

**KEVIN O'REILLY—MLA FRAME LAKE**  
**Covid Secretariat—Expenditures and Oversight**  
**Committee of the Whole—Supplementary Estimate Review**  
**November 3, 2020**

**MR. O'REILLY:** Thanks, Mr. Chair. I do have some questions and some comments I would like to make about this particular item. The first thing, though, I will start with some questions. I have had mixed reaction from some of my constituents about this COVID secretariat, and there is a lot of concern about the amount of money that we are being asked to put into this. I want to get a commitment out of the Minister of Finance or the Premier about some kind of regular reporting of the expenditures for the COVID secretariat functions to year-end and maybe into the new year, as well. Can I get some kind of commitment about what kind of periodic reporting can be made to Regular MLAs and to the public about the expenditures for the COVID secretariat functions from now till year-end? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

**CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Rocky Simpson):** Thank you, Member. Minister.

**HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am happy to make a monthly commitment. The Department of Finance will be collecting monthly variance reports on the COVID secretariat spending and can make those public as they are available. It does take some time, so September 30<sup>th</sup>, it does not mean we necessarily put it out on September 30<sup>th</sup>, Mr. Chair. When it does get gathered and reported and analyzed, it can take a couple of weeks, but we will be getting them and putting them out on a monthly basis. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Rocky Simpson):** Thank you, Minister. Member.

**MR. O'REILLY:** Thanks, Mr. Chair. Thanks to the Minister for that commitment. In the monthly variance reporting, presumably it's not just going to be a bunch of numbers, that there would be some attempt to explain the changes or differences from what is anticipated in terms of places where there might be extra spending that was unanticipated or, hopefully, reductions in spending moving forward. Is that going to be kind of documented in these monthly reports? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

**CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Rocky Simpson):** Thank you, Member. Minister.

**HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am inclined to just give the simple answer of yes, but rather than use hand signals, perhaps I'll turn it over to the deputy minister. He can describe in a little more detail what the contents of the report might be.

**CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Rocky Simpson):** Deputy minister.

**MR. KALGUTKAR:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. What we'll do for Members on a monthly basis, and then we'll post it on the Department of Finance website, is a very detailed variance report on the COVID secretariat by every category area. In that category area, we will report on the costs that have been incurred to date; the variance to date; the projected costs that we're expecting to the end of the year and the variance of those

projected costs; and an explanation of why we are seeing a difference. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Rocky Simpson):** Thank you, deputy minister. Member.

**MR. O'REILLY:** Thanks, Mr. Chair. I do appreciate that commitment, and it's, I think, prudent financial management. Earlier, I mentioned how there have been mixed reactions from my constituents. I had an online constituency meeting I think it was early in October about this, and certainly, it was a big source of discussion. I do need to say that I think the communications around the COVID secretariat left a lot to be desired, and I think we've all learned from that experience, I hope. I don't think it was communicated very well.

This is not about creating some new institution or department or something. This is about carrying on a number of functions that have actually been going on since March and April. This is about the ProtectNWT function. It's about the border control functions. It's about the isolation centres. These are all functions that have been going on literally for months. The functions, as I understand it, that have been added to the secretariat are some additional staff around coordination and communications. We've all asked for clearer communications; I just said that a few minutes ago myself. These are things that we need moving forward to help us better manage our response to the pandemic and allow us to look at different ways of controlling some of the costs and finding cost savings. I think there is a misunderstanding in the public that this is creating some brand new bureaucracy, some brand new positions. People have been doing this job since March, April, for the most part. This is not about creating a new institution, a new body, whatsoever. It's about trying to find a way to better coordinate that, and look at cost saving potentials as we move forward.

This is not about approving \$87 million in spending. The Premier said that is the worst-case scenario. It is over three years. That is not what is before the House right now in the supplementary appropriation. What is before the House with this supplementary appropriation is approval to spend \$32 million on the COVID secretariat functions to the end of this financial year. We've heard from the Minister of Finance that there is \$24 million in federal assistance that is already on the table, with the prospect of more coming, so what we are being asked to approve, Mr. Chair, is \$8 million in new funding to carry on the COVID-related response that has been in place since March, April, May, June. That is something that I am prepared to support, with the assurance that there is going to be monthly variance reporting.

The Premier also spoke about efforts to find cost reductions, particularly half of these costs are related to the self-isolation centres. She has made clear commitments that there are going to be ways to look at rapid testing and whether the self-isolation periods might be changed; having people isolate in regional centres that are not on the self-isolation list right now; working with communities, if they are prepared to have people self-isolate in their communities. There may be some additional savings there, discretionary travel. I agree that we probably shouldn't be covering some of those costs ourselves, so I'm convinced that we're going to find ways to bring those costs down, even for the \$8 million that we're being asked to approve between now and year end.

I think that's all I need to say now, Mr. Chair. With the commitments that I've received here in terms of regular financial reporting, a commitment to ensure that there are ways to reduce these costs moving forward, I am prepared to support an extra \$8 million to keep in place the sound controls our government has had in place to keep COVID out of the Northwest Territories. I think that's a price that most members of the public are prepared to continue to spend until March 31<sup>st</sup> to get that peace of mind and keep our residents safe and sound. I'm prepared to support this with the commitments that I've received here in Committee of the Whole from our Finance Minister and from our Premier. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

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**MR. O'REILLY:** Thanks, Mr. Chair. I know it's been a long day and long evening, but I am concerned with some of the remarks that I heard. I think I do not support personal attacks on the Premier. This is not about the Premier's vanity, and I do not accept those kinds of remarks being made in the House. I just don't think that they are appropriate.

This is not another bureaucracy. This is continuing functions that have been going on since March, April, May. This is not a new bureaucracy. This is continuing the efforts of our government attempting to respond to a public health emergency. This is unprecedented. We have a pandemic. We have a public health emergency on our hands, and I take at face value what my colleagues on the other side have said, the Minister of Finance, the Premier, in terms of demonstrating fiscal prudence with monthly variance reports, that there are efforts underway to reduce the cost of the isolation centres, which are the major part of the cost in the supplementary appropriation for the COVID secretariat functions. I'm not dictating to anybody what happens with this pandemic. I accept what the Chief Public Health Officer has done to date in terms of keeping us safe or keeping our residents safe.

Everybody's entitled to their own views about whether they support this funding or not. I'm not dictating to anybody, and I don't believe that Cabinet is dictating to anybody how we respond to the pandemic. A lot of this has been done quickly, and I think it has kept our residents safe. I commend Cabinet and my colleagues on this side of the House for working together through a lot of this. It hasn't always been easy, but I think we've found reasonable compromises and grounds to work together in the interests of all of our residents.

I had hoped that if people on our side have concerns or issues with the cost, that there would be more specific suggestions around ways to reduce them, and I think some of us have brought some of those ideas forward. If you don't like the management function performed by the secretariat, say so, and move to remove that, or the communications function. There's a number of things here that I'm just not prepared to compromise on things like border controls, ProtectNWT, the self-isolation centres. We'll be watching very carefully. We'll continue to put pressure on my Cabinet colleagues to find, to save funding for those functions.

At the end of the day, how much is public health worth, \$8 million? I'm sorry. I'm prepared to spend that to invest in the health and safety of our residents. That's what this is about. We're not approving \$87 million here. This is about funding for the COVID secretariat functions to the end of this fiscal year. Next year, all bets are off. I'm hoping that the pandemic is over by then. We're being asked to approve an additional \$8 million tonight, and I'm ready to do that. I'm not prepared to support this motion, and I would hope that colleagues, when speaking to this, refrain from attacking individuals that are here in the House. Thanks, Mr. Chair.