Laking: Very quickly, I would say that the territory has a significant wealth of all sorts of critical minerals, but, top of mind, the one I think about is tungsten. We have a world-class, untouched, high-grade deposit of tungsten that's already been through environmental permitting in the territory, but one of the eventual challenges to getting that project to a final investment would of course be electricity.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, you have six minutes.

Marilène Gill (Côte-Nord—Kawawachikamach—Nitassinan, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank Minister Wawzonek and Minister Laking for appearing before us today. I would also like to thank the mayor of Anticosti Island, Ms. Boulanger, as well as her director general, Mathieu Gravel.

Naturally, you will allow me to direct my questions to Ms. Boulanger and Mr. Gravel, since Anticosti Island is part of my riding. At the same time, I would encourage all committee members to visit the island if they ever have the opportunity. It is a UNESCO World Heritage site. After all, it is an island of 7,900 square kilometres, so nearly 8,000 square kilometres, in size. For those who enjoy hunting, there are between 160,000 and 200,000 deer on the island. There is, quite literally, a beach for everyone. We could all go there and have our own 30-kilometre stretch of private beach.

That said, residents of Anticosti Island have been requesting a change in zone designation for a number of years. Sometimes a line is drawn that may be somewhat arbitrary, as the mayor and Mr. Gravel mentioned. It is very arbitrary because, in reality, the living conditions of Anticosti residents are largely the same as those of residents in zone A. We have demonstrated that in a number of ways. As Ms. Boulanger noted, Haida Gwaii successfully obtained a reclassification. Clearly, that helps in many respects. I will leave it to Ms. Boulanger and Mr. Gravel to elaborate further on that point if they wish.

I know that the mayor spoke, for example, about the costs incurred by a family simply to travel. We are talking about geographic isolation, of course, but I would like her to tell us more about what that isolation means in practical terms where she lives and about the resulting costs for families. She could also tell us what effects this has in more remote regions, particularly in terms of population retention and maintenance, as well as economic development.

Hélène Boulanger: We can provide a very simple example. Let us consider a family of four, consisting of two adults and two children, who wish to travel to the mainland with their vehicle twice a year. The purpose of those trips might be to visit relatives or make major purchases. It should be remembered that the municipality has only 200 residents. To access services, people truly have to leave the island. By services, I mean things such as dental care or optometry services. Those services are simply not available on the island. According to Relais Nordik's current 2026-27 marine transportation rates, two round trips between Anticosti and Rimouski for such a family, including their vehicle, would cost approximately $3,380.

If that same family wishes to travel by air, current fares mean that, even taking into account the significant discount currently available under the airfare reduction program, flying to Sept-Îles still costs approximately $720. Of course, that figure doesn't include any of the additional costs incurred once they arrive in Sept-Îles. Depending on the length of their stay, they may need to rent a vehicle. These are extremely significant expenses. Nor does that amount include meals, accommodations and other travel-related costs, all of which must also be taken into consideration.

What should be emphasized is that, for a family that must bear transportation costs of that magnitude simply to leave their community and access services, these are major expenses. This is just one example of a routine trip.

● (1615)

Marilène Gill: Mr. Chair, I have lost track of my speaking time. I believe I have about two minutes remaining.

I may have a question for you, Mr. Gravel.

We've talked about the cost of travel for individuals, but transportation constraints also drive up the cost of goods and services on Anticosti, beyond the issue of travel itself.

Could you give us some examples?

Mathieu Gravel (Director General, Municipalité de L'Île-d'Anticosti): Yes, I would be pleased to answer.

It's true, virtually everything on Anticosti Island must be transported by boat. Things are only rarely transported by air, depending on the weight of the goods. We're talking about groceries, construction materials, household appliances; everything arrives by boat.

We have two local businesses, a grocery store and a hardware store. According to them, transportation costs directly increase prices by 5% to 8%. For certain types of goods, transportation costs can amount to 10% or even as much as 100% of the value of the goods themselves.

Energy costs were also mentioned. Here, we pay approximately $1 more per litre for gasoline than the Quebec average, at all times. Fuel supply is handled differently, of course. Once again, it arrives by ship. These are recurring costs.

A very concrete example affecting the municipality is that we often have to bring people to the island to provide certain services. Sometimes we travel elsewhere to obtain a service, but if we bring in a plumber, for example, for two, three or four hours of work, we do not get a bill for a few hundred dollars. Instead, the bill may be $2,000 or $2,500 because we have had to fly the plumber in and pay for meals, accommodations and related expenses. For the municipality, that means those costs must ultimately be passed on to residents through property taxes. Residents therefore also end up paying indirectly for the costs associated with our island status.

These may seem like many small examples taken individually, but over the course of a year they have a significant impact.

That's what we want the members of your committee to understand. These are not occasional or one-time issues and surcharges. They are structural costs. They're part of the cost of living. Ultimately, it's always taxpayers who end up bearing them.

Marilène Gill: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Now, we have MP Schmale for five minutes.

Go ahead, Jamie.

Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you again to our witnesses for being here on this very important discussion we're having.

Maybe I'll start with you, Minister Laking, and then I'll jump up to the Northwest Territories—or over to the Northwest Territories—if that works.

You mentioned in your opening remarks the cost of electricity, but these types of situations don't just pop up. I'm guessing there was a period of time when the infrastructure wasn't kept up, because I can't imagine there was one day when everyone woke up and said, “It's -45°C out and, hey, we're having troubles with our system.”

Hon. Ted Laking: I think what has become evident through this situation is that, certainly, planning, the collection of data and that sort of thing are extremely important to ensure the integrity of the electricity system.

One of the challenges we're faced with is that a lot of the infrastructure in the north and in the Yukon is extremely old. We have hydro facilities that provide the bulk of our energy, but some of them are near the end of their life. I think it's fair to say, if you know something was built in the 1950s, you shouldn't be surprised that in 2026, it's getting to the end of its life. However, I think with proper planning and investment over a longer term and by being a bit more strategic, you can ensure that the problem is addressed earlier and in a less expensive way. Because that hasn't necessarily happened, we're seeing massive new emergency works required to support our electricity grid that are much more expensive than our ratepayers can bear.

Jamie Schmale: That emergency work usually is more costly than the normal work.

Your government was sworn in about a year or so ago. Congratulations. You got 66% of the vote in your riding. Well done. I'm jealous.

At the same time, you spent some time working within the government, either municipally or at the territorial level. What kinds of investments were made over the last, say, 10 years to upgrade the electricity system in the Yukon to potentially prepare for what you're dealing with now? Was anything of substance done?

● (1620)

Hon. Ted Laking: To kind of indirectly answer that, these cost increases that we're facing now, the 34% that Yukoners have faced over the last year and a half, are a direct result of what is absolutely necessary and what was not addressed over the 10 years prior. If these costs had been addressed a decade ago, or planned more appropriately, we wouldn't be dealing with as urgent a situation.

I think it is very fair to say that when you're in an emergency situation and you're faced with a hydro facility that's at risk of failure, and that could flood a community if it were to fail, that is a much more urgent and expensive project than if you had done the necessary work 10 years ago to address the situation.

Jamie Schmale: Maybe I'll jump over to the Northwest Territories.

Minister, thanks to Mr. Zimmer, the three of us here on this side had an opportunity to travel to the Northwest Territories. The topic of energy and aging infrastructure seems to be an ongoing issue. I know it's important to have that partnership because the territories can't do it alone. At the same time, we heard about how the cost of energy, or the availability of energy, was putting an additional strain on the grid and was hampering the ability for new industries, or even for economic development, within the territory.

Maybe you could talk to us about how the government is addressing that and preparing for the future, knowing what you have to deal with.

The Chair: Minister, you have 20 seconds to answer that question.

Hon. Caroline Wawzonek: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll try to be brief.

We're trying to attack the problem from all sides. We have to increase the availability of the grids. We have to look at microgrids, because the grids we have are not connected to the North American grid and they're not connected one to the other. We're also doing some significant policy changes. We're changing the policies to make it more available for communities to actually do their own microgrids and to have more renewables available to them, and similarly for households to do the same and to then put more back onto the system in a way that doesn't destabilize the grid.

There's a lot happening. Thanks.

The Chair: That was a great answer. It was very concise.

Minister, and this goes for everyone giving testimony, if there's further information you want to give us, you can send it in writing as well. Sometimes we're constrained by time.

Thank you very much for that.

Next is Lori for five minutes, please.

Lori Idlout (Nunavut, Lib.): *Qujannamiik, Iksivautaq*. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Tunngasugit. Welcome to the witnesses.

My first question will be for the mayor of Anticosti. The next question will be for the Minister of Finance in NWT.

Mayor, first of all, congratulations on your UNESCO designation. That's quite a feat to achieve. This summer I was in Wanuskewin Heritage Park. It's about 10 kilometres north of Saskatoon. They're seeking UNESCO designation too. I hope we all take the chance to visit there. It's an amazing park that I'm sure deserves the same designation.

You mentioned in your presentation the nutrition north program. Could you share with us any recommendations for improvements that you might have, based on your experience?

[*Translation*]

Hélène Boulanger: The program is well suited to the municipality's needs. We receive annual funding to achieve food self-sufficiency, or to improve our food self-sufficiency, given our isolation. We want to be able to access fresh products year-round. As it stands, the program meets our needs well. That one is truly tailored to our situation.

However, I'm glad you mentioned the nutrition north Canada program, because it does in fact apply across Canada to areas recognized as northern zone A communities. We've discussed two similarities, but there are many others. I hear people talk about situations in the Far North and elsewhere that are comparable to what we experience. When analyses were conducted between 1991 and 1993 to determine which communities would be classified as zone A and zone B, one of the key criteria was geography. However, that led us to fall through the cracks. In fact, recognition under the nutrition north Canada program also required meeting certain additional criteria. That's part of the case we're making when we say we're a good match for zone A.

That said, the program suits us very well in its current form.

● (1625)

[*English*]

Lori Idlout: Thank you so much.

Because I have such limited time, I will go to the minister from the NWT. Before Nunavut separated from the NWT, I used to say that I was raised in the NWT.

I want to hear from you, in your experience as the Minister of Finance, what factors you think contribute to the increasing cost of everything. I know that, for example, they're not limited to Government of Canada policies. I wonder if there are global factors, like Russia's invasion against the Ukraine or the trade war, that are having an impact on prices.

Qujannamiik.

Hon. Caroline Wawzonek: I'll try to be concise again. I expect there are time crunches very shortly.

Absolutely, the northern territories are deeply impacted by factors outside of our control. Prices on fuel are still number one because they impact both transportation—which impacts the cost of supply—and the cost of energy since we are so dependent upon diesel as our primary or redundant source.

There are always factors outside of our control. The best we can continue to do, as governments, is to have a large-scale mindset on not only subsidizing today, to keep people managing and healthy today so that they're able to look to the future, but also, at the same time, maintaining a national scope on what we are going to do to build Canada into the north in a real and substantial way so that we don't continue to find ourselves so dependent in these situations that face us from extraneous and outside factors.

Thank you.

Lori Idlout: Very quickly, I wonder if you could talk about whether the Arctic infrastructure fund has had any impact on your territory.

Hon. Caroline Wawzonek: Absolutely, the Arctic infrastructure fund has already announced a significant advancement of the Great Bear River bridge, which is really a middle linchpin point on the Mackenzie Valley Highway, which is a project that was started in the 1950s and is one of the ones that was abandoned. It will have a tremendous impact on connecting communities and opening up an entire part of this country to greater exploration and opportunity, creating a link with my friend in the room, a link to the Yukon. I think it can be, for small communities, transformative in terms of tourism opportunities. For the Department of National Defence, it can also provide a strategic corridor to the Arctic, something we do not have right now.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Gill, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I will take the liberty of addressing one final two-part question to Mayor Boulanger or Mr. Gravel, the director general.

You have, of course, outlined the significant costs associated with living on Anticosti. We should also talk about the rising cost of living, which is something the committee has really discussed at length.

First, Ms. Boulanger or Mr. Gravel, you indicated that moving Anticosti into zone A would be an appropriate solution. Could you provide more information on that?

Second, the other part of my question has to do with the fact that, as we know, there was an 8% increase in 2008, if I'm not mistaken, and a 33% increase in 2016. Those were increases rather than indexation measures. Regardless of what they were, as many northern communities have requested, would you also support reviewing the deduction and indexing it so that it provides greater assistance and better supports people facing a higher cost of living?

The question is for Ms. Boulanger or Mr. Gravel.

Hélène Boulanger: I will begin, and then you can add to my answer if you wish, Mr. Gravel.

From our perspective, before considering an increase, the priority is to receive the full deduction. That's really what we're trying to achieve.

Of course, some attention could be warranted for this deduction in comparison with all the other deductions, tax credits and other measures used in income tax returns that are increased annually and incrementally. In the case of this particular deduction, I don't know the years in which increases may have occurred, but there have been long periods with no changes. I'm not originally from Anticosti, but since I first became eligible for it 10 years ago, the amount has not been adjusted at all.

Therefore, if people believe there should be an increase, I agree with them. I fully support a gradual and justified increase. However, what matters most to me today is securing the full deduction. That is what we're primarily trying to demonstrate. We want to show that we meet all the requirements and should be entitled to the same deductions as people living in zone A. Of course, looking ahead, it would be excellent if that deduction were increased in the future.

● (1630)

Mathieu Gravel: Perhaps I can expand on that to give an idea of exactly what we're talking about.

The tax relief provided to eligible individuals for the residence deduction amounts to about $5.50 a day for zone B and $11 a day for zone A. To put it in perspective, that is about $2,000 and $4,000 a year overall. That's what we're looking for.

I obviously think that the idea of indexation speaks for itself. The cost of living is rising. That said, you can still see that there is a major difference between the two zones. You may now have a better understanding of the importance of being properly recognized. For a tool to be effective, its level of assistance must actually align with the lived experience of the people who benefit from it.

That was the point we wanted to make today.

The Chair: Thank you.

Hélène Boulanger: Do I have a few seconds to add something?

[*English*]

The Chair: You can send it in writing.

Take your time. Please send it to the clerk, and we'll receive it.

[*Translation*]

Hélène Boulanger: Of course.

[*English*]

The Chair: To all three panellists, I want to thank you very much for your very thoughtful and informative testimony today. *Chi-meegwetch*.

We are going to suspend and get ready for our next group of panellists.

● (1630)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1635)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

Welcome back. As a reminder, I would ask all in-person participants to consult the guidelines written on the cards on the table. These measures are in place to help prevent audio and feedback incidents and, again, to protect the health and safety of our fabulous interpreters.

Thank you, interpreters, again, for the wonderful job.

Thank you to everyone for doing a great job here today.

You also have a QR code that links to a short awareness video.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic. When you are done, please mute yourself. That also goes for the people in the room. Make sure that your red light is not on when you're not speaking. For those on Zoom, you've done your sound check and passed.

As a reminder, at the bottom of your screen, there is a button. You can select floor if you want and are fluent in both languages, or you can select English or French, because you may be asked questions in either language. For those in the room, remember to put your earpiece in. You also can select the language here on the buttons before you.

I remind everyone to address all questions through the chair.

Welcome.

As an individual, we have Dr. Mylène Riva, associate professor and Canada research chair in housing, community and health at McGill University, by video conference. From the Government of Nunavut, we have Nathaniel Hutchinson, director of the petroleum products division, also by video conference. In the room, we have Integrated Resource Technologies Ltd. and Kenneth Watson, president, along with Rob Fraser, the mayor of Fort Nelson. I also recognize that we have the Yukon Energy Corporation and Rod Savoie, chair of the board of directors.

You have five minutes. If two of you are splitting the time, let me know, and let me know who's going to be doing how many minutes. I say that because I give everyone a reminder when they have about 30 seconds left to try to wrap up, along with a reminder that they can get more information out during the question and answers for the remainder of the time.

Without further ado, we will commence with Dr. Riva.

Please go ahead.

● (1640)

Mylène Riva (Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair in Housing, Community and Health, McGill University, As an Individual): Thank you.

Bonjour. Good afternoon. *Ullaakkut*. *Kwe*.

It's my pleasure to be here with you this afternoon and to participate as a witness in the important study on affordability challenges in northern Canada.

As mentioned in the introduction, I'm a professor in the department of geography at McGill University. My research examines housing, energy and climate adaptation as key determinants of health and well-being. I examine these issues and I work with communities from coast to coast to coast.

The main message I would like to leave with you today is that housing, energy, climate change and population health are deeply intertwined. They should not be treated as separate issues. Housing conditions affect energy needs. Energy affordability affects household finances. Both affect physical and mental health and, ultimately, well-being.

A home is much more than shelter. It's where people spend their daily lives and it's their first line of defence against extreme weather. An affordable home is not just a home that people can afford to rent or buy. It's a home or an apartment they can afford to live in, heat, cool and maintain without having to compromise on other necessities. Housing affordability is, therefore, inseparable from energy affordability.

One issue that deserves much greater attention in Canada is energy poverty. Energy poverty is a situation that happens when households cannot afford or cannot access adequate levels of energy services to maintain a healthy indoor temperature, meet their daily needs and live with dignity. Energy poverty can mean living in homes that are too cold or too hot. It means struggling to pay utility bills or having to sacrifice on other necessities, such as food, in order to cover energy costs.

Importantly, energy poverty is not limited to households paying utility bills. Many renters have utilities included in their rent, yet still experience energy poverty through poor housing conditions, such as inadequate insulation, dampness, mould, poor ventilation or limited control over indoor temperatures.

This matters because energy poverty and housing quality have direct consequences for health and well-being. High energy bills and living in cold, hot, damp or poorly ventilated homes affect respiratory and cardiovascular health and create stressful living conditions, and they can impact mental health, sleep quality and overall quality of life.

Investments to improve housing quality and to tackle energy poverty are investments in health. When we support housing energy upgrades or the construction of better-performing homes, the benefits can extend well beyond lower energy consumption. These interventions can lower household expenses, improve thermal comforts and generate benefits for health and well-being.

This also highlights an important point about how we measure success. We often assume that lower energy consumption is always a positive outcome, yet low energy use can arise for very different reasons. Some households consume less energy because their homes are efficient. Others, however, use less energy because they simply cannot afford it. These situations are fundamentally different. If we do not distinguish between them, we risk misidentifying needs and overlooking some of the most vulnerable households. For this reason, energy policy should focus not only on fuel switching or reducing energy consumption, but also on ensuring that all Canadians have access to the energy services they need to live healthy, safe and dignified lives.

Ultimately, the question is not simply whether a northern household can afford a place to live. The question is whether people can live in homes that are healthy, comfortable and affordable to operate throughout the year.

Finally, climate change is intensifying these challenges. Across northern Canada, changing climate conditions are placing increasing pressures on housing and energy infrastructure and systems, among others. This also contributes to raising the cost of maintenance, adaptation and daily living. Designing programs, strategies and policies that reduce energy poverty, improve housing quality and strengthen climate resilience can simultaneously lower living costs, improve health and well-being and support the long-term vitality of northern communities.

● (1645)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much. You're right on time.

Next, from the Government of Nunavut, we have Nathaniel Hutchinson, director.

You have five minutes, please.

Nathaniel Hutchinson (Director, Petroleum Products Division, Government of Nunavut): Thank you.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

My name is Nathaniel Hutchinson. I am the director of the petroleum products division within the Government of Nunavut's Department of Transportation and Infrastructure.

Our division supplies fuel to all 25 communities in Nunavut. Each year, during the short, ice-free shipping season, we import approximately 225 million litres of fuel by sea. Once those ships leave, that fuel must last until the following year. Our mandate is to provide safe, reliable fuel services at the lowest sustainable cost. Similar to the GNWT's fuel services division, we operate on a long-term, break-even basis.

In Nunavut, fuel heats our homes, generates electricity, powers air, ground and marine transportation and supports virtually all economic activity. We have very few practical alternatives. Our current retail fuel prices remain competitive with other Canadian jurisdictions, but they still largely reflect fuel purchased in 2025. As this year's resupply season nears completion, we are preparing updated pricing recommendations to our financial management board. Board purchasing contracts and our stabilization fund have helped protect Nunavummiut from sharp fluctuations in fuel prices. Nevertheless, fuel purchased in 2026 is considerably more expensive than fuel purchased in 2025.

Today, wholesale diesel prices are exceptionally high, and the exchange rate adds further pressure to our purchasing costs. This raises concerns about our 2027 resupply and what higher costs could mean for Nunavut families, including hunters who depend on affordable fuel to harvest country food.

Beyond fuel prices, we face another important challenge, which is ensuring that our infrastructure keeps pace with growing demand. Since Nunavut was established in 1999, annual petroleum sales have increased by approximately 45%, going from 152 million litres in 1999 to 221 million litres in 2025. We anticipate needing to expand fuel storage capacity in eight communities over the coming years.

Consider Grise Fiord, Canada's northernmost community. Before this year's sealift, we had to airlift approximately 120,000 litres of diesel to prevent a shortage. The construction of a new water treatment plant and other projects in the community had pushed demand beyond the community's storage capacity. Transporting that fuel by air cost approximately five dollars per litre. With sufficient storage, that fuel could have arrived by ship at substantially lower costs.

Grise Fiord is an example of a broader challenge. Communities across Nunavut are experiencing sustained growth, and our infrastructure must accommodate their ongoing fuel needs to support new housing, community facilities and economic development. Expanding storage is costly and logistically challenging. Materials and equipment must be shipped north, construction seasons are short and facilities must be designed to withstand an extreme Arctic climate.

Retail fuel revenues recover the cost of purchasing and delivering fuel, along with operating and maintaining our facilities. Major expansions, however, require substantial capital investment. These investments must compete for the Government of Nunavut's limited capital resources, often at the expense of other essential projects, including housing, schools, elders' facilities and water treatment plants, to name a few.

As Nunavut's communities continue to grow, we need to ensure that our infrastructure grows with them. Without adequate storage, we risk costly emergency resupplies and delays to the very projects our communities need. Investing in fuel infrastructure is therefore more than ensuring a reliable fuel supply. It is about freeing up limited capital resources for other critical investments, supporting the growth of our communities and helping address the high cost of living in Nunavut.

Thank you. I welcome your questions.

● (1650)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next, we'll go inside the room to Integrated Resource Technologies Ltd.

Who will be speaking?

Kenneth Watson (President, Integrated Resource Technologies Ltd.): I will, for the whole time, Chair.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

Kenneth Watson: Mr. Chair, thank you for the opportunity to be here.

I want to focus on something very basic: the cost of diesel and heating fuel oil in the north. When talking about diesel fuel in the north, we're not just talking about the price at the pump. We're also talking about the cost of living.

Think about what diesel does for northern communities. It moves the groceries and building materials, powers the trucks and equipment, and supports business and essential services. Heating oil keeps families' homes warm.

When the price of fuel goes up, the cost gets passed through almost everything. Food, construction, transportation and services cost more. For families, heating their homes is not an option. When it's -30°C or -40°C, you have to heat your home. That's why I put it this way: In southern Canada, high diesel prices hurt you at the pump, but in northern Canada, high diesel prices hurt you at home.

What that means for families is that this really comes down to what happens around the kitchen table. If a family has to spend more to heat a house, that's money that doesn't go somewhere else. There may be less for groceries, clothing, transportation and kids.

Northern families can end up paying the high fuel cost twice. First, they pay it directly for heating and transportation. Then they pay it again through the higher costs of groceries, building materials and services. For me, the real affordability question isn't what a litre of diesel costs. After a family feeds the people in the house, buys groceries and pays for transportation, how much is actually left over?

What do we do about it? There's obviously a role for short-term assistance, but we just can't keep subsidizing higher and higher costs. We have to actually start bringing down the underlying costs. That means building better efficiency in homes, using better insulation, building better transportation infrastructure, having reliable local energy solutions where they make sense, and looking at ways to produce energy closer to the people who actually need it.

We have to be practical. In the north, reliability and affordability matter. Whatever energy solutions we use have to work in the extreme cold. Energy infrastructure is affordability infrastructure.

There's another piece to this: Keep the benefits in the north. The north has tremendous energy and natural resources potential. I think we should be asking how we use northern resources to create more affordable energy and economic opportunity for northern people. When we invest in energy and infrastructure, that's when we can create jobs, train local people, support northern indigenous businesses, and create partnerships and ownership possibilities. Let's keep more of that investment dollar circulating in northern communities. At the end of the day, the strongest long-term affordability program is a strong local economy.

I would ask the committee to consider the following recommendations.

First, recognize energy as an affordability issue. For families, heating and transportation are necessities.

Second, look beyond the pump price. Diesel affects the costs of food, housing, construction and essential services.

Third, invest in bringing down the underlying costs—including energy efficiency, transportation and infrastructure—and have reliable northern energy.

Fourth, make sure that northern investments create northern opportunities in jobs, business, training and partnerships.

In closing, I think the message is pretty straightforward. When we talk about diesel and heating oil in the north, we're really talking about the cost of living. Diesel moves the food. Diesel moves the building materials. Diesel powers the trucks. Heating fuel keeps families warm. Those costs ultimately end up at the kitchen table.

We need to help families with the pressures they're facing today, but in the long term, we have to start bringing down the underlying costs. If we're going to invest billions of dollars across northern Canada, let's make sure those investments also create northern jobs, northern business, indigenous participation and ownership, and stronger northern communities. Ultimately, if we can make reliable energy more affordable, we can make life in the north more affordable.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I look forward to your questions.

● (1655)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next, we have the Yukon Energy Corporation.

Rod, you're going to have five minutes, please.

Rod Savoie (Chair, Board of Directors, Yukon Energy Corporation): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for the opportunity to contribute to your study on affordability challenges in northern Canada.

My name is Rod Savoie. I serve as the chair of the board of directors of the Yukon Energy Corporation.

I will discuss some variations on the themes presented earlier by Minister Laking.

My professional background is in engineering, with more than 39 years of experience on infrastructure projects across northern Canada and internationally. Having lived in the north for almost 40 years, I bring a strong personal understanding of the region and have seen first-hand how rising costs are affecting affordability.

Yukon Energy's three hydroelectric facilities have been supplying electricity to Yukoners for decades. These facilities have allowed us to generate more than 90% of our electricity from renewable sources when averaged over 25 years. At the same time, we acknowledge that these facilities have had significant and lasting impacts on first nations lands, waters, cultures and traditional ways of life. These impacts continue today and reinforce our responsibility to learn from first nations and work together toward a better future.

Today, these facilities remain central to Yukon's electricity system but can no longer meet growing demand. Winter electricity use is nearly three times that in the summer, requiring diesel and LNG to supplement hydro generation. During peak winter demand, existing hydro and thermal facilities together cannot meet the needs of homes and businesses, excluding mines, and we are increasingly relying upon rented diesel generators just to maintain adequate capacity.

Like other jurisdictions in Canada, the Yukon's electricity system is reaching its limits. Last December, the Yukon reached a new electricity demand peak of 127 megawatts. At that time, 90% of our available electricity supply was being used, bringing us dangerously close to rotating power outages.

To avoid outages, we curtailed large industrial customers several times last winter, requiring them to disconnect from the grid so that we could maintain power to Yukon homes and businesses. The consequences of running out of power in the Yukon are particularly serious in the winter, when many Yukoners rely on electricity to heat their homes.

How did we get here?

A significant factor is that the Yukon has grown much faster than earlier planning anticipated. The population of the Yukon grew by 51.3% between 2005 and 2025, significantly outpacing Canada's overall growth of 29.2%. At the same time, the electrification of home heating and transportation is adding to winter peak demand, and non-industrial peak demand is projected to continue to rise 60% by 2035 as compared to 2025.

Yukon Energy has continued to plan and invest in new supply, but the pace of growth and the time required to assess, permit and construct major infrastructure has made it increasingly difficult to keep up. Our existing infrastructure is aging. We must make significant investments to preserve our hydroelectric facilities, replace aging equipment and add dependable winter capacity.

The scale of investment needed in Yukon's electricity system has grown significantly. Five years ago, annual capital investments ranged from $20 million to $40 million per year. Today, we're investing an average of five times that annually. For example, Yukon Energy's current projects, which are critical to keeping lights on and homes warm, will cost well over $1 billion.

This is only part of the investment required. Several major projects will continue beyond 2027, and new investments will be needed to meet growing demand. These costs will place further pressure on electricity rates in the years ahead. This creates a difficult challenge. We need to invest in our electricity system to maintain reliable service and support growth, but every additional dollar recovered from rates places further pressure on a small customer base and contributes to an increase in the cost of living for Yukoners.

Canada is also looking to the north for new opportunities in critical minerals, defence and economic development. Reliable electricity is fundamental to all of this. Supporting these opportunities will require new electricity infrastructure and careful consideration of how those costs are shared. Federal funding can make a meaningful difference in keeping electricity affordable for Yukoners. Recently, through the smart renewables and electrification pathways program, $50 million was secured for projects at our Mayo hydro facility. This will result in about a six-dollar decrease on Yukoners' monthly bills.

● (1700)

Yukon Energy is focused on managing these challenges through long-term planning and prudent investments. We make efficient use of existing resources, and we're also working with the Government of Yukon to pursue federal funding that can help reduce costs that are passed on to electricity customers.

The challenge is not simply how to build more electricity infrastructure. It's how to maintain a reliable electricity system for Yukoners while supporting the territory's future growth and Canada's broader northern interests and priorities.

Thank you. I welcome the committee's questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now start the six-minute round.

Bob, you have six minutes.

Bob Zimmer: Thank you, Chair.

Thanks to all our guests for appearing today.

Thanks for coming, Mayor, and thanks for coming, Ken. My questions will be for both of you.

As you know, diesel costs are through the roof in the north. I'm sure you are well aware of it, Mayor. I was just looking at the prices. In Yukon it's $2.69 per litre of diesel. In Inuvik it's $2.78 per litre of diesel. In Fort Nelson it's a whopping $2.84 per litre of diesel. It's not just that it's more expensive per litre; you use more of it in the north to either stay warm or power your trucks to drive up and down the highway.

This is an article from CTV, entitled "'It's almost immediate': How surging diesel prices could hit every Canadian's wallets". It's from September of this year. The article states:

> "Pretty much everything that we use, anything that is transported by truck, (or) by rail, or anything that goes from sea to the rail to trucks, all gets this cascading knock-on effect and it's real and it's almost immediate," said Dan McTeague, gas analyst and head of Canadians for Affordable Energy....
>
> McTeague added that the "cost of living in this country will go up correspondingly."

Ken, you represent a microrefinery company. You talked about how we need to lower the cost of diesel and the relative cost of food and everything else attached to that. I'm wondering if you could explain a little bit more your plan to do that.

Kenneth Watson: Thank you for the question.

We are looking at building microrefineries distributed throughout local areas in the north. The first one is in the Fort Nelson area. It's a microrefinery where we would like to take trapped natural gas that is not being shipped and convert it, using a process where we convert natural gas into diesel and home heating fuels. With that, being that we're already 12 hours closer to the area than we are from the refineries, we believe the savings in transport and the costs of producing it locally will drive down the cost substantially.

Bob Zimmer: Great.

For the people watching today, Fort Nelson is a very key community on the way up the Alaska Highway. It can service Yukon. It can service the Northwest Territories. It can service almost the entire north by having a refinery in that particular area.

Is that correct, Ken?

Kenneth Watson: That is correct.

Bob Zimmer: Part of this microrefinery isn't just accessing.... As I was just explaining to a colleague, we have the Montney play. The Horn River gas, which is Fort Nelson gas, is dry. It's not being utilized right now because it's not cost-beneficial to produce. We have a lot of natural gas in Fort Nelson that's really unused.

You also mentioned that wood waste could be added into this to make diesel as well. Can you explain that part of the process?

Kenneth Watson: The facility itself is basically taking natural gas and converting it to diesel. By adding a wood waste composition to it as a feedstock, we can actually drive it down and become a net-zero carbon facility, where the carbon offsets could be anywhere from 50¢ to 75¢ per litre. Over a 10-year process, it could be up to $3.5 billion in savings on fuel. Fort Nelson has ample natural gas, and it hasn't been harvested for 30 years. On the wood waste, or the wood that's available to get to market, we would not be using marketable trees. We'd be using biomass.

Basically, it was a 34% savings by adding a different feedstock, one that was other than natural gas.

● (1705)

Bob Zimmer: Just quickly, Ken, by how much did you say wood waste would reduce the diesel cost of $2.84 per litre?

Kenneth Watson: It would reduce it by 61¢ per litre.

Bob Zimmer: That's if wood is included.

Kenneth Watson: That's if wood is included. If wood isn't included, the savings are about eight cents to 12¢ per litre.

Bob Zimmer: I have about a minute and a half remaining, Mayor. You've made a long trip, so I want to get at least 90 seconds in.

What would make a difference? I know what's hit Fort Nelson. It used to be that we didn't even have enough room to land the planes, because it was that busy. Now it's really very quiet up there. What would a microrefinery do not just for the locals, if there's a local group that could work there at this refinery, but also in reducing costs for folks in Fort Nelson and the north?

Rob Fraser (Mayor, Northern Rockies Regional Municipality): Through the chair, thank you for the question.

I think it will create fuel autonomy in the north. We have 4.7 billion cubic metres of natural gas there. That's 100 years of supply at its maximum operating level, which would reduce the fuel.... The price of fuel permeates everything we do. You've heard it here today. The one thing that hasn't been said, I think, is that for remote communities, it's the ability to get to medical care. That hasn't been discussed. Sometimes the price of fuel just makes it unaffordable for people to get to a specialist or to a CT scanner, and they just don't do it. Their health outcomes are worse because of it.

A refinery like this will assist in every aspect of the lives of northerners and their communities.

The Chair: Thank you, Your Worship.

Next, we have Lori for six minutes, please.

Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik, Iksivautaq*. Thank you, Chair.

Tunngasugit and welcome to all the witnesses. I'll be asking my questions of Nathaniel Hutchinson from Rankin Inlet.

My questions are going to appear a bit funny, but I'm trying to better explain to Canadians what the realities are in Nunavut. For example, when you were talking about fuel storage, I don't know that people really understand that. I don't know if most Canadian cities have fuel storage. Can you describe that a bit better?

Nathaniel Hutchinson: Yes. Thank you for the question.

All 25 communities in Nunavut have bulk fuel storage facilities, and those facilities are designed to be large enough to accommodate an entire year's worth of demand for that community, for all products. That includes diesel, jet fuel in most communities and gasoline in all communities.

Where we have a high growth in many Nunavut communities, we find ourselves running short on capacity. That's when we create a situation where we need to coordinate emergency resupply through airlift. It's not common for us to do that, but it's the only alternative we have if we do not have sufficient capacity.

Thank you.

Lori Idlout: Could you explain what it is that happened in Grise Fiord when you had to provide that emergency supply?

Nathaniel Hutchinson: Yes. Grise Fiord has a lot of activity going on in construction. There's a new water treatment plant going on there and other construction projects such as housing, etc. Our facility there is quite limited. In fact, in the year prior to that, we hooked three additional horizontal tanks of 90,000 litres each into that facility, just to give us more capacity, but it wasn't enough to last. We found ourselves in a situation of having to airlift 120,000 litres of fuel.

That was a very challenging operation, because Grise Fiord has a very short runway and very challenging weather conditions. We managed to complete the task about a month before our resupply, which happened in August.

In many communities, we can supply as early as the first part of June or July, but with the latitude of Grise Fiord, the earliest we can get there is usually in the third week of August.

● (1710)

Lori Idlout: That resupply only happens once a year because of the sealift season.

Nathaniel Hutchinson: That's correct. In Grise Fiord, we have a very short window. We have a matter of a few weeks, really, to get in there and get out.

Lori Idlout: Okay. Thank you so much.

For you, being in the petroleum products division, I'm wondering if you could describe for us how you determine pricing and how you understand pricing happens in terms of not just what the customer buying petroleum and stuff pays, but where you buy it from and what decisions you make to help ensure there's some sense of affordability in the north.

Nathaniel Hutchinson: We import all of our fuel. It comes from eastern Canada. Nearly all of that fuel is imported. Much of it comes from the United States. We use forward contracts to time our purchases leading up to resupply so that we don't find ourselves being price-takers at vessel loading during the summer. We often start buying our fuel in tranches as early as December.

In fact, last year we made a little less than half of our diesel purchases in December, before the events in Iran drove prices up significantly. That strategy has benefited Nunavummiut. By using foreign contracts, we can also secure at favourable times, as oil markets soften or correct. Even in a period of high volatility like we had with the Iran war, we still were able to secure favourable pricing.

Our retail prices recover our cost of product, our cost of transportation, our storage and distribution costs in the community, our operations and maintenance expenses, and the salaries of our division. They recover nearly all costs. There are some hidden subsidies there in terms of shared government services. We do not amortize the cost of our tank farms in the retail price of fuel. That's another subsidy.

Lori Idlout: You mentioned the impact of the Iran war. Are there other contributing factors that you have to consider when you're buying diesel?

Nathaniel Hutchinson: Yes, we monitor markets very closely. Global events are typically the biggest shocks.

Another member referenced the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. That was another period of extremely elevated pricing. These are the biggest price shocks, but we're always monitoring markets on a daily basis, checking futures contracts and taking guidance from the IEA and various analysts.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next, we have MP Gill for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses in the room and taking part in the meeting by video conference.

My question is for Ms. Riva.

You hold the Canada Research Chair in Housing, Community and Health. I saw that you co-signed an article in Policy Options in 2023 in which you called on the federal government to adopt a policy, or rather a comprehensive housing strategy, that takes into account the specific needs of the north.

Could you tell us about that strategy as you see it in that article, and even in your work as a whole?

Mylène Riva: In fact, we view the strategy as an ecosystem. Two of my colleagues from the At Home in the North partnership, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, testified before the committee. We approach housing in the north in an ecosystem-based way by linking housing to other important aspects of everyday life, such as health, education, early childhood development and employment.

In the article, we also wrote that the housing continuum model that ultimately targets home ownership may not be achievable in a number of communities in the north, simply because there is no market. It is extremely expensive not only to build a house, but also to maintain it, pay for electricity, gas and diesel, pay for the waste water system and connect to the water system. This type of housing tenure is very hard to access.

One of the points we made in the article was that there needs to be a better understanding of what local housing priorities are. Is it transitional housing? Is it housing co-ops? Do we need more social housing? It's also really a matter of assessing needs community by community.

● (1715)

Marilène Gill: If I understand correctly, we can't do things exactly the same everywhere either. We need to take into account the different types of construction and housing.

I noticed that you've obviously analyzed the issue from a number of angles. In your work, you also talked about the issue of colonialism. Obviously, colonial social policies and inequalities are symptomatic when it comes to housing. It's persistent, but it's symptomatic. You also talk about planning and funding. I know that's a lot of topics at once, but I imagine you're used to juggling all of them. Can you elaborate on that?

I know that we're always short on time, and you could also submit information to us in writing, but I'd like you to give us some recommendations, particularly regarding the ecosystem vision of the issue. You could also give the committee recommendations on housing. We almost always talk about it, but it's also important to have new recommendations, particularly from the scientific community.

Mylène Riva: Thank you for the question. I don't know how much time I have left to answer it.

I would say that, when it comes to funding, one of the big issues is that it's short-term funding or large envelopes that often have to be spent very quickly. There should be permanent funding so that communities and regions can plan projects. We also need to develop local labour for construction and maintenance. These are extremely important issues.

You talked about colonialism. Having southern workers come to the north creates certain issues in the communities. There are different ways to slightly rethink housing construction and housing funding in the north using ideas that come from the north. There are a lot of good ideas. There are plenty of solutions. There are plenty of programs that could work, but sometimes it's hard to integrate them into existing programs or existing boxes.

I would say that we need to co-operate, build on what is being done in the north, support projects financially and get the necessary means.

Marilène Gill: It has to go from north to south, not the other way around.

Mylène Riva: Yes.

Marilène Gill: In your work, you also talked about the issue of community self-determination, which could be a cornerstone of housing construction.

Once again, can you give us more details? You have about a minute left to do so, but you could also send us your comments in writing.

Mylène Riva: That's actually a big question. It's a short question, but the self-determination of indigenous peoples when it comes to housing is a big question.

Again, it's about listening to the needs of the north. There's a lot of money going north right now, but what are the priorities and needs of the communities? They will vary. How are the needs determined and measured? There will be variations there as well.

I'm going to take the time to answer that question properly in writing and to send you some potential solutions, or rather some food for thought, let's put it that way.

Marilène Gill: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

● (1720)

[*English*]

Billy, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Billy Morin (Edmonton Northwest, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to go to Mr. Watson first.

I liked what you said about how high diesel prices don't just hurt at the pump in the north, but they also hurt at home. Certainly, I'd like to see diesel taxes lowered for an extended period of time, but there are diesel taxes that have been lowered by the federal government, most recently.

Would you categorize these as band-aids for a wound that's bleeding a lot more in that regard? How has it affected, for instance, planning beyond three, four or six months? Does it affect not only your business but also general operations in the north?

Kenneth Watson: Tax savings are always good in the short term. We have a problem right now that we're trying to sort out with the cost of living, so they do help. In the long term, I think we really have to look at substantially lowering the cost on an annual basis, so it can be budgeted for rather than always having spikes and having to look to buy fuel in December in order to get some cost savings down the road.

Tax relief is a good thing. It's a short-term band-aid, but I think we really have to look at where the fuel is built and how it's built, as well as how we can continue it to be a lower cost of living for people rather than looking at it as the price of fuel.

Realistically, trying to lower the price of fuel should be one of the biggest things that we look at right now, because it's a variable. One day it could be $1.85, and the next day it could be $2.85. We live in the north, and we're used to the spikes. I drive around every night to find out what the lowest price is, and that's where I go to buy fuel. Giving the communities the ability to purchase cheaper fuel ends up putting more money back into the communities where it needs to be spent, so it's not spent driving down the road or things like that.

Ultimately, I think we need to look at how we build the fuel rather than what the real cost is.

Billy Morin: Thank you. Building on what you said, I have a question for Mr. Hutchinson.

We had Mr. McBryan here from Buffalo Airways. He had some great stories about how he services the north. He threw out something really tangible, which I like. I would categorize it as low-hanging fruit. He described how upgrading runways by paving and extending would tangibly bring down costs. It's just something that I think a government can wrap its head around as opposed to some of the challenges with permanent fixes, tax relief and things of that nature.

I might be asking you to repeat yourself, but can you expand on storage? Is that something as tangible as fixing a runway in terms of being one temporary thing the government could invest in that would systematically, or for a while, bring some more permanent relief? Do you have any idea of what some of those costs would be to upgrade the storage capacity?

Nathaniel Hutchinson: Yes. Thank you for the question. On a cost basis, as with many projects, we are certainly seeing the cost of our infrastructure going way up. We built a new tank farm about 11 years ago in Cambridge Bay at a cost of about $25 million. That was a good-sized facility. Today we're planning another facility build in a community. It's roughly the same size, and maybe a little smaller, but it's more than double the price, where we're at now.

There's a lot of pressure there. Unfortunately, when we go to expand these facilities, we end up competing with other priority projects of the government that need to advance.

Billy Morin: Would you categorize tank storage as something that would be a tangible investment? I realize that the prices have gone up, but is this something that permanently, or at least for decades—like that $25-million one—would lower the cost of living across the board? Do you see it as a first, tangible priority versus maybe some of the other things that are being invested in?

Nathaniel Hutchinson: I think so. On the pressures we're seeing on our infrastructure and the need for that investment, if there's a predictable capital stream to help us invest and expand those facilities, it certainly helps for affordability. Otherwise, we would find ourselves having to get creative around funding capital projects—even the consideration of a reserve or something that would be funded through retail prices, like you see in the south. A sustained flow of capital dollars to our infrastructure certainly helps with affordability.

● (1725)

Billy Morin: Thank you.

The Chair: We will now go to the Liberals.

Brendan, you have five minutes, please.

Brendan Hanley: Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses for this panel. It's been a very constructive and very coherent panel on the various aspects of the challenge with energy and how it relates to everyday affordability. I really appreciate the testimony.

Mr. Savoie, I'll go back to you. What you said really echoed the minister's testimony in the last panel on the need to build energy capacity and, therefore, reduce or at least stabilize energy costs. Maybe this is a chance to dig into some areas a little deeper. Really, when you talk about the cost of electricity generation, it obviously is affected by multiple inputs. The price of fuel is one, but you referred also to the capital spending for upkeep or for adding new capacity. I know that people are very concerned about how much they are actually paying for energy.

To operate the Yukon grid from source to household—I'm talking about where the grid exists—it of course involves the Yukon government, involves the energy corporation and also involves, for much of the grid, the private corporation ATCO as a distributor. I wonder if you can comment here. Between these various players, how are rates ultimately determined and subsidized—or not?

Rod Savoie: For quite some time, Yukoners have enjoyed legacy investment by the federal government that can be traced back decades, often associated with resource extraction. That set the grounds for what I mentioned earlier about three hydro facilities really forming the backbone of the electricity grid. The fact that those facilities have been maintained and functional throughout the decades established for quite some time what was really a favourable situation.

In recent years, since the demand and population have increased so much, we're now into constructing—pursuing new capital projects at much higher construction costs than they once were. We're also having to repair this aging infrastructure. When we contemplate the mix of all of the different effects that go into determining a rate at the end of the day, we have to bear in mind that there has been historical federal investment that helped immensely.

The other inputs that are more variable and more current, such as the price of diesel, are very much real. These are becoming more and more prevalent, particularly as we run out of capacity from our hydro sources and are having to use more thermal plants. We have an LNG facility and multiple diesel facilities, so there's a pretty straight-line correlation between the cost of fuel inputs and electricity outputs.

You asked about how the prices are ultimately determined. There are these multiple players involved. We've talked now about the capital investment side. Yukon Energy is a publicly owned organization that is the primary generator of electricity that is largely sold to ATCO at a wholesale rate. ATCO then distributes it, so ATCO owns that final infrastructure that gets the electricity from the substations through the communities and delivered to homes. All the rates are reviewed by the Yukon Utilities Board. Every time there's a proposed rate increase, it has to be justified, and there has to be a demonstration of value through that board, whether it be Yukon Energy's rates or ATCO's rates.

Collectively, all of these things—from the inception of capital investment to the operational inputs and the distribution costs—form what we see as the rate.

I hope that answers the question.

Brendan Hanley: That's very helpful. Thank you.

We only have about 30 seconds left, but I wonder if you can talk about.... You again referred to opportunities for the Yukon, critical mineral resource development being one of them.

What are the load considerations, in addition to population needs, if we are to harness the amazing critical mineral opportunities that are ahead of us?

● (1730)

Rod Savoie: They are potentially very large, depending on the potential mine, of course. There are 31 critical minerals on Canada's list of critical minerals. Yukon has identified resources of 12 of those and occurrences of another 13. Some of those large potential mines scale to the point of actually representing the current full demand of the entire territory. The potential is game-changing.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Gill, you have two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Once again, this will be a very brief intervention for you, Professor Riva, but you have a few minutes. I will let you use the two minutes to talk to us about colonization, which we have addressed, or any other subject you would like to address for the benefit of the committee.

Mylène Riva: In fact, we are seeing that colonial approaches continue to this day when projects from the south are imposed on the north and local people are not consulted. I would like to believe that this is not done intentionally, but sometimes thinking a little more about the consequences of actions could have a positive impact.

I'd like to give you an example. This is not a colonial practice, but when Quebec, for example, decided to legislate against all diesel furnaces, it did so at the expense of indigenous people who need diesel to heat their homes. The consequence for the communities of Nunavik, for example, is that it is increasingly hard to find the equipment needed to repair furnaces or the skilled labour to maintain them.

We have to think about the consequences of the decisions made in the south. Take Build Canada Homes, for example. That's all great. However, as we've seen in the housing booms in the north, the housing crisis has been an ongoing issue since colonization.

If we don't give indigenous communities, territories and governments all the decision-making powers when it comes to housing, from design to construction, not to mention maintenance, we're going to perpetuate certain inequities, including some very long-standing ones.

People talk about a housing crisis in the north, but in fact, the word “crisis” indicates something acute. Housing has never been adequate. Giving full authority to indigenous territories and governments to have self-determination over housing breaks the wheel of colonialism.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

For the last two spots, it's a rapid round, as we say. MP Dalton will have a very short question and answer period. It will be about a minute long. If you don't quite get the answer out, you can put it into writing as well, but the questions need to get on record. Following that, the Liberals will have MP Lavack for a one-minute rapid round.

Thank you.

Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Congratulations, Rob, on your acclamation last Saturday.

Rob Fraser: Thank you.

Marc Dalton: We've been hearing a lot about diesel from all of the different witnesses and the importance of it. I found very fascinating the potential of a microrefinery for diesel in Fort Nelson. You're on the line toward Whitehorse, the Yukon and even Fort Simpson.

You may have to send this in, but is this being looked at seriously? Is the private sector interested? It just seems like there's a real opportunity here. Are you having push-back? Let us know a bit about that.

Rob Fraser: Thank you for the question.

It has very recently been brought to our attention. It fits exactly with our economic diversification strategy. We really can support Ken, and I believe our indigenous neighbours are also interested in new opportunities for the resources that we have. I can't speak for them, but I know that with the new councils that are there, they're willing to participate.

● (1735)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to MP Lavack for the rapid round.

[*Translation*]

Ginette Lavack (St. Boniface—St. Vital, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all today's witnesses for being here and for their important testimony.

My question is for Ms. Riva and concerns housing.

We've had other occasions where people have made presentations and told us that one of the many challenges with increasing housing in the north lies in the fact that there are municipal zoning challenges.

Is that something that comes up in your research or in the work that you do? I'm talking about the fact that communities are not always able to build housing precisely because of shortcomings in municipal zoning.

Mylène Riva: Unfortunately, I haven't looked at that specifically. I'm so sorry. However, I can try to find some answers to your question.

Ginette Lavack: I would appreciate that.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

I agree with MP Hanley. This has been very informative.

Thanks to all of you for your expertise in helping us put together some really important information for this important study.

Thank you very much.

Do I have permission to adjourn?

Bob Zimmer: I just want to say thank you to the chair for being flexible. Some of the witnesses came later and everything, but you've been great. On affordability, I think we got to hear from all the different stakeholders.

Thank you, Chair, for doing that.

The Chair: Please, go on.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: We are adjourned.

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