

KEVIN O'REILLY—MLA FRAME LAKE
Land Use Planning
Committee of the Whole—2021-2022 Operating Budget Review
Dept. of Lands—February 24, 2021

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. One of my favourite areas, land use planning, it brought me up here in 1985, and it's almost as long as the Dehcho Land Use Plan has been in development. It's now been in development for 20 years. I asked the Premier about this in June of last year in connection with a decision that the government had made to make permanent the subsurface land withdrawal for Edehzhie. Can someone give me a brief update of the Dehcho Land Use Plan and why it hasn't been completed after 20 years? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

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

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Thank you. For 20 years, I probably can't give you that answer. What I can tell you right now is that we've appointed our government person on there. The committee's excited, and they basically said within the next two years, supposedly, that we are going to have the land use plan up and running. We are working on that. If I've misspoken, I will actually, with your permission, turn to the deputy minister. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

MS. HAENER: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Edehzhie was referenced earlier, and in the lead-up to actually putting forward the subsurface withdrawal for Edehzhie, there was considerable discussions with representatives from the Deh Cho. A commitment to devote extra and continued energy towards work on the land use plan and completing that work. The Minister referenced that we did have the GNWT representative for that work retire and appointed a new representative. We received a very favourable response from the Deh Cho in relation to that, and from that, took to heart that the commitment to continue to work diligently on completing the land use plan would continue. The Minister said three years? Two, sorry. I think in the lead-up to discussions around the subsurface, the expectation actually was and the impression formed was that it would be a shorter time frame than that for the completion of the work. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I'm hoping that I can bargain the other side down to a lot less than two years. As I've said, this has been dragging on for 20 years, and I know some of the people who have been engaged and involved in this over that period of time. It's just incredible. There's been at least two or three plans prepared. They were rejected by our government not once, twice, three times, so we're the problem now. It's our government that's the problem. I'm hearing, though, that the Edehzhie subsurface land transferred to the federal government, that's going to happen in the next six months. Did I hear that correct? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

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

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: We're transferring land to the federal government? Sorry, I apologize. I'm asking the Member questions. Is that what he's asked?

MR. O'REILLY: [Microphone turned off]

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Okay. We've withdrawn the land subsurface rights as per their request. Basically, once the land use plan is completed, then the land will be basically transferred as part of the land use plan. We're not doing it in six months for the Member because I know the Member's trying to get things done in six months, but we're working with their committee. We, as this government, has shown good faith. Usually, you do a land withdrawal for a short period of time. We've done the withdrawal permanently until the land use plan is completed. We are working with the Deh Cho First Nation and the committee. We're working on it to get it done. I would actually thank EIA for the work they did to remove -- just not have it for short periods of times, withdrawals. Now, we're working on getting the land use plan completed. When I say "we," the collectively "we." We are working with the Deh Cho First Nation on it. I'm excited about it. I am from that riding, the Member beside you, and if we are able to get this done in this Assembly, I would be very, very happy. You said it's 20 years? I'm hoping it's going to be done in 22 years. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

MR. O'REILLY: I thought I was patient, but 22 more years, it better not. Look, I'd understood that the subsurface for Edehzhie needs to be transferred to the federal government so that it can actually formally set up as a national wildlife area. The money can then flow from the federal government. This is on hold while our government continues to twiddle its thumbs about whether we're actually going to transfer the land back to the federal government. It should never have been given to us in the first place under devolution. I don't know why that ever happened. It's my understand you have to transfer the subsurface back to the federal government so then they can start to invest money and complete the agreement that's already been made with the Deh Cho. Anyway, I'm going to move on because my clock's running down here. I hope that the Minister can get that clarified.

Wek'eezhii land use planning, earlier, we talked about how we're going to carry out some federal responsibility even though we may not have the money. Now, we're going to be carrying out federal responsibility again using our own money. Wek'eezhii land use planning, why are we paying for land use planning in the Wek'eezhii management area? I keep asking this. Why is the federal government not paying for this? It's in the Tlicho agreement. It's an implementation issue. Why is our government paying for land use planning? Thanks, Mr. Chair. How much in this budget is for Wek'eezhii land use planning? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

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

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: We have a three-party approach to it: the federal government, the Tlicho, and the GNWT. What you're seeing here and our budget here today is our money to complete that commitment. It's our commitment that we agreed to be part of. As for the amount of money in there, with your permission, I will ask the

deputy minister to provide that information. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Rocky Simpson): Thank you. Deputy Minister.

MS. HAENER: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The total amount of funds for the Department of Lands for the Wek'eezhii land use planning governance work includes funds to lease office space in Behchoko and positions, and it amounts to \$443,000. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I don't think I really got an answer to my question. Can someone tell me, then: how much money is in this part of the budget for Gwich'in and Sahtu land use planning? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

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

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: For that detail, I will turn to Ms. Macdonald. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Rocky Simpson): Ms. Macdonald.

MS. MACDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Chair. We don't have specific funding for those categories, but it would just be included in our base funding under land use and sustainability. For land use planning, our budget for 2021-2022 is \$2,357,000. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Rocky Simpson): Thank you, Ms. Macdonald. Member.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I just made my point. We are not making a financial contribution for land use planning in the Gwich'in or the Sahtu settlement area. Yes, we are at the table. We help participate. We provide information and so on, but we don't make a financial contribution there because the federal government pays for it, as they should, in terms of the land rights negotiations agreements that were reached for those two settlement areas. Why are we paying for land use planning in the Wek'eezhii management area? This should be a federal responsibility under the Tlicho agreement. Can I get an answer? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

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

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: I guess this is going to be one of those "I agree to disagree" with the Member. This is our commitment, the Northwest Territories' commitment to the Wek'eezhii part of the plan. That's our commitment. That is our understanding. This is what we have to pay, and we are honouring that. We have worked with the federal government, we have worked with the Indigenous governments, and this is what our costs are. This is something that we are honouring. We have worked with them, and we are able to do it. Thank you, Mr. Chair.