

KEVIN O'REILLY—MLA FRAME LAKE
Committee of the Whole—2021-2022 Capital Budget Review
Dept. of Industry, Tourism and Investment—October 21, 2020

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Madam Chair. I see in the budget here that there is supposed to be a wayside park number 1 on the Inuvik to Tuktoyaktuk Highway. I've had an opportunity to drive the highway now a couple of times. I'm kind of surprised that we don't build these things into the original design, but can someone tell me a little bit more about what this is going to actually be? The pull-outs on the highway now, they make the shoulder a little bit wider. I'm hoping that this is actually going to be a place where people can actually pull off. There might be some interpretive panels. There might be, I don't know, a place for people to do some things. What is this all about in the capital estimates? Thanks, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you, Member. Minister.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Madam Chair. I think this really is meant to be essentially a fairly basic site with the pull-off and some essential basic facilities there, but let me see if there is anything else that I'm -- yes. Sorry. Basically, they have a very basic pull-away, not necessarily an interpretive centre, which would be a fairly significant investment that is not contemplated here. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you, Minister. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Madam Chair. I don't think I was asking for an interpretive centre; maybe interpretive panels, like we see on the highway even now between Behchoko and Fort Providence. Can I just get a little more detail about what this is? The pull-outs that you see on this highway now are marked with signs. It's like the shoulder is about two feet wider, and they call it a pull-out. If I was driving that road from the South and I thought there was going to be a pull-out and all you see is a wider shoulder, it's just a little bit misleading, maybe. Is this actually going to be somewhere where you can actually pull your vehicle right off the highway, like a loop? What else is going to be there? Is there going to be an outhouse or picnic tables, or something? What is this all about? Thanks, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you, Member. Minister.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Madam Chair. Sorry, my apologies there. I did misunderstand. Yes. The intended vision, if you will, is that there is a pull-out sufficient to park a vehicle, have a picnic, have the interpretive signage, and actually be able to utilize this as a space, a washroom facility, more than just the roadway on the side; something a little more than that. I understand, right now, there are some conversations happening with the local hunter and trapper association. Once that is done, this can move forward and be something that is actually usable as a space, I think more in the line of what the Member is envisioning. Thank you.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Madam Chair. Yes. A couple of areas here. If you look at page

27 in the capital estimates, some of this looks like it's related to the Yellowknife airport, at least one item here. Is this money that's coming out of the revolving fund? How does this relate to the use of the revolving fund? Thanks, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you, Member. Minister.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Madam Chair. There is a committee that's responsible for all of the technology management systems within the Government of the Northwest Territories, and they have a budget assigned to them for such projects as that at the airport, as well as you'll see here, items for corrections, items for cultural places. It's that set budget is where this money is coming from. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you, Minister. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Madam Chair. Is the money for this project coming out of the revolving fund, or it's just being parked in Finance? Where does the money actually come from for this work? Thanks.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you, Member. Minister.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Madam Chair. I was actually just trying to see if it's showing, listed here. Anyhow, no, it has nothing to do with the revolving fund, Madam Chair. That's not being touched for this purpose. There is, again, it's the set amount that's allotted to new information technology products. I'll let Mr. Kalgutkar confirm the number that that comes from. It's that budget that sits in Finance and information shared services for use for all the projects that come through the committee that then determines which of the technical projects, or information technical projects should go forward. Again, I don't want to get the number wrong, Madam Chair, so I'll just see if the deputy minister has it. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you, Minister. Deputy Minister Kalgutkar.

MR. KALGUTKAR: Thank you, Madam Chair. The appropriation for all the information technology projects is funded through the Department of Finance, so this is in the Department of Finance's appropriation. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you, deputy minister. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks for that. The top item on page 27, broadband fibre expansion link. This mentions that this is the Inuvik to Tuktoyaktuk extension of the Mackenzie Valley fibre link. I've been somewhat critical of the Mackenzie Valley fibre link in the past, kind of building the line but passing by communities without a distribution system when it had actually been pitched as a way to improve broadband access across the NWT. Does this budget item actually include a distribution system in Tuktoyaktuk, or how are people in Tuktoyaktuk going to be able to take advantage of extending the fibre link to their community? Thanks, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you, Member. Minister.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Madam Chair. Much like the Mackenzie Valley fibre line that has brought a point of access to communities up and down the entire Mackenzie Valley, this now, will extend that all the way to Tuktoyaktuk so that

there is that point of access. It's the backbone of the system, backbone of bringing the line up to the community, and it provides, it certainly will provide in terms of healthcare and education and the other government services that the government can be a customer of, and then with respect to residents in their homes. There's recently been the CRTC announcements supportive of a Northwestel application. That's where that final last mile, if you will, their point of home connection will take place, but this specific project from the government's point of view, makes that other part possible. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you, Minister. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Madam Chair. I've heard this, we've had this debate and discussion before, and we need a real plan to bring affordable and accessible broadband to all of our communities, not just building lines and ending them. It's like building a water line in a community, but nobody can use it. Is there any money in here for actually developing even a plan or a costed proposal of some sort for broadband across the Northwest Territories for all of our communities? Thanks, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you, Member. Minister.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Madam Chair. No, Madam Chair. This is not an operational component of the budget. This is not the work. This budget doesn't speak to the work that goes on in ISSS or through the Chief Information Officer's office, which is responsible for ensuring that broadband is accessible and available to the greatest extent possible. This is an infrastructure item, so it really is just speaking to the infrastructure project that is under consideration and under planning to bring access to the fibre line into the community of Tuktoyaktuk. That is what this is. Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you, Minister. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Madam Chair. If this is not the place where I would expect to find work and money to support the development of a broadband plan for the whole Northwest Territories, where would I find it in the budget, in the capital budget? Thanks, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you, Member. Minister.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Madam Chair. The Government of the Northwest Territories is not an Internet service provider. If the 19th Assembly decides that the Government of the Northwest Territories should become an Internet service provider, that's a very different conversation. The capital plan budget that is here right now is: this plan is demonstrating the next significant step in terms of extending broadband access, fibre access, right up to the Arctic Ocean. There certainly are other projects that are being contemplated and discussed, some of which will be potential capital plan projects that will come through in a future year.

At this point, this is the project we have here. Internet service aspect of it, that involves ensuring that the CRTC's approval of ongoing projects through Northwestel or other smaller service providers. I'm certainly happy to speak to those, but I don't know that this is necessarily the moment in which to do that. If that's the question, then I can get

back and provide more information about that Internet service provision and where we fit into it. As far as the capital planning, right now, this is the next step for us in terms of providing better fibre access in the Northwest Territories. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you, Minister. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Madam Chair. This could be more of a comment. If we have to wait for the CRTC and Northwestel to develop broadband for all of our communities, it's probably not even going to happen in my lifetime. The federal government and throne speech on lots of other occasions have talked about almost becoming like a right within Canada. There is a need for equitable access to the Internet, and we saw that with the pandemic, with distance education needs for our youth and the education system. Even applying for CERB online, whatever, people have to have equitable and affordable access to broadband across the country.

If we don't have a plan together, a costed plan, to take to the federal government, we're going to miss the boat again on federal funding like we did with housing. I just cannot stress enough to my Cabinet colleagues: we need that plan. It's not just me saying it. It's people like Just Recovery, Our Time, people across the Northwest Territories who want and have a right to access to affordable Internet and telecommunication services. Where is the plan to develop that? There is no money in the budget to do it. I don't know what else to say, Madam Chair. We have to get that plan together, and the sooner the better so you folks in the Cabinet side can go to Ottawa and start to get that money. Thanks, Madam Chair. That's the big capital project that our government should be pursuing right now. Thanks, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you, Member. Minister.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Madam Chair. There is so much going in this file right now, and I was only hesitating to get into it because we're doing capital review, the capital plan that I have in front of me that we've actually got a plan for that we can move forward and get an approval so that we can get this out to contract and to tender. There is fibre to Whati that is under consideration. There is the fibre line coming up the Dempster to provide redundancy. There is the prospect of redundancy coming out of Fort Resolution which is still fairly theoretical but would give redundancy to Yellowknife. There really is a lot happening, but it's not a stage where I can come forward with a capital plan where I can give you a cost estimate and say that, in three years from now, there will be shovels on the ground to start laying that line.

This is a plan that gives projects of that nature but in terms of the bigger picture, concepts, as I say, I don't want there to be any misconception in the public that the government's not aware, that the government isn't looking at the kinds of things that I've just described and that I am not having those conversations, which I am, with federal Ministers. Just recently, in fact, had that conversation with the federal Minister because the UBF, the broadband fund is going to be opening up again soon. We do want to be there, and we want to be at the front of the line with visionary plans. A visionary plan isn't the same as a capital plan. That was my only hesitancy, but it's not for lack of having a vision. Thank you, Madam Chair.

