

MEMBER STATEMENT—KEVIN O'REILLY MLA FRAME LAKE

VISITOR SERVICES IN YELLOWKNIFE

September 22, 2017

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. It's fall, and once again we are seeing our streets filled with tourists drawn from around the world to enjoy our spectacular aurora viewing. While further interim measures have recently been announced, we are still without a solution supported by the tourism sector, or resourced with dedicated funds from this government.

As I have pointed out before, aurora tourism is the NWT's biggest success story in sustainable and renewable economic diversification. It's a \$40 million a year industry, and a study last year showed that having a visitor's information centre boosted expenditures by about \$5 million alone in Yellowknife. As I've also pointed out, visitors' centres at the 60th parallel in Inuvik and in Dawson are operated by the GNWT and only open in the summer.

Anyone with eyes knew that the Yellowknife visitors' information centre was crumbling to ruin. The warning flags have been up for years. For more than a year, the Northern Frontier Visitors Association, which operated our very popular centre, has appealed to this government to take action so tourists won't be left out in the cold, with no welcome or advice.

We appreciate the City of Yellowknife's effort to offer a stopgap, but this will not be the comprehensive service replacement required. There has been no progress on a full-service centre to operate temporarily until we have a new visitors' centre open. The numbers prove how inadequate the move to the museum has been. There were 725 clients served in July this year; the same period last year, 3,018. That's a catastrophic drop.

As I have said before, it is simply inconceivable that Yellowknife would not have a world-class tourist information and interpretive centre. How is it possible that this government operates visitors' centres with comparatively low figures, but has sat on its hands in ensuring service for the NWT's tourism epicentre? It is as if our government has simply vacated the field for supporting tourism in Yellowknife.

It is time to stop ignoring our guests and get serious about maximizing tourism benefits. I am looking for this government to commit operating and capital funds in this budget cycle to begin construction of a new centre and to explain its plan for service in the meantime. I will have questions for the Minister of Industry, Tourism and Investment later today. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.