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Tuesday 25 October 2005

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Mardi 25 octobre 2005

**Standing committee on
estimates**

Ministry of Transportation

**Comité permanent des
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère des Transports

Chair: Cameron Jackson
Clerk: Trevor Day

Président : Cameron Jackson
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ESTIMATESCOMITÉ PERMANENT DES
BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Tuesday 25 October 2005

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The committee met at 1604 in room 228.

MINISTRY OF TRANSPORTATION

The Chair (Mr. Cameron Jackson): Good afternoon. I'd like to call the standing committee on estimates to order. We are assembled today with the Ministry of Transportation. We would like to welcome the Honourable Harinder Takhar and his staff.

We have five hours and 25 minutes remaining, and I think we'll start with 15-minute rotations. I will recognize Mr. Bisson to lead off. You just look totally ready.

Mr. Gilles Bisson (Timmins–James Bay): I'm always ready.

The Chair: I know you are.

Mr. Bisson: I've been at this for a while, so I can multi-task as I'm being briefed as we go.

The Chair: Minister, if you have responses to previous questions, we have a clerk here who would be more than pleased to accept those from you and circulate them.

I want to thank you and your staff. If you want to respond briefly, that would be fine.

Hon. Harinder S. Takhar (Minister of Transportation): I have the report back to the standing committee, so I would like to submit that. I also have the northern Ontario highway study, both English and French copies, for my colleague here.

The Chair: Now you're really warming yourself into his heart.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Give him the French copy so he can read it.

M. Bisson: Seulement pour ça, monsieur le Ministre, on va être très gentil avec vous aujourd'hui.

We don't have translation. That's unfortunate.

Minister, welcome back. We're so glad you're here with us today. I stayed up all weekend just thinking about today.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Me too.

Mr. Bisson: I did.

I want to go to Bill 169, Minister, and to see if we can come to some understanding on some of the issues in Bill 169. You have heard my speech and I'm not going to give it here because I don't have enough time. We support much of what you have in that bill; for example, the whole idea of giving firefighters the ability to fundraise that was excluded by the Safe Streets Act. We support that initiative. We think it's a good one. There were some

elements in that bill that came from Mr. Lalonde, things that he has worked on for a long time and that we support. We think they're good ideas.

Studded tires: I know there are some who might be opposed in some of the municipalities in northern Ontario, but generally we support the initiative. We don't think it's a bad one. However, it's a bit of a bitter pill, Minister, and I want to make a deal with you. We will give you fast passage—this is my question—of Bill 169 if you remove those sections of the bill that deal with the taxi and limousine situation. Then we could go back to committee and try to fix the problems with that, and then have a straight-up, straight-down vote on that one. Would you be prepared to sever the bill so that everything's excluded from the taxis, and we would give fast passage in two seconds out of those, not a problem, and then take a bit of time to fix the problems with the other bill?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I agree with the honourable member that there's a lot of good stuff in Bill 169. I agree that it will make our roads safer. Some of the provisions are very good. But on the taxi-scooping issue, as I said last time, there are three goals for me: protecting consumers from illegal operators, ensuring passenger safety in taxis and limos, and also making sure this industry is viable and protected. Those are the three issues for me. Keeping those three issues in mind—that's why this legislation was introduced. I'm sure the member will agree that nobody in this province would like to have unlicensed drivers taking away passengers from people who earn their livelihood in a legal manner.

Mr. Bisson: Does that mean maybe?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: That is exactly the issue. The short answer to my colleague here is that we are not prepared to split this bill. I think this is the right bill to go ahead with. It needs to be passed, and I'm looking forward to support from the NDP and all other parties on this front. The issue here is illegal taxi-scooping. The issue here is safety of passengers. The issue here is protecting the public, protecting visitors to this city.

Mr. Bisson: Thank you, Minister. That was just on time. I take it the short answer is maybe?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: No, the short answer is no.

1610

Mr. Bisson: I just wanted to make sure. It's unfortunate, Minister, because by coming to an agreement to make fast passage on the rest of the bill, you could have had the bill away at the Wednesday night sitting. I would

argue that we don't need a lot of time on the other bill. On the scooping part, I agree with you. We need to do something around the scooping issue. It's how we treat limo drivers differently than taxi drivers that is the big issue, and I'm a little bit sad you are not able to do that.

But let me get to another issue: truck inspectors. I've had the opportunity to meet with a number of truck inspectors over the summer and fall. As you know, a number of truck inspectors were hired under the Conservative watch. You would know there was a fairly significant problem with flying truck wheels and other issues when it came to truck inspection.

The provincial government of the day, under the Tories, did the right thing and increased the number of MTO inspectors to make sure we can inspect and catch those offenders so we can make our highways safer. We now know that there are some 70 inspectors who have left and gone on to other jobs, been promoted, whatever it might be, and that there has not been a replacement of those. I'm just wondering, Minister, if you are prepared to commit to try to rebooster the numbers on the inspection side.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: The numbers fluctuate from time to time due to general staff turnover. However, the number of those truck inspectors has remained relatively stable. I have checked the data for the last five years. The number has not really changed. The actual number of bodies who do inspections more or less stays the same. Each year we conduct about 140,000 commercial driver and vehicle inspections province-wide, and those inspections serve a very useful purpose.

What I also want to say to you is that we are going to go ahead and look at how we provide service. My thinking on that front is that we need to do more that is proactive rather than after the fact. That's why we are looking at streamlining and modernizing this service and we will be moving ahead with that.

Mr. Bisson: Quite frankly, I don't agree with you. The one thing we learned in the crisis we were in the last time with the flying truck wheels is that if somebody is driving down the highway and thinks they're not going to get inspected, thinks they're not going to get caught, there's more likelihood that they're going to break the law or that they're not going to fix their vehicle to make it safe. I think one of the integral parts of the system—yes, there were some advances done by the former government. I give them some credit in regard to some of the initiatives they took to make the method by which we certify trucks and all that a better system. But overall, you've got to be able to have the inspectors on the road to make sure they know there's a chance of being caught. If you decrease the number of inspectors, I think that in the long run you're putting the public at risk. There are 70 inspectors missing. Are you prepared to replace them, or are you going to replace part of them? What's your plan?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Let me repeat this: In 2003, the number of inspectors was 292. The number of inspectors as of August 2005 is 301.

Mr. Bisson: Yes, but they were increased under the Tories. We know that. That's not the issue.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: The number has more or less stayed the same. I'm giving you the 2003 number, which was when the Tories left, right? It was October 2003. There were 292 on the road and now there are 301 on the road.

Mr. Bisson: So tell me why inspectors are coming in to see me to tell me the numbers are less.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Can you let me answer the question? Right now, it's 301. What we're planning to do—it's not an either/or approach; it's both. We want to do the inspections on the road, but we also want to do proactive inspections, so we might be rechanneling some of these inspectors, but the total number of inspectors will more or less stay the same. At the same time, we want to provide service that is useful to the industry, that is useful to the people who travel on the roads, and to actually protect our consumers and make some of the roads safer.

Mr. Bisson: I've got to say a couple of things. First of all, I'm being approached by those people who do the job. They're telling me that there are fewer inspectors today. In fact, they're saying that some of the scales are not manned at all because of the shortage of manpower and that as a result you have a situation where trucks are able to bypass the areas where they know the scales are up and running. In fact, on some of these snap inspections that were done on those roads where truckers figured there would be no inspection, they found a higher level of non-compliance than they did on the roads where the truckers know they are being inspected. It comes back to my point: If they know they cannot get caught, they're not going to fix their trucks, and when we do the inspections and snap inspections, or the OPP does a blitz, we're finding that the numbers of vehicles which are out of compliance are up. You're saying there's no decrease in staffing?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: What I'm saying is, there are always vacancies because there is a turnover in the staff, but the number of people who are doing the road inspections has stayed more or less the same for the last five years. The actual head count has stayed the same. We are absolutely committed to making sure that our roads are safer, and our roads are some of the best in North America, from the safety point of view. So we must be doing something right. You also need to look at how—

Mr. Bisson: Can I ask you just a short question? Are there any vacant positions currently of MTO truck inspectors in your ranks?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: There are always vacant positions, everywhere.

Mr. Bisson: How many would you estimate?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I don't have the exact—

Mr. Bisson: According to media reports I've got in my office, which I'll go down and share with you, there are 70 missing. So who's wrong?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: The thing that you need to see is how many inspections we are doing. In 2002-03, we did

106,000 truck inspections. In 2003-04, we did 146,000 truck inspections. In 2004-05, we did 143,000 truck inspections. In fact, it has gone up since 2002-03. People are becoming more productive, but we also need to make sure that we are using them effectively and we are getting more productive work.

Mr. Bisson: Can I ask you, through the Chair, if I can have the ministry table the manpower staffing levels for truck inspectors for the last two years? The other thing that I want is—

The Chair: And do you want the number of inspections as well?

Mr. Bisson: Yes. That's where I was going. Very good, Chair. You saved me time. I like that. You're a very good man. We'll come back to this. If we can have that by tomorrow, that would be very helpful.

The other thing in regard to the truck inspection: One of the things I'm being told is that there's an initiative of a type—and I don't know how far down the pipe this is. It was reported in the media, if I remember correctly, in regard to the Ontario Provincial Police being asked—or at least police forces generally—to take on more and more of the responsibility of truck inspection. What I'm getting complaints about from some of the police officers is that they don't have the wherewithal to do that because they have other duties to take care of. Is there a move afoot to get the police services to carry out more of the inspections, sort of on side road inspections, that normally are done by MTO officers?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I think I basically answered that question already. I said that the number of people who are doing the inspections more or less has stayed the same and the number of inspections has increased. Creating safety is a joint effort between the police and the MTO inspectors. It has always been the case and will always be the case. You need a group of people who can bring different skills to promote safety on the roads.

Mr. Bisson: No, that wasn't my question. My question was, I'm being told—according to what I read in the paper, and then I contacted some police officers to find out about this. They confirmed that this is what they hear, but I don't know if it's actually what you're doing. That's the question I'm asking: You're going to be relying more and more on police officers to do inspections, truck inspections, as compared to before. Is that the case? Is there a move afoot to go that way?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I think I answered that question already. What I said is that we always work together. Our inspectors have more or less stayed the same. There has been no change in practice.

Mr. Bisson: So you're saying—let me put the words in your mouth—you will not be increasing the number of inspections done by police services this year, next year or the year after.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: The effort that my ministry puts out is more or less the same as before. If the municipalities want to do anything differently, we have not instructed them one way or the other to do anything.

Mr. Bisson: So you're saying you have not instructed police services to carry out more inspections.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: No, we have not—

Mr. Bisson: You have not. OK. That's all I was looking for. And you don't plan on going there either.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: We are always going to work together.

Mr. Bisson: We know that you work together, Minister. Listen, I'm not trying to be combative with you—

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I can't tell you what is going to happen two years down the road.

1620

Mr. Bisson: That's not the question. Listen, I'm happy that you answered the first question. You said, "No, we don't plan on having more truck inspections done by police officers than we normally do in the regular course of duty." That's fine. The next part of the question is, is it true that there is a move to get the ministry to do more? You said no, and I'm satisfied with your answer.

The Chair: I'm satisfied that your time has expired.

Mr. Bisson: Thank you very much, Chair. You were so helpful.

The Chair: I recognize Mr. Dunlop.

Mr. Garfield Dunlop (Simcoe North): People are getting kind of testy in here today.

I have a series of questions, and I apologize if I'm not that organized, because this is my first round of estimates, although in 2002, when I was the parliamentary assistant to the Premier, I was taking the questions from Mr. Bisson. So I know exactly the situation you're in.

A few questions, and I'm not so sure if you can answer the questions today and get back. I do appreciate the fact that in the responses, you got back with answers that I wasn't aware of. I appreciate those.

I'm going to go back to the HOV lanes for a moment. First of all, as I told you earlier, I support the principle. The more people in the car, the better, and all that sort of thing. I hope the pilot projects we're working on are successful, and I hope we can make sure that we have HOV lanes in a lot of our 400 series of highways. I think, in a way, it will be very positive for the transportation system in our province.

I'm wondering, when you did make an announcement like your plans to go ahead—and I understand that you've got plans put in place; you're actually going to, in some cases, start construction fairly quickly—in terms of money coming to the ministry, do you actually cancel other projects that might be planned so that you can proceed with those ahead of time? That's one of the questions I wanted to ask.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: You want me to answer that now? Congestion is the immediate problem in the GTA, so we needed to address some of the congestion issues on our major highways like the 403, 400 and 401. These projects, one way or the other, needed to be addressed. We needed to do something on those. What we thought was that in order to maximize the capacity on our

highways, we'd use that more effectively. So we're just using a different approach to addressing the same issue that we needed to address. So this money, in a short answer, is not coming from any other project. This money was supposed to address the same issues, although we have taken a different approach to it.

Mr. Dunlop: What you're saying, then, is that if you're doing a Highway 403 project—and I believe there is one on Highway 403—that money was previously allocated to some type of a project on Highway 403?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: This was the money that was allocated to address some of the issues on the 403, congestion issues.

Mr. Dunlop: OK, because what I'm worried about is—my colleague Jim Wilson isn't here today, and he has a huge problem on Highway 26. I'm not sure what the status is today on the Wasaga Beach/Collingwood project. I briefly mentioned it the other day and the fact that there has been substantial construction with the Intrawest project in Collingwood. In the Collingwood area, there are all kinds of developments around Thornbury and Meaford, condominium projects, you name it. There's a lot of development up there, I think, as baby boomers retire to that region.

There was apparently, at one time, a sign on the highway saying that the project would proceed at a specific time. I think it was in the spring of 2003 or 2004. Now that sign has been boarded over, and we're not really sure what exactly is happening with that particular project at this time. What I hope I'm hearing from the minister is that you wouldn't cancel a project like the Highway 26 project and proceed with an HOV lane at the expense of a project in another community. That's sort of the question I'm asking.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Actually, did you know that the demand to do these projects far exceeds what you will ever get in allocations? So the demand far exceeds that. The other is that it also depends on how far the projects are in the planning stages. Sometimes you need to do the environmental study, then you need the design work, even though the need may be in that community. So we are not taking money away from projects, but at the end of the day, we need to prioritize projects because sometimes the demand very far exceeds what you can do during that year. So you need to prioritize the projects. But there is no effort being made to divert from one community to another. We try to address the needs in each community, more or less based on the need in that community.

Mr. Dunlop: Thank you very much, Minister. If that's the case, could you give me an update on exactly what is happening with Highway 26? Because I can tell you, coming from Simcoe county, it's a fairly large issue in the Collingwood–Midland–Penetanguishene area. We're hearing a lot of media comments about it. There's certainly a concern from the general public that that project may be on hold for a long period of time. My concern is—I'm kind of speaking more or less on behalf of Jim Wilson. Some of my other colleagues had asked me to

raise some questions here today. Can you actually tell us when, in fact, we may see some movement so that project can proceed to construction?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: First of all, I'll tell you that there was never funding committed to Highway 26 by any government before. You should know that. We know that Highway 26 is important to the Simcoe community; we understand that. The issue here is that the engineering work for the Highway 26 new alignment between Wasaga Beach and Collingwood is ongoing and will require federal approvals before the timing of construction can be established. That's where the issues are. We need the federal approvals. We will attempt to use this time to work with our municipal partners to complete a value engineering study, which we are trying to do right now. This value engineering study will look for efficiencies in this project, make the project more competitive and result in better value for tax dollars.

We are also planning for a potential bypass of Collingwood and the Stayner area as well. So we are actually working on it, we are looking for approvals, and once the approvals are obtained and the value engineering work is done, then we will be in a position to maybe start the construction on this project.

Mr. Dunlop: So you're saying that all agreements haven't been made with the municipalities, which would be in that case, I think, Clearview, the town of Collingwood, the town of Wasaga Beach and the Town of the Blue Mountains. I believe they would all be involved in that. I'm curious, then: You're saying that there are municipal agreements that still have to be put in place, but there are federal agreements as well or federal approvals are required?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Federal approval is required. Let me just get the ADM in charge of this project and he can maybe give you a little bit more detail.

Mr. Dunlop: I've known Carl for a long time. We fought over a few roads up in Simcoe North too. Thanks. Good seeing you, Carl.

Mr. Carl Hennem: I think what the minister is saying about Highway 26 between Wasaga Beach and Collingwood is that we're still waiting for federal approvals for fishery aspects of the job. So it's still not cleared.

The minister is also correct that we have to take a bigger look at the area because of what you mentioned in terms of the interests in development at Blue Mountain. In fact, Jim Wilson and I met with the town of Collingwood a couple of weeks ago and discussed how we were going to proceed with the Collingwood bypass and so on. At the request of the town, we are pulling back a little bit to take a broader look at the area to make sure that we satisfy the desires of all the municipalities in the area and incorporate their perspectives into a broader transportation study which will outline where the bypass of that area will be.

Mr. Dunlop: I apologize that most of my questions involve Simcoe county, but I'm kind of selfish from that perspective. I guess the problem, Minister and deputies and assistant deputies, is that it is a county that's growing

at a fairly rapid rate, and the greenbelt legislation is not going to slow it down, because we're actually seeing now a huge leapfrogging effect, and I think it's going to have an impact on the 427 expansion and those sorts of highways as well.

I want to ask a question now on the 404. I've been around politics for a lot of years, and I've been hearing about the Bradford pipe bypass and the 404 for a couple of decades now. But I'm curious. I've forgotten the exact name of the project, but there's apparently a study underway right now that directs more people to the north, via the expansion of highways in central Ontario, to eventually wind up on Highway 11 or Highway 400/69.

1630

We've had a number of meetings. One was on the proposal to expand Highway 400 to five lanes or six lanes in each direction; the possibility of widening Highway 11 from Barrie through to Orillia; and there's also the 427 corridor, which—I happened to be at a public meeting one night, and maybe some of the folks in this room were there, at the Barrie Golf and Country Club, and it wasn't very well received where it was coming out, through Midhurst.

One question that continually comes up on that program is, why is the 404 expansion to—I believe it would follow Highway 48 up to Highway 12, and then Highway 12 would be either widened or expanded at some time down the road. Is there anything we can say today about the future expansion of the 404 north of Newmarket, up into Simcoe county and south Muskoka?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Let me just say first, I think on June 27 this year we announced that Highway 404 will be extended from Green Lane to Ravenshoe Road, with construction expected to begin within three years. We announced that already.

Mr. Dunlop: I'm sorry, Minister, I didn't understand. What was the announcement?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: We said we will expand the 404 from Green Lane to Ravenshoe Road. We have done that already. On the 404 extension that you talked about and the Bradford bypass, we had the provincial environmental assessment done, but the federal environment assessment is still required and most probably will be done at some time in 2006. That's what the timing on that one is. I don't know if Carl wants to add anything more to this.

Mr. Hennum: As the minister indicated, we are focusing on the first link of the 404 extension, from Green Lane, which is just north of Newmarket, up to Ravenshoe Road. That is the first step. That's all we have committed to at this time.

In keeping with the growth plan that was established by the present government, we don't have any scheduled plans for extending it beyond there at the moment. We are doing the design and are seeking environmental approval for that first link. Hopefully, by late 2006 or early 2007 we may be able to consider starting construction.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Let me just give you a couple of numbers so you can put that into place. The rough estimate for the 404 extension is about \$900 million. The Bradford bypass is about \$400 million. These two add up to about \$1.3 billion. We are already moving ahead for acquiring the properties for the 404 extension and hope to have this project tendered in 2007.

Mr. Dunlop: What I wanted to put on the record is that the folks up in eastern Simcoe county, up around the Gamebridge-Brechin-Highway 169 area, or county road 169 now—one of the reasons there is a lot of keen interest in seeing the 404, and I know there have to be further studies done and that sort of thing, but as you look at the possibility of planning to widen Highway 11 through gasoline alley and possibly the 400 or 427, we wondered why there wouldn't be some importance put on the 404, for two reasons: It would bring people from the eastern side of the GTA up through Newmarket and on to Muskoka that way eventually, and the other benefit it would have is that in that area there's been such a designation of aggregate, basically in the Ramara township, Severn township. Some of the best limestone we have in the province, really, is there. What we're seeing now, with the elimination of the railway system from the quarries, is Highway 12 basically being used as a haul route for literally hundreds of trucks per day. I've been in Lafarge and James Dick quarries—I think Dufferin has a huge quarry there as well—and Highway 12 is becoming a haul route. I know you've put in some truck lanes and that sort of thing.

People are saying that it's hard to get by some of the trucks when you're southbound on Highway 12 toward Whitby. I'm curious: The 404 would make a phenomenal haul route at some point to alleviate the pressure. I don't think the pressure on those municipalities is going to be reduced, by the fact that we have so many quarries located in them, and there's a lot of land that's licensed for the future as well. So we should see ongoing pressure from the aggregate companies to use those roads as haul routes. I thought that the 404 would be a nice way to plan in the future.

The Chair: Briefly, thank you.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I understand your position on that. I have met with the local area mayors, and we have plans in place to include Highway 12 as well. The design back is under way to address the immediate bridge rehabilitation needs for this section of the highway, and MTO has several other highway improvement projects on the design and construction on Highways 7 and 12 through Durham region. I also understand the importance of the 404. That's why we announced that project. I know that the mayors from the 427 area have also met with me to fund the extension of that as well. So we are working a little bit on that project as well.

Mr. Dunlop: Good luck on that one.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dunlop. I'd now like to recognize Dr. Kular.

Mr. Kuldip Kular (Bramalea-Gore-Malton-Springdale): Minister, I want to welcome you, and I want to

thank you for taking time out to help us with the estimates of your ministry. As you know, I represent the riding of Bramalea–Gore–Malton–Springdale, and I also want to commend you and thank you for making the safety of Ontarians a commitment and a high priority on our roads as well as on our highways.

Some of my constituents work as legal drivers at Pearson International Airport. As you know, Pearson falls into my constituency. They tell me they've had to pay high fees to the Greater Toronto Airport Authority to operate at the airport as drivers, and they also tell me that a lot of illegal drivers work at the airport.

I want to give you an example. At one time during last winter I was travelling from Sudbury to Pearson International. What happened was that I was picked up by an illegal driver. I have travelled so many times to Pearson; usually the road fare from Pearson to my home is about \$45, and as soon as this guy picked me up and took me to my home, he was asking me for \$85. I said, "What are you talking about?" He says, "\$85, and I want cash." I said, "No. I don't want to give you the cash, and I know—I have been travelling quite often—it takes only \$45. Show me your rates of the Greater Toronto Airport Authority." He said, "I don't have it."

I also want to thank you for bringing forward Bill 169. If passed, I think this will give some of the illegal drivers who work at the airports in Ontario a very difficult time. My question to you, Minister, is, how does Bill 169 make illegal drivers operate differently than at this time?

1640

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Let me first say that you are not the only one who was scooped by illegal taxi drivers from the airport. It has happened to me as well. I came from Ottawa, and I was approached that way as well.

But this bill is not just about the Toronto airport. This bill is about making taxi scooping illegal in this province. This is an issue at the airport, this is an issue in the city of Toronto, this is an issue in Ottawa, this is an issue in Niagara Falls and this is an issue in London. It exists in all major cities.

What we are planning to do with Bill 169 is make scooping illegal in this province, not only for taxi drivers who pick up illegally because they don't have the right licence; it will also become illegal for anybody to arrange for scooping. It will greatly benefit the taxi drivers in the Toronto area as well, because their major complaint has been the people who scoop fares from hotels. If a hotel operator or any employee in the hotel industry illegally passes passengers to a taxi that doesn't have a valid licence, they can both be charged. There will be immediate penalties associated with it. The same thing will happen at the airport. The same thing will happen in Niagara Falls and in all other areas.

The idea here is to protect consumers from illegal operators, making sure there is safety for passengers in taxis and limos. We also want to make sure that the taxi industry is viable and vibrant. By doing so, if people with valid licences can pick up passengers, then their industry will become better.

This bill is basically intended to make sure that scooping becomes illegal in this province. We are absolutely determined, if this bill passes, that it get implemented and enforced effectively as well.

I want to thank you for your support for this bill as well, because you have worked very tirelessly to make this happen.

I just want to tell you that the fines proposed for convictions under this bill will be from \$300 to \$20,000. The proposed offences, as I said, will apply to drivers, will apply to arrangers and will apply to owners, and driver's licence suspensions or plate denial upon renewal will also apply if fines are not paid. So not only are we going to make sure that this bill passes, not only do we want to make sure we have support for this bill, but we also want to make sure that if this bill passes through the Legislature, it gets enforced properly as well.

Mr. Kular: Thank you, Minister. The drivers in my constituency are at this time working very hard at Pearson International Airport, and if this bill is passed, they have been telling me that I should thank you on their behalf. As soon as this bill is passed, I think you definitely deserve high commendation and I will come to your seat in the Legislature to thank you on their behalf.

My second question: As you know, I represent one part of Brampton and you represent one part of Mississauga, and Mississauga as well as Brampton are a part for the region of Peel. There's one highway which really connects the whole region of Peel, and that's Highway 410. I know it has been in the Ministry of Transportation's plans to extend Highway 410 from where it presently ends north of Bovaird Drive, and there are plans for extending this highway from Bovaird Drive to Sandalwood, from Sandalwood to Mayfield and from Mayfield Road to Highway 10. Can you say whether we have money in this year's estimates for the extension of Highway 410, or what are your further plans for Highway 410? When is it going to be extended, and when will the final extension go up to Highway 10 in the region of Peel?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Mr. Chair, through you to the member, let me just say this: The first issue that you raised, about the taxi scooping, is about public safety and it's about consumer protection, so I don't think anybody needs thanks. I think we need to protect the public and we need to protect our consumers.

On the issue of the 410, our government is absolutely committed to making sure that the 410 completion goes ahead on schedule. I actually want to thank all the members from the Brampton area who have really spearheaded this cause.

The first phase, as you know, is complete. The design for phase two, from Sandalwood to Mayfield, is complete. Property acquisitions are about 85% to 90% completed. Most of the issues are behind us now. This is going to go to tendering, if I'm correct, in the next couple of months. This project should move ahead as scheduled, at least for the second phase.

On the third phase, there are public information sessions going on; in fact, I think one is today, if I'm not

wrong. They are moving ahead in a very disciplined fashion to make sure that the 410 completion occurs and occurs on a timely basis, and that the proper funds are allocated to make sure that the 410, which is so strategic to Brampton, Caledon and other areas, happens on time.

Mr. Kular: Minister, I really want to thank you for holding the public hearing meetings in our region as well. As you know, there is one being held tonight, and I wanted to go there but somehow I'm on House duty.

Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have about six minutes.

Mr. Kular: There's a third area I want to deal with. The other day, the member from the third party asked you about the suspension of drivers' licences. As you know, I'm a family doctor turned politician. I used to work at the William Osler Health Centre, Brampton Memorial branch, as an emergency physician from 1986 until about 1998. When patients come to the emergency saying that they are having a dizzy spell or they feel weak, most physicians have to do a lot of investigations. Once a doctor makes the diagnosis that there's a possibility of a seizure, he definitely has to report to the Ministry of Transportation about suspending the licence. I know for a lot of older people, even younger people, if they get their licence suspended for some time, their livelihood is at stake. It's very, very difficult for the emergency physician to say definitely whether at that point in time the patient does have seizures or not.

I have dealt with in my practice, two or three times, similar patients who have had to have their licences suspended. We get neurologists and some of the other specialists involved. They have to write extra letters. In my experience, if everything is going on time as it should—the patient is seen by the specialist at the right time, there's not much of a waiting time in seeing a specialist—the whole thing can be settled in about four months' time. This is not that bad, but still, for a person whose livelihood is depending upon their driving distances, Minister, my question to you is, can that period of four months be further reduced? Can you do anything to reduce it?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I think I have some experts here on the medical side who actually look after all these things. Here's an acting assistant deputy minister who will be more than pleased to answer this question.

The Chair: Welcome, Mr. Bartucci. Please enter your proper name and title for the record.

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Mr. Ernie Bartucci: Ernie Bartucci, acting assistant deputy minister for road user safety.

We have made some improvements in the processing or the assessing of medical reports from physicians. The two- to six-week number that we use is an average number. As you know and as you've indicated, depending on the complexity of the illness that is reported in the first instance and the completeness of the report, our staff will triage that and can get some conclusive decision within a week or two, in most instances.

It is only in those instances where we need to dialogue with the physician for further elaboration of the diagnosis or results of the test to support a particular condition that has been identified that it tends to take us much longer. I dare say that the four months that were described is anomalous. I think we usually can clear medical reports within five to six weeks and identify them for consideration via our specialist medical advisory committee if our staff is incapable of making a determination because of the nature of the illness.

As was indicated previously, our staff, as well as other jurisdictions, use a standard that is developed by the Canadian Medical Association in partnership with motor vehicle administrators. It is a standard that we assess. We're not physicians. We don't make decisions; we seek advice from physicians in deliberating on files.

Mr. Kular: Thank you very much. I'm done.

The Chair: Very good. Mr. Dunlop.

Mr. Dunlop: Mr. Chair, can you tell me how much time I have now?

The Chair: You've got 15 minutes.

Mr. Dunlop: I'm sorry; 15 minutes? We just go in rotation?

The Chair: Yes, we go in rotation.

Mr. Dunlop: OK. Sorry; I wasn't exactly sure how it worked out.

I've got quite a few questions on road repair and maintenance. I'm looking for information, simply the success and failure rates of winter sanding, salting and the liquid chemical they put on a series of highways that are under contract. I guess all the provincial highways are under some kind of contract.

Can someone, maybe yourself, Minister, or someone from the ministry, explain to me a couple of things: For decades we've used salt and sand, and I've noticed in the last few years we've seen a little more chemical on the road, or they spray it with some kind of a liquid calcium or whatever it may be. I'm wondering if you had any studies on that to date that would indicate the success of that, the environmental success of that as well, as we try to allow less salt contaminants to wash into our lakes and rivers and ditches etc. Again, I'm thinking of Lake Simcoe and my selfish reasons for asking these questions.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Let me start this, and then I will ask Carl Hennum if he can pick up from there.

I want to tell you that our maintenance standards are the highest in North America. I think that is one of the reasons that contributes to making sure that our roads are the safest in North America as well. We expect our contractors to meet ministry standards, and we monitor their work very carefully during and after the winter season to make sure that all we expect from them gets done, including the environmental issues. We use the latest technology, tools and methods to keep the roads safe in the winter season.

I'm going to ask Carl to give you more information, that we use prewettered salt, which sticks to the road surface and so on. He can talk about how the technology has changed over a number of years.

Mr. Hennum: In the really old days, we would just use sand. Perhaps you don't remember, but that was the case. For many years now, we have used both salt and sand, as you've stated. Salt is effective down to about 14, 15 degrees below zero Celsius. After that, you have to use sand. So you will find that in northern Ontario, for example, there's considerably more sand used than in southern Ontario.

In recent years, we have introduced chemicals to add to our salt. In fact, we use chemicals now—calcium chlorides, magnesium chlorides, depending on the supply—to make our salt more effective. We use a method called pre-wetting of salt, which means that we introduce liquid to the salt before it actually reaches the road, so it has a certain stickiness to it and stays on the pavement rather than being blown around. It also works faster, because the melting process itself has already started, so it's more effective that way. This has environmental implications, as well as great savings, because the less salt, the less the environmental impact. For example, by pre-wetting salt, we can reduce the amount from, say, 135 or 140 kilograms per kilometre down to about 90 or 95, which is a considerable improvement.

We also use chemicals for what we call anti-icing. We sometimes spray the pavement several hours in advance of freezing so that when black frost or actual ice appears, we already have the chemical down and we prevent slipperiness of the pavement itself. That is widely used.

We work with the international community on research in winter maintenance. As the minister indicated, we are one of the foremost winter maintenance agencies, probably globally. We are quite proud of our record and the accomplishments we have in terms of using new technology.

Mr. Dunlop: I guess what I'm going back to is that I know of a number of situations, and they probably date back to before any of us were involved in politics or worked with MTO, where there has been contamination of wells from road salt, and MTO takes the responsibility. There are a number of them up on Highway 11; I'm sure you've heard of them over the years. It's been a problem for the homeowners, but it's been an expense for the taxpayers. Salt is washed into the ditches and has filtered its way through the sand and got into some wells. With the thousands of miles of roads that we have in Ontario, it has to be an ongoing challenge to see if we can try to eliminate that type of thing.

Is there any way that the government is currently measuring their salt contamination on highways, or is it that today we've got the 400 series of highways and we don't really have a lot of buildings and wells adjacent to the roads any more?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Let me start. We use the latest technologies to do everything for winter maintenance. Let me give you an example. We are using electronic spreader controls to reduce waste and maximize effectiveness of materials. As Carl just said to you, we now use a pre-wet salt rather than dry salt. The tonnage of salt that we put on the road is far less than we used to before

and it's also way more effective. We use fixed automated spray technology to automatically spray identified bridges with anti-icing liquids and so on.

Our whole study is that we should use the latest technology. We should try to use material that is more effective and use less of it, and at the same time try to be very careful about the environmental impact of those things, not only on our roads but the total environmental impact. We do everything we can possibly do. But the winter is harsh, so you need to address some of those issues and at the same time be careful about the environmental impact.

Mr. Dunlop: I understand that completely. When I hear of all the environmental analyses and impact studies that have to be done—an example would be the 404 or the 427 expansion northward. I know you talk about how highways will impact natural heritage corridors and lakes and rivers and all that sort of thing. When you're doing those types of studies today under our modern programs, do you include the impact of salt on well water and well water contamination or groundwater contamination? Is that part of it at all, or do we just try to divert the salt and sand away at a later date, once there's highway construction?

1700

I'm really curious about that because I think the whole world has become far more environmentally friendly, and people who would never even talk about the environment 25 or 30 years ago are today out there in environmental organizations fighting against the expansion of a road or supporting it, one way or the other. Can you make any comments on that?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: The standards over the years have changed a lot. Now we are way more knowledgeable about what the environmental impacts are, but we are also being more careful in what kind of materials we use and how we use them and how effectively we use them.

Let me ask Carl to specifically address the concern that you've raised.

Mr. Hennum: It's an interesting question. Of course, it's a difficult one as well because, as you know, many areas of the world have done research on winter maintenance and, quite frankly, there is no other material, within a reasonable cost, that is as effective as salt. So we're kind of locked into using it. But when we do environmental studies for the new alignments I think you are referring to, the impact on the environment is measured or estimated for each of the alternatives, and the impact on groundwater is certainly one of the things that we are looking at in that respect as we are looking at wetlands and streams and fisheries etc. So, yes, they are taken into account when we select the preferred alignments for new facilities.

Mr. Dunlop: Really, I'm saying that because I've become a bit of an environmentalist myself. I'm serious. Things that I wouldn't have thought about 10 years ago, I pay much more attention to. I think that's just the general feeling of the public, the same as we talk about the Drive Clean program and those types of things. If it's going to have a positive influence on the environment, so be it.

That's why I wanted to ask that question, because most of my questions to you today, Minister, and in the last two days, have been directed at Simcoe county highways or proposed highways for Simcoe county that will affect the county. I worry about that, because, to bring up the 404, I'm wondering what will the negative impact on the environment be with the 404, what will it be with the 427 and the expansion of all these roads etc.

I know you're not going to do it all overnight. It's going to cost hundreds of millions of dollars to build all those highways throughout those regions. But at the same time, when constituents come to me with a concern—and there definitely will be concerns with any Simcoe county roads on the impact they will have on Lake Simcoe. I talked last night in the House on the throne speech, and basically the whole speech related to the future of Lake Simcoe as an economic generator in the province of Ontario—it's a beautiful lake—and how we as governments, whether it's municipal, provincial or federal—what the impact will be in the future on that lake if we keep going in the direction we're going.

I just want to be assured here today or know that one of our major ministries that will be building highways around that lake will be taking into account the negative impact of surface runoff and of salt contamination or calcium contamination on that lake. I just think that it's so important that we take these lakes or rivers or whatever they may be, that we take these beautiful areas of our province—every ministry has a role to play as we develop them and we develop the province.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I think that most of the comments you've made are very reasonable and make a lot of sense. But at the end of the day, it's a balancing act. You have to address the needs of the developing community, you have to build roads, you have to address the issue of congestion and you have to take into account the environmental issues. Above all, you have to make sure that the roads are safe, that people can travel from one place to another and that our economy doesn't suffer. I think we are trying to balance all of those in a reasonable way, so that the needs of the people get addressed and our roads stay safe for the people who travel.

Mr. Dunlop: Minister, I appreciate the fact that public safety is a top priority for the Ministry of Transportation. I was so pleased to see—and I want to put this on the record—the responses on the Highway 12 Coldwater to Orillia expansion. I don't know if you're aware of this little story, but I wanted to add it into the record and tell you why I'm so pleased to see it proceeding.

As we've gone through this process, there have been a number of public meetings held so that the general public can comment. For some time, I've been pushing—I guess you're the fifth minister I've pushed—for truck lanes on Highway 12 in the eastbound lanes going toward Orillia, because it basically all goes uphill, and big tractors, buses and gravel trucks slow down the traffic quite a bit.

It was so amazing that at not the most recent meeting, but a public meeting of two years ago held in a little community called Warminster, at the Legion, everybody

was able to go out and talk about what they wanted to see with the highway. This is not a negative thing in any way toward the MTO, but it was so ironic that the very next morning after the public meeting, there was a young lady and three of her high school classmates who were going to Orillia. She was a 16-year-old driver, and she tried to pass a truck on that highway, and she was killed instantly. It's such a sorry thing, because the public meeting was held the night before, and people were talking about a truck lane. It was driver error; there was no question about that. She shouldn't have tried to pass the truck. But it would have been amazing—if those truck lanes had been there, there's a good chance she'd be alive today.

I just wanted to say how important that road is to the people in north Simcoe, that it's been a long time coming. If we could possibly make it happen next year, it would be very important to the people of the community.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dunlop. I'll now recognize Mr. Bisson.

Mr. Bisson: I was at the Northeastern Ontario Municipal Association earlier this September, where mayors from as far south as the Matheson-Ramore area all the way up to Hearst were concerned about reports in the paper, and they had also been contacted by people within the ministry, that there were going to be cuts to the winter road maintenance program this winter. I'm wondering if you would like to comment on that. Are there going to be cuts to winter road maintenance?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Actually, we just answered that question, but let me just say that we have no plans to have any cuts in the winter maintenance operations. Our winter maintenance operations will more or less stay the same, although what we are looking for are better ways to maintain our roads, to use the different philosophies and technologies to make things even better.

Mr. Bisson: One of the figures that I heard reported from one of the individuals who presented to the Northeastern Ontario Municipal Association meeting was that there was a plan to cut 250 units from winter road maintenance equipment across the province: sanders, salters and plows. There's no truth to that? There will not be a reduction of equipment?

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Hon. Mr. Takhar: I think that's what I said. We have no plans to reduce the winter maintenance operation. In fact, we want to make it more effective by using more technology and different methods to do salting of the roads.

Mr. Bisson: So you don't expect that there's going to be a reduction of 250 pieces of equipment overall within the winter road maintenance program this year or next?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I think that's what I said.

Mr. Bisson: OK. That's all I wanted to know. That's good. It's interesting, because when we talk to IMOS—you know who IMOS is, obviously—they tell us that's not the case. So what's going on?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I'll let Carl answer that question. Maybe he can give you more details if there is any issue with IMOS.

Mr. Hennum: I think it's expected of us that we continue to look at the effectiveness and efficiency of any operations that we have out there. We certainly continue to talk to our contractors about how we can make things better, how we can get the same service for less money and so on. We certainly have talked to contractors over the last several months, and I think we'll probably continue to find better ways of doing things, as the minister says. There may be somebody who misinterpreted that and assumed that we are maybe cutting trucks out there.

Mr. Bisson: Then the people I've talked to at IMOS management didn't know what they were talking about; there's not going to be a reduction of 250 pieces of equipment?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I think I answered that question.

Mr. Bisson: I know you did. I'm just paraphrasing. So we got the answer to that.

You were saying that we're all trying to get a bigger bang for our buck—nobody's going to argue about that—and you said that you are looking to get the same service for the same amount of money. I understand that. However, IMOS is telling us that they're going to be reducing services in some of their contracts. So that's not going to happen? I'll give you what I was told specifically: The area between Temagami and Porquis is one where they are looking at reducing services. Just in case you don't know where Porquis is, it's just outside of Iroquois Falls. I take it you know where Temagami is.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I'm sure the staff knows all that.

Mr. Hennum: We're not looking at reducing services in any area.

Mr. Bisson: OK. That's good. I'm glad you answered that way. So I can expect to drive safe this winter; I like that.

Further to that point, then, one of the things I was also told by somebody out of the Gogama area is that you're apparently having some difficulty renewing the contract in the Gogama area, that the bids you got in are actually quite high. What I've been told, which I thought was kind of intriguing, is that the ministry is looking at taking back the responsibility for maintaining the Gogama area because the private contractors are coming in at a fairly high price. Is there any truth to that? This is not a fight or anything—

Mr. Hennum: It's true. We tender on the open market. Everybody knows what the prices are and so on, and it's true that we got really high prices. We refuse to be held for ransom out there, so we are looking for other ways of providing the same service as we had before. We did, in fact, explore various options, and I think that for this particular winter, we will run one of our own trucks with a hired contractor as an operator.

Mr. Bisson: So you're looking at taking back that area because of the high price of the bids that came in?

Mr. Hennum: I'm not taking back the area; I'm just running one truck. We have probably about 700 or 800

trucks out there, so one of the trucks will be a black and yellow truck.

Mr. Bisson: So it will be a Ministry of Transportation truck—

Mr. Hennum: A spare truck we keep in case something happens to the equipment out there.

Mr. Bisson: But there's more than one truck that services that area, no?

Mr. Hennum: Yes.

Mr. Bisson: So you're going to maintain at least the level of service they had last year.

Mr. Hennum: At each of the patrol yards, there will be several contractors providing service. It's not just one contractor per area; there may be several. It depends on how many trucks we require. We will put out the tender and take the best bids, and there may be two, three or four contractors who provide service at the same place.

Interjection.

Mr. Bisson: I'm sorry. I'm dealing with a crisis somewhere else at the same time. I really apologize. I've got a community that's being evacuated.

So the service in the Gogama area will at least be at the level it was last year?

Mr. Hennum: That's correct.

Mr. Bisson: OK.

That distracted me a little bit; I've got to deal with this crisis in a minute.

The Chair: If you'd like to stack your time—

Mr. Bisson: No, I have one last question and then I'm going to move out and deal with this.

My question—I guess it's more of a statement, and I'd just like to hear what the minister has to say. The previous government privatized by basically divesting the Ministry of Transportation of the winter road maintenance they used to do. The system was that about half the equipment was our equipment, owned and operated by MTO, and another part of it was basically contractors. It was a mix, the idea being that it kept the contractors in line. When the contractors came back too high, we had some ministry plows to put out there to put pressure on the contractors not to jack up the price. I'd like you to go back and get my Hansards from when they were in government and I predicted this. If we go down the road of basically saying we're going to have the private sector go by way of contract, at the end of the day, when the contractors have it all, they will grab us by the—I can't use the term here. They will basically try to get as much money as they can. So I will be more than pleased to assist you with anything to get the MTO to take back responsibility for maintaining our highways. I would like to know if you need help in that direction.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Let me try to answer this question. I want to say that our maintenance standards are the highest among North American regions. Our roads are the safest. So there is some connection between the standards and the roads being safe. The roads couldn't be safe unless our standards were high.

We work very closely with our contractors. We monitor their work. We give them standards, be it their work

during the winter or after the winter. We also try to use the latest technology, the latest tools that are available, not only in North America but throughout the world, to make sure our roads are safe, and we will continue to do that.

Mr. Bisson: I guess philosophically I have a difference of opinion. I can tell you, as a driver on northern highways, that I don't blame the contractors so much. We've always had contractors in the system, as we well know. But we are seeing that basically we are being stranded on highways much more than we were in the past. If you were driving up and down Highway 17 or Highway 11, it was a pretty odd thing to have to stop overnight somewhere because of road conditions—if you had a really big snowstorm, maybe. But you didn't see it to the degree you have now, and the last time I checked, we're not getting any more snow than we did before.

I'll go deal with this, Chair, and I'll be right back.

The Chair: I would like to recognize Mr. McNeely.

Mr. Phil McNeely (Ottawa–Orléans): Thank you, Minister, for being here.

When I sat as a councillor for the city of Ottawa on the transportation committee, I always supported public transit, that culture of transit, knowing that we had to change things. We had one of the oldest bus fleets. I think all cities were the same: Through the 1990s there wasn't much support for public transit—there was very little support—and the buses became pretty decrepit. You have a policy for providing long-term, sustainable funding to replace, refurbish and expand municipal transit fleets. I'd just like to know a little bit more about that.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Let me say first that what we're trying to do in this province is create a transit culture. We have a big congestion problem, and that can only be addressed in a couple of ways. One is to promote public transit, and the other is to create more capacity on the highways. Creating capacity on the highways takes a very long time. So we are trying to provide sustainable, long-term funding to the municipalities—and we are doing it after a decade of neglect, I may add. For the first time ever we are putting about \$900 million in the 2005-06 budget alone, which is a 60% increase over the previous year, to provide assistance for transit funding. That funding will sort of create a transit culture there.

In addition to that, we are also giving two cents of the gasoline tax—we are going to get to that. It's about \$156 million the first year, and it will go to about \$234 million, I think, in the second year and \$312 in the third year. That money can be used by the municipalities to actually buy new buses, refurbish old buses, add new routes and all that.

1720

In addition to that, we have other programs like the \$1 billion funding that we give to the TTC, along with the federal government and the municipality itself. We have done the same thing to GO Transit as well. What we need to do is to renew the fleets, add new routes and buy new buses. Only then can we encourage a public transit culture in this province.

The money that we are providing for the gas tax funding I think is being put to very good use. Most of the municipalities that I've talked to are using it for refurbishing their existing fleets. They're buying new buses, adding new routes and hiring new drivers. I think that will go a long way.

In addition to that, we are also trying to do a few other things. We want to make sure that public transit is encouraged in this province. One thing we are doing is bus bypass shoulders, so the buses can actually run in a different lane on the highway so people can see the difference it makes. In Bill 169, you will see that we are giving some preference to the drivers so they can change the lights as they go through on the streets. We will also allow the buses to run on the HOV lanes as well, so they can go from one place to another.

Providing long-term, sustainable funding to replace, refurbish and expand municipal transit fleets I am sure will go a long way to create a transit culture in this province and address some of the congestion that we have.

Mr. McNeely: In Orléans, we have a fairly direct route downtown. The public transit runs parallel to 174. In Orléans, we have the highest ridership of the whole city. We have, I believe, over 30% now, and it compares to Kanata, with 9%. I think if good public transit is provided, people will be there to use it.

I've also been an advocate of using our infrastructure better. One of the things that I could see is—the Department of National Defence is a big employer in Ottawa, and all the people arrive at 8:15 by bus. It would be very nice if our big employers, especially the federal government, would stagger their employment hours and allow the buses to do maybe three runs instead of two. It would really help out. I don't think there has been enough co-operation between employers, and especially the federal government. They promote public transit and promote better use of our infrastructure. They could do a lot more, I think.

The other thing about area is that we're basically a bedroom community. Balanced development has been in our official plan since the old region was there. It was stressed in our new official plan in 2002. We're a bedroom community. We don't have the jobs. New jobs are created downtown. So balanced development is something that we've looked at as well, but it's only in the official plan; it's not in the actions of our city.

Home workstations: I think we should be going in that direction. With the price of gas and with the long delays, we should be looking at getting more people working at home. I think it's practical. A lot of companies have done it and have shown great results. A lot of areas in the US are further ahead than Canada. I understand that in Alberta they're going to have a special program at the university—a chair, I believe—for these types of sustainable ideas.

Carpooling has been talked about, but it's good to see that your ministry and our government have acted. We've

got the HOV lanes coming up. That's going to be constructed in Kanata and that's great.

I think those things are going ahead, but can you tell me more? Of those ideas, which ones are you promoting in the ministry now?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Let me give an idea to you about what is happening in Ottawa as well. The gas tax funding: The first year brought about \$18.8 million. By 2007, they will get about \$85 million more than they had ever before. But the city of Ottawa has done a good job in terms of public transit. When I go to Ottawa, I see the buses lined up. People are taking buses from the city of Ottawa; in fact, very few people bring cars into the city. That's the kind of culture we need to create everywhere else as well.

They also have \$600 million for the O-Train project that we have committed to the city of Ottawa to further promote public transit there.

But I think it's the sum of things that we need to do. I always say it's the chicken-and-egg situation. If you don't have service, people can't take public transit; but you can't have public transit if people don't take it. You have to start somewhere.

I think that our gas tax project is the right way to do it. It allows municipalities who have existing transit fleets to renew their fleets, add more buses and add more drivers. Gradually, we have very clear targets established with the city and have said, "You have to use this money to increase ridership."

And we have seen results. Our ridership on GO Transit is up; our ridership on the TTC is up. It's up in Mississauga; it's up in Ottawa; it's up in Brampton. You can see everywhere that we are succeeding very much in our efforts.

In the city of Ottawa, their goal is to increase ridership by 30% by 2021. I'm sure that the kinds of investments we are making in their area will absolutely make that happen. We look forward to working with that city.

It's not really one item that can make the difference; it's a number of items together that make the difference. Sustainable funding goes a long way to make this happen, and the gas tax funding is a step in the right direction, along with the funding of the major projects.

Mr. McNeely: I'll change the subject now. Last Friday, I was in St. Peter's school, and one of the young fellows said, "Why are the insurance rates so high for us, for the males?" I came back with the information that we have: Insurance companies set these rates and young males are terrible drivers.

Bill 73 was passed. I just wondered, why did you restrict the number of teenagers who can accompany the G2 teenaged driver? I think that's so important, and I just want to get that information out.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: We wanted to make sure that our roads are safe. Sometimes the teenagers end up in accidents on our roads, and that's one of the reasons their insurance goes up. So what we have done is made sure that in the first six months, the teenager can carry only one passenger from midnight to 5 a.m. After that, they

can carry three passengers. Sometimes what happens is that teenagers get in the car and start talking to each other, and they are not experienced drivers and that leads to the accident and can lead to the increase in insurance costs as well.

I want to make a pitch here for public transit. We want to encourage people to take public transit. That will more or less control their insurance costs as well and help us move toward our ridership targets too.

Mr. McNeely: Chair, how much more time?

The Chair: About five minutes.

Mr. McNeely: I'd like to give the other five minutes to Mr. Lalonde.

The Chair: Delighted to hear from Mr. Lalonde.

Mr. Jean-Marc Lalonde (Glengarry–Prescott–Russell): Thank you. Through you, Mr. Chairman, to the minister: Lately there have been several reports in the news about unsafe U-Haul rental trucks. As we know, according to Bill 169, drivers could become responsible if their trucks are declared unsafe on the road. The majority of those trucks do not carry an Ontario licence. What is your ministry doing to make sure these are not operated in Ontario?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: This issue, to me—and you have seen my statements to this effect—is about public safety and also about consumer protection. This issue came to my attention in the summer and we acted very quickly and decisively. We may be the only province in this country to really act on this issue. What I wanted to make sure in my own head was if this issue is just about one company or if this issue is widespread in the industry. I wanted to know that, so I immediately ordered the inspections of the rental truck industry, and we found out that the problem was a little more widespread than what we were led to believe in the beginning by the reports.

So we worked with those companies, and some of those companies corrected whatever their maintenance issues were and brought their equipment up to standard, but there was one company who could not bring their equipment up to standard. I have ordered my ministry to work with them and do more inspections; that's number one. Number two is to make sure that their maintenance standards are high and that they are actually doing what they said they were going to do. Number three, the ministry has contacted the licensing offices in the US, and we have come to some arrangement that whenever we take the plates off any truck, we can inform the ministry responsible in Arizona and tell them that these are the VINs for them. They will then more or less enter that into the computer, and the plates cannot be replaced unless we tell them that the equipment has come up to the standard and safety is being maintained.

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If you really want to know exactly what we have done, we are doing more inspections; we are working with the companies to make sure their maintenance procedures are up to standard and that they are following their maintenance standards; and third, we are working with the ministry or department of transportation in Arizona to tell them

exactly if the trucks are unsafe, and we are taking plates so that they should not be renewed again.

We will continue to work with them to make sure that the trucks on the roads are safe. If they are not safe, then we will take some other measures to make sure that this gets done, and we will continue to audit them on a regular basis.

Mr. Lalonde: Even though they don't carry Ontario plates, we could still remove their plates?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Absolutely. I think the OPP has been doing that; they remove their plates. But what I heard was that somehow those plates were being replaced by the department of transportation in Arizona—or somebody did it. We have now notified them that this is not the right thing to do and that they shouldn't do it unless we authorize them to renew their plates again.

Mr. Lalonde: I have another question. Last week our colleague from Timmins–James Bay asked a question, and we told him that we would get back to him this week. Does MTO have a multi-year capital plan for remote airports?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Yes, we have capital expenditures for the airports. As you know, there are 29 remote airports in Ontario, and we understand that we need to maintain those airports on a regular basis in the northern communities, because sometimes that's the only way they can get in and out of there. The safety of an airport that we maintain is our number one priority. We have capital expenditures that we allocate to those airports, and we try to do the work that is necessary on a regular basis. We have given information to that effect to Mr. Bisson.

Mr. Lalonde: Thank you very much, Minister.

The Chair: I'm going to say now we've got 10 minutes per rotation. We've got about half an hour left, and Mr. Bisson has stacked about six minutes. If I have everyone's concurrence, then I'll do 10-minute rotations.

Mr. Dunlop: Sure.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Mr. Dunlop: Starting with me, I have 10 minutes?

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. Dunlop: Thank you. You mentioned the previous government a couple of times in not the nicest manner, Mr. Minister. There are a few programs that I wanted to ask you about, whether you support them or whether you would eliminate them. The one that comes to my mind is that the previous government cancelled photo radar. I'm curious whether or not you had any intentions in your ministry—if you're investigating it at all or looking at bringing back photo radar for highway traffic speeds etc.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Let me just say this: Safety is the number one issue for me. We need to maintain safety on our roads. But you need to know that most of the accidents really happen on municipal roads; they don't happen on highways. We have already given red light cameras to municipalities; we have given them the authority to do it. What we also said to them is that if they make a compelling case for photo radar, we will

look into that. We have no plans to introduce photo radar at this point on our provincial highways.

I also have looked at the photo radar that other countries have used, and I have come to the conclusion that our roads are way safer than theirs, even in spite of the fact that they have photo radar on the highways. There are one or two countries that have photo radar that have maybe a slightly better record than us, but not much better. Then there are other countries—I can give you tons of examples—that have photo radar and their fatality rates are way higher than ours. So I think it's not just the photo radar. I mean, the end objective is to keep our roads safer, and the roads will only become safer if you take a lot of other measures along with it. One of those measures is that you want to make sure your drivers are trained well before they get on to the roads, and that you also maintain your roads in a good condition, and that you do so in the summer and winter seasons.

Mr. Dunlop: Of course our government, the previous government, felt that it didn't really target aggressive drivers. You could be driving down the road impaired and not be speeding, and the guy ahead of you could be speeding and he gets charged, when you're drunk and you move on. That was one of the key areas. I just want to point that out, that it was something that we think you agree the government did right.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Listen, anything that works to make our roads safer, we agree with those things, and anything we can do to improve it, we will continue to do that.

Mr. Dunlop: A couple of other points—I've only got a couple of minutes left.

I was actually in municipal politics when the previous government did what we would have called downloaded—local services realignment—a number of provincial highways into the county roads or regional road systems. I know that at that time your party objected to local services realignment, and you objected to those roads going over to counties and regions. My question today is, have you reconsidered those decisions, and are you actually looking at uploading county roads into the provincial system today?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I can gather from your question that you don't agree with the downloading of those roads to the municipalities; that's what I read into your question. Let me say, from my point of view, my first priority is to maintain the roads that the province currently owns and keep them in good shape so that safety is maintained on those roads. That is my number one priority.

The other is to give municipalities sustainable funding so that they can maintain their infrastructure. That's what our government is doing. What we're doing right now is that we have increased our funding for highways by 20%, we have increased our transit funding by about 60% this year, and we are giving sustainable funding in terms of gas tax to the municipalities so that they can promote their public transit projects. We also have \$900 million in COMRIF funding that we are giving to the municipalities. We are providing them with sustainable funding so

they can address some of the needs that maybe were not addressed before.

Mr. Dunlop: Minister, how much money would the county of Simcoe receive through the gas tax?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I don't have that here. We can find that out for you.

The Chair: It's on its way.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Bruce can give you that number.

Mr. Dunlop: I'm just curious about that. Maybe while it's on its way, one other quick question was about the maintenance of the roads. I see that most of the contracts are expiring in 2011, 2012, 2013, and even some up to 2014. I know that my colleague from Timmins–James Bay does not agree with private contractors maintaining the roads. I definitely disagree with him on that. I think they do an excellent job. I think I put that on the record in the previous meeting last week. I take it that your ministry, and you, Minister, in particular, are satisfied with how these private contractors maintain the roads for public safety. I think they do a good job. Do you have any problems with them?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: We feel our roads are in very good condition. The contractors do a great job, and we constantly try to challenge them to make it even better. From what I have seen so far, I think the contractors are doing a good job, and we will continue to work with them to make it even better.

Mr. Dunlop: Thank you very much. I appreciate hearing that answer, because we've seen some movement for—

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Can I just give you the—Simcoe doesn't get gas tax, because they have no transit system.

Mr. Dunlop: Oh, I knew that.

Interjections.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Barrie gets about \$1.27 million, and Orillia I guess about \$271,000.

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Mr. Dunlop: They're not part of the county of Simcoe. They're another tier of municipality. I was curious if you had any plans, though, and I think I brought this up in the House before, that I felt the gas tax is being distributed in an unfair manner. Everybody pays toward the gas tax, and municipalities like the county of Simcoe and the member municipalities receive none of the money. So I want to put that on the record again. I've got to defend my municipalities. I don't think it's fair that the city of Toronto gets such a huge portion of it and these rural municipalities that all buy gas get none of it. But I do appreciate that Barrie and Orillia get some of the money.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: You're going to give me the opportunity to answer this, right?

Mr. Dunlop: Sure.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: The gas tax funding was meant to promote public transit, and any municipalities that want to get into the transit business will get gas tax funding, but in addition, we are giving the COMRIF funding to the municipalities that need to do the other infrastructure.

Mr. Dunlop: Do I have any time left?

The Chair: You have another three minutes. Perhaps, Minister, if you could table the complete list of municipalities with gas tax income for the first year of the program, we'd appreciate that.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dunlop: I guess the other positive note—I'm trying to make positive and negative notes here today—is that I do appreciate the most recent bill that's been passed with child safety. I know there were times in the House where I questioned you on it and had to put on some kind of a negative spin, but I will say, I've got three little granddaughters, and my daughters and her friends have so many friends running around in fairly speedy vehicles today. I think the 80-pound limit is very positive for child safety in our province.

I just want to pass it on, because it seems that each decade we make our school buses and our vehicles safer for our children, and of course our children are our future. I know I don't always compliment you on a lot of things you're doing, but I do want to say that that's one part of the bill that I really do appreciate, that it was put into place. I hope it does save lives, and young lives, down the road. So I'll sum it up with that.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I'd now like to recognize Mr. Bisson. You have 16 minutes.

Mr. Bisson: Thank you very much, Chair, and again, I thank the committee for their indulgence in dealing with everything that's going on today.

I'm just looking, Minister—I went back to get my laptop, because everything I need is in it. It's from the meeting I had with the union that represents the truck inspectors. What they gave me at the time was a document dated October 5, 2005, questions and answers for RUS staff: strengthening commercial vehicle enforcement.

A little while ago, when we were having our exchange, you were talking about how it was not your plan to reduce the number of inspectors within the Ministry of Transportation. But I'm looking at question 4 on your own ministry document, and it says: "Why is the ministry refocusing the program from primary on-road inspection activities to a more balanced on-road/off-road approach?"

I understand where you're going to go with it, but what it says in the document is, "Empirical evidence and success realized by other jurisdictions" etc. and all these other places "show that significant gains can be realized by refocusing resources from primary on-road inspection activities" and basically doing the audit approach. So I take it your ministry decided not to go there?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: No, I did not say that. What I said was that the number of inspectors on the road right now has more or less stayed the same for the last few years, but we are going to look at different ways of doing things, which means we want to put more effort on the front end, rather than on the back end, which means we might have to reallocate the sources. But we have not exactly decided how we're going to do it. The number of inspections that we will do and the effort that we will put in to

promote safety for our truckers will not decrease; it will stay the same.

Mr. Bisson: See, I guess the issue for me is that there's a part of what you said that I agree with, but there's a part that I'm a little bit troubled with. I agree there has to be a balanced approach. You can't have inspections without audits. Who's going to argue that? In fact, there probably is an argument that we need to do a better job on audits to make sure that at the front end, as you say, we don't end up in a situation of having people out there who are not compliant with the regulations. I'm just looking at your balance, and what it seems to say—and I guess that's why the union came to see me—is that the focus on putting people in the front end will basically lessen the need to have people in the back end, which they read as having less truck inspectors. I guess I'm asking you if you can speak to that. Will this result in a diminished number of inspectors over the next year or two as you implement more front-end services?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I don't know whether I'm making myself clear or not, but I'm saying that we need to have a balanced approach.

Mr. Bisson: No. You're very clear, Minister.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: We have to have a balanced approach, which means we need to do front-end audits and we also need to do inspections. We're going to take our resources and ask, "How much do we need to put on the front-end resources and how much are we going to do on inspections?" But the end impact of all that is to make sure that our roads are safe, that the trucks on the roads are safe. That is the objective. Why do we do inspections? To make sure that the trucks that go on the road are safe. How can we do it? We can either inspect them on the roads or we can do an audit before. But our research shows that the front end is way more effective, and we will continue to do it.

Mr. Bisson: Listen, I'm not arguing with you that we don't have to do audits. I agree with you that we need to put an emphasis on that. I agree with you that we probably have to do a better job. I've got no problem with what you're saying. All I'm asking is, overall, in the end, should the truck inspectors worry that this means less truck inspectors? That's the only question I'm asking you.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I think my issue is, and what I need to ask is, are our roads safer after we rejig or re-focus our program, and that's what I'm interested in.

Mr. Bisson: I think we're all interested in the same thing. I don't think you have a monopoly on wanting to make roads safer; I think everybody wants to go there. But my question is—and if you don't want to answer it, just say you won't answer it and I'll move on—are we expecting less truck inspectors as a result of putting more money on the front end, on the audits?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I said this program is under review, and we have made no decisions. So there is no answer that I can give to you at this point.

Mr. Bisson: OK. All right.

I wonder if the ministry can provide me with—and this is something I'm asking through the Chair—the winter road maintenance budgets, district by district, from 2004, 2005 and 2006. You don't have to speak to that, unless you have something you want to say, please.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: We will be more than pleased to provide you with that.

Mr. Bisson: All right. If we can get that, it would be helpful.

I want to go back to an issue that I raised with you back when we met last week, and that is the whole issue of people losing their licences as a result of being reported, for lack of a better word, by either an emergency worker or a doctor. Do you have anything to add to that since our last meeting? Have you had a chance to look at that at all?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I have staff here who can.

Mr. Bisson: Yay. I've got a whole bunch of cases here. I'll give you my laptop.

Mr. Bartucci: If you have specific cases on the release of the individuals, we can certainly deal with them one-off. I guess just generally, as I described in response to an earlier question, we have a process where, by legislation, physicians are obliged to report when anyone over the age of 16 has a condition that may make them an unsafe driver. As a result of that—I think you had asked and we provided information on the 21,000 on average that we get a year. When our staff do get that, they triage them to determine what the nature of the information is and what the next steps should be. They refer to guidelines from the Canadian Medical Association and the Canadian Council of Motor Transport Administrators, which together have developed very specific criteria for the type of diagnosis and the seriousness of that relative to driving. As a result of that, if more information is needed, we'll contact the physician and ask for a specialist's report. If no further information is needed, then within a week our staff can deal with the assessment and make a determination as to whether a suspension is warranted or not. In those complex issues where we need further information, we will assign those to our medical advisory committee, which is a committee, as you know, of specialists who will deal with those. So that's the process.

We've tried to constrain or contract the time down to no more than five weeks. I guess the important thing to stress is that often the delay is in the elapsed time, where we might need some reports—a stress test, for example, for a heart patient, or some other information from a specialist. So the time is the time necessary to correspond with physicians to get the necessary information in order to provide more information to us so that we can make a decision in the interests of road safety and the driver. At the outside, those are the timelines. It's not our staff sitting on the file; it's our staff waiting for information from the physician and whatnot.

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Mr. Bisson: I went back and talked to my staff. Before I go there, just to get a bit of a sense, I'm looking

at, as we call them, our customer service files within our database. By looking at the numbers, we've had 42 calls in the last 12 months on this particular issue. Some of them we managed to resolve fairly easily; others are still suspended. I see a whole bunch of these that are. To me—and I think I had some acknowledgement from the government side—it seems to have become more and more of an issue because the regulations were changed, where doctors are being forced to report where they weren't before.

There are two or three things that I want to raise with you, and then we can get into maybe some of the specifics. One is that the medical community, as I told you the other day, is basically saying, "Listen, we're being put in a spot that we don't want to be in." On the other hand, I put on my legislator's hat and say that if there's anybody unsafe on the road, I want to make sure that those people are not on the road endangering others, so don't think for a second I'm asking that we put dangerous drivers on the road. But what the doctors are complaining about is that they have to report everything, and once it gets into the system, you lose your licence, and sometimes it is quite an ordeal to get it out. I was talking to my staff. I just had one, a Mr. Gemme up in Timmins. We managed to get that one resolved through your MPP desk—I forget her name.

Mr. Bartucci: Tersigni.

Mr. Bisson: Tersigni, yes. She's been very helpful. We basically managed to get that one resolved, but it took a huge amount of work. We have a couple of others which I'm going to give you a little bit later to follow up on. So the first complaint is that doctors are saying, "We're forced to report. Once we do report, if the report comes in and the MTO thinks there is a reason to suspend, they suspend, but then there's a very long process to get it back." People are frustrated by that. That's the first thing.

The second thing is that for those that take over a year, they lose their class G licence; they have to start all over again. That's a real, real problem, because they basically get a restricted licence. What do you do if you live in rural Ontario, around Prescott–Russell, or in northern Ontario or wherever it might be, and you end up getting a licence that doesn't allow you to get on Highway 400 because it's a graduated licence and you can't drive at night, or whatever the restriction might be? Again, I'm not opposed to a graduated driver's licence system. I think that's a good idea. But these are people who have been driving for years and years and years, and they're having to go back to phase 1 because they've been suspended for a year. That's the second complaint that we're getting, on top of the length of time that it's taking for people to get through the system.

Maybe working in reverse order, is there any chance that your ministry could look at making sure that if somebody is suspended and they lose that licence for over a year, they don't need to go back through the graduated system if they've already been issued a full licence?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Let me say this: I think we always need to review our system to see the effectiveness of the system, so I will ask the staff to look into this and see if it makes sense to do that. I'm also sure that my colleagues here who are doctors as well will give me some recommendations on how to effectively improve the system, and we'll take that into consideration. If you have any other suggestions, please feel free to pass them on to us, and we'll look into them.

Mr. Bisson: I would ask you—it's something to look at. It just seems to me, and I think most members will agree—you're 40, 50, 60 years old, and you happen to walk into the doctor's office because you're feeling dizzy. It might be that you're starting to have blood sugar problems, or maybe you've got high blood pressure problems or God knows what. But if the form goes in wrong, all of a sudden it takes a long time to get your licence back. First of all, losing your licence is frustrating, but having to go through the graduated system again seems to be a bit onerous. I appreciate your willingness to take a look at that, and we'll certainly follow up by letter.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I understand the inconvenience it causes, and I think that if there are suitable ways to improve it, we will do it. But I think, from my point of view, doctors are in the best position to tell us whether the person should have a licence or not. I'm not sure who else can tell us. But I will be prepared to listen to my colleagues here who are doctors as well.

Mr. Bisson: Again, I'm not going to get into that whole debate, but I think you have undertaken to take a look at this, and that's good enough for me.

The other thing I wanted to raise was testing and assessment, a huge problem for us. I don't know, Monsieur Lalonde, if you have the same problem in Prescott–Russell, but in our area, for example, I've got one individual—and I've gone back and checked; I've got three others, so a total of four—trying to get their driver's licence back. The specialists have said, "Yes, you should be able to drive," but they're not accepting the specialist who comes to Timmins. They're saying, "You have to go to an accredited place to get tested," which happens to be London, Ontario. Well, you know, it's kind of hard to get from Timmins to London, especially if you don't have a heck of a lot of money and you don't have a driver's licence, so you can't drive there yourself, and your wife doesn't drive, or vice versa, the husband doesn't drive.

Is there any plan by the ministry to try to find some way to either use the specialists' reports—for example, we have Dr. Meloff, a neurologist, who comes to Timmins. Are you able to change it so that at least they can rely on the report of the neurologist, who is the attending specialist who deals with the individual, so they don't have to send them out for additional tests which could be quite expensive and difficult to do?

Hon. Mr. Takhar: I'm going to ask the staff to answer this.

Mr. Bartucci: We'll have to look into that. I believe the tests are those that are prescribed by the standards to

verify the condition. That is set by the Canadian Medical Association and we adhere to it, but we will look to see if there's any discretion within those standards to allow us to vary from them. The concern we have if we varied from the Canadian and international standards is that our drivers may not be recognized in other jurisdictions. That's the only caution. But we will certainly look into some accommodation or some opportunity to accommodate people who might not be as close to the centres as others are.

Mr. Bisson: I'll give you one, and I'll follow up by letter. I've got a Mr. Willie Cauchon. We have a waiver from him and a driver's licence I can provide you with. He's one of these guys who have done all the tests, and he's still hung up. There's no reason not to give him back his licence. He's done the assessment. All the work has been done, but for some reason it's sitting at MTO and

we can't seem to get it out. This guy is without a licence. I'll follow up on that.

With that, I'm sorry, Chair, but I'm going to have to return to the other disaster that I'm dealing with.

The Acting Chair (Mr. John Milloy): I was just about to tell you that you have about 45 seconds.

Mr. Bisson: Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Takhar: Can I just answer one question before you go? The winter maintenance expenditures by region were already given to you in the package today.

Mr. Bisson: Oh, were they? OK. I thought I asked for them last week. Thank you.

The Acting Chair: Thank you very much. As there's just a minute or two left before 6 o'clock, we'll adjourn the committee to meet tomorrow at 3:30 or at the end of routine proceedings. This committee stands adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1756.

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