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Chair

Mr. Larry Miller

Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

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• (0850)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC)): I'm going to call the meeting to order.

Minister, thank you very much for being here. You have some of your departmental staff, Ms. Dazé, Ms. Laroche, and Mr. Lévesque, here also.

With that, Minister, I'm going to turn it over to you.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Thank you committee members. It's a pleasure to see all of you again, and I'm looking forward to continuing to work with you.

Today my officials and I are here to discuss the 2014-15 main estimates for the infrastructure, communities and intergovernmental affairs portfolio, for the federal bridges in Montreal, and for the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec.

[Translation]

The following Infrastructure Canada representatives are joining me: Louis Lévesque, Deputy Minister; Yazmine Laroche, Associate Deputy Minister; and Su Dazé, Assistant Deputy Minister, Corporate Services Branch. I am accompanied by a few other individuals, both from Infrastructure Canada and the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec.

Today, I will provide you with an update on the work that has been done by Infrastructure Canada, the team responsible for federal bridges in Montreal and the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec over the last year, and on our plans for the coming months.

[English]

As you know, our Conservative government is building on our historic infrastructure investment by providing \$70 billion for public infrastructure over the next decade. This includes the \$53 billion new building Canada plan, which is the largest and longest federal infrastructure plan in our nation's history. The plan will provide funding for provincial, territorial, and municipal infrastructure over the next decade. It will build on our past successes under the original building Canada plan as it continues to focus on supporting projects that enhance economic growth, job creation, and prosperity.

Since 2006 our government has supported more than 43,000 infrastructure projects in Canada. We have been able to achieve this level of success by always working in partnership with the provinces, territories, and municipalities and always respecting their jurisdiction. It's important to remember that in Canada, provinces, territories, and municipalities own more than 95% of public infrastructure.

The projects we have funded have generated economic growth, have created jobs, and have contributed to a higher quality of life for Canadians. We understand the vital importance of quality infrastructure to the success of our country and the health and well-being of our citizens. Modern, efficient infrastructure helps get our goods out to market, connect people and businesses with the world, and reduce gridlock on our roads and highways. The new building Canada plan will continue to support infrastructure projects that help to meet these goals.

Our \$53 billion new building Canada plan will provide funding for public infrastructure through several funds. It's always important to remember that this is a global plan for 10 years. Don't split that period when comparing things.

First is the community improvement fund, which is made up of the renewed \$21.8 billion federal gas tax fund and the \$10.4 billion GST rebate for municipalities. It will provide more than \$32 billion to municipalities for projects in a wide range of categories. In fact, as part of the new building Canada plan, the categories for the gas tax fund have been doubled. As well, the gas tax fund has been indexed at 2% per year, to apply in \$100-million increments. This indexing will provide \$1.8 billion over 10 years to municipalities across the country.

Second is the \$14 billion new building Canada fund, which consists of \$4 billion of a national infrastructure component for projects of national significance and a \$10 billion provincial-territorial infrastructure component for projects of national, local, and regional significance. Of the provincial-territorial infrastructure component, \$1 billion will be dedicated to projects in communities with fewer than 100,000 residents.

•(0855)

[*Translation*]

Third is the P3 Canada Fund, which has been renewed with a further \$1.25 billion over five years to continue to support innovative ways to build infrastructure projects that will be delivered through a public-private partnership arrangement.

Finally, there remains \$6 billion in funding that continues to flow across the country, this year and beyond, under our existing infrastructure programs. So the Building Canada program—which began in 2007 and will end on March 31, 2014—will again make it possible to invest \$6 billion in the country's infrastructure this year.

[*English*]

Putting every construction season to work is very important for us. For our 2014-15 main estimates, Infrastructure Canada is seeking a total of \$3.3 billion for investments in public infrastructure. This funding will support the \$2 billion renewed federal gas tax fund and includes close to \$850 million to support ongoing projects under the 2007 building Canada fund, such as the Evergreen Line in British Columbia, the LRT here in Ottawa, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal, and the Halifax Discovery Centre.

It also includes \$550 million for projects in other sunseting programs. These funds are in addition to the amounts that will be requested under the new building Canada plan, which are not reflected in our 2014-15 main estimates. Given the difference in timing of the preparation of the main estimates and the budget, it is not always possible to include emerging priorities and items announced in the government's budget in the main estimates.

We are putting every construction season to work. This year is no different. We expect to flow funding to about 3,000 projects across the country under our existing program. The renewed gas tax fund will support about 2,500 public infrastructure projects this year alone. We are making sure that every construction season is put to use and that our partners have the support they need from the Government of Canada.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to turn to a project that is a high priority for the Government of Canada—the new bridge over the St. Lawrence, in Montreal.

I would first like to repeat what we have said from the beginning on this file. The new bridge on the St. Lawrence will be built through a public-private partnership, and it will include a toll and a public transit corridor. From the beginning, we have been saying that, without a toll, there would be no bridge, and we are reiterating that statement today.

Since my last appearance before your committee, we have covered a lot of ground. On March 3, I invited stakeholders to participate in the request for qualifications for the project. This is the first step of the process to select our private sector partner for the new bridge. As I have publicly stated, the Government of Canada is committed to opening the new bridge to replace the Champlain Bridge by 2018, and to completing the rest of the corridor by 2020.

I am pleased to say that the project is on track, and the posting of the request for qualifications on March 17 represents yet another important milestone for the project. In the summer of 2014, a limited number of respondents will advance to the request for proposals phase, where they will be asked to submit technical and financial proposals. While we are doing everything we can to ensure the new bridge is built as quickly as possible, we are providing all the resources necessary for the Jacques Cartier and Champlain Bridges Incorporated to ensure the safety of the current Champlain Bridge and of the other federally owned bridges in Montreal.

It is important to remind our colleagues that this is the only part of the country where Canada owns interprovincial bridges. We own 100% of the Champlain Bridge, 100% of the Jacques-Cartier Bridge and 50% of the Honoré-Mercier Bridge. All efforts are being made to keep those bridges in good condition.

In addition to fulfilling my duties as Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs, I also have the pleasure of serving as Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec. Since our government has taken office, we have restructured the agency according to its mission in order to support the economic growth of all regions of Quebec, and we will continue to do so.

Allow me to share a few figures from the Economic Development Agency of Canada's activities since 2006. Just imagine. The agency has funded 4,575 projects, granted \$2 billion in contributions, and generated \$8 billion in total project investment.

The businesses we have funded during this period report that 38,000 jobs have been created, and another 31,000 have been maintained as a result of this support.

The agency's activities are aligned with the government's priorities of jobs and the economy.

To help further these priorities, the agency focuses more specifically on promoting entrepreneurship, business productivity, export, innovation and technology transfer.

The agency maintains a presence on the ground through its 12 business offices and is the Government of Canada's principal economic representative in Quebec. Its advisors provide direct assistance to SMEs, economic development stakeholders and organizations by offering them guidance and financial support.

Ever mindful of the specific needs of communities, in June 2013, the agency introduced the Canadian Initiative for the Economic Diversification of Communities Reliant on Chrysotile. This \$50-million initiative aims to help communities and businesses in the Des Sources and Des Appalaches RCMs make the transition to new economic activities.

To support the community of Lac-Mégantic in the wake of the derailment disaster, the agency also launched, in July 2013, an initiative to help with the town's economic recovery. This \$35-million initiative consists of the following three components: up to \$20 million in aid for the reconstruction of the town; up to \$10 million in direct funding to businesses and non-profit organizations; and up to \$5 million in financial assistance through two investment funds to be administered by one or more local organizations.

Based on the agency's track record so far on the ground, you can rest assured of our ongoing commitment to supporting SMEs and furthering the economic growth of every region of Quebec. That continues to be our daily motivation.

● (0900)

[English]

I would like to thank you for offering me the opportunity to speak to you about the important work being done on behalf of the whole country by Infrastructure Canada for the federal bridges in Montreal and through the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec.

Thank you for your time, Mr. Chair, and all the committee. My officials and I will be happy to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We'll now move to Ms. Boutin-Sweet, for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Thank you very much, Minister. I look forward to hearing your answers to our questions.

As you in part said, municipalities own most of the public infrastructure in Canada—at least 60% of it. However, the criteria announced for project submission—I am talking about the Building Canada Fund and not the New Building Canada Plan—do not specify how the money will be spent, how the projects will be assessed, or whether priority will be given to municipalities or other groups.

Other groups, such as universities and non-profit organizations, now have an opportunity to obtain funds. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the caucus of mayors of major Canadian cities have often asked that a portion of that \$14 billion be set aside for the Building Canada Fund. They are still waiting for a concrete answer. Will they obtain a concrete response today and find out what percentage of the Building Canada Fund will be earmarked for municipalities?

Hon. Denis Lebel: I want to begin by saying that 95% of the country's infrastructure belongs to municipalities, provinces and our partners.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: I am now talking about municipalities.

Hon. Denis Lebel: Since the beginning of this project, Mr. Fletcher, the former Minister of State for Transport, and I have held 13 round tables across the country, and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities was invited to all the meetings. Muni-

palities have been part of the process since the beginning and are fully aware that 71%

[English]

of the total building Canada plan

[Translation]

will go to Canadian municipalities. That figure has already been set at 71%.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Minister, I specified that I was talking about the Building Canada Fund and not the New Building Canada Plan. I know that 71% is earmarked for the plan, but I want to know what the percentage is for the Building Canada Fund.

Hon. Denis Lebel: You asked me a question. I have to answer it in a comprehensive way because you failed to provide some important information.

In the case of a plan with four phases, four components, when you isolate one component as you did, you are deliberately evading part of the answer.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Minister, this is what municipalities want to know. They want to know what percentage of the Building Canada Fund will be allocated to them. That is the question.

Hon. Denis Lebel: They should put that question to the provinces. We have already set aside \$1 billion of the \$10-billion provincial and territorial fund.

I want you to know that we are very respectful of jurisdictions. Our government and our party are very mindful of jurisdictions when we sign agreements with the provinces.

We sent the provinces the gas tax fund renewal on November 5 of last year. I just want to point out that \$32 billion of the \$53 billion will go to municipalities.

However, \$4 billion of the \$14 billion will be reserved for infrastructure projects and will be awarded based on merit. Municipalities will be able to apply for that funding.

We cannot say how much money will go to municipal projects until municipalities have submitted their projects. Of the \$10-billion envelope, \$1 billion is intended for municipalities with 100,000 people, and less than \$9 billion will be distributed through the provinces and territories.

You are asking me to answer on behalf of the provinces.

● (0905)

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: No.

Hon. Denis Lebel: But that is what you are asking me.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: I am asking you to answer on your behalf.

Hon. Denis Lebel: I can tell you that we sign agreements with the provinces when it comes to gas tax. The Building Canada Plan was renewed with \$10 billion. Provinces and municipalities will prioritize projects. In Quebec, among other places, all municipalities must....

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: I am sorry to interrupt you, but I have only seven minutes.

So the department has not set an amount or a percentage of the Building Canada Fund that will be allocated to municipalities. Is that the answer?

Hon. Denis Lebel: The answer is that 71% of the Building Canada Plan is going to municipalities.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: I was talking about the Building Canada Fund.

Hon. Denis Lebel: That is the Building Canada Plan.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Yes, but that was not my question.

Hon. Denis Lebel: But that's because you cannot isolate different parts.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: I have a second question.

If I remember correctly, you limited the federal funds to a third of the total allocated funding for projects of over \$100 million. That means municipalities cannot, for instance, obtain a third of the funding from the Building Canada Fund, another third from the gas tax fund, and so on. The federal amount has to represent a third of the total funding. That really reduces municipalities' resources and could lead to a significant increase in municipal taxes.

What do you have to say to municipalities on this matter?

Hon. Denis Lebel: I would say that municipalities are very familiar with the principle whereby funding for provincial, territorial and municipal projects is divided into three parts. That's nothing new. The old Building Canada Plan operated on the same basis in terms of anything other than the excise tax on gasoline. They know this very well.

What's different about the renewed plan is that all projects of over \$100 million will have to be analyzed using an analytical grid to determine whether Canadians would benefit more from the project being carried out through a public-private partnership.

The approach whereby spending is divided into three parts has been known to municipalities for a long time. No changes have been made when it comes to that.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Regarding public-private partnerships, municipalities will now have to go through this process. That means they will lose a great deal of flexibility. They will no longer have a choice. First, the decision on whether to use a P3 arrangement will be final.

Second, on your website, you say that it takes 6 to 18 months to carry out the study. Earlier, you were saying that you were putting every construction season to work, but this process could result in the loss of one, even two, construction seasons.

Hon. Denis Lebel: Absolutely not, madam.

Let's not forget that the \$32 billion from the excise tax on gas is something else. It's important not to lump it all in together.

Of the \$53 billion, some \$33 billion goes to municipalities by way of the gas tax fund, and \$4 billion goes to the national infrastructure fund. We're still talking about just that \$10 billion. It's sizeable, but

it's part of the overall plan. You always have to look at it in that context.

It's important to understand that it does not apply to all projects, just those valued at \$100 million or more. Every one of those projects will be reviewed. The plan says very clearly that we will adhere to the P3 review systems already in place in some provinces; we will work with those that have recognized expertise and sound P3 review frameworks already established. We don't want to reinvent the wheel. So no construction seasons will be lost.

Some details still need to be worked out, but the overall plan has been known since February 14. In November, all the provinces and territories received details on the renewal of the gas excise tax. They are fully aware of what it entails. On February 14, we announced the last \$14 billion. So it's clear. I am convinced that no construction season will be lost.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: So you're saying that the review period for a \$100-million plus project is 18 months, and yet no construction season will be lost. I don't think we're doing quite the same math.

Hon. Denis Lebel: You are the one saying that it will take 18 months for a project to be approved. That's not what I—

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: It's on your website.

Hon. Denis Lebel: That's not what I said to you. I just told you that in provinces like British Columbia and Ontario, where review processes already exist, we won't duplicate what's already been done. That is the basic concept behind what we're trying to do.

We established a \$70-billion plan over 10 years, and \$53 billion of it is in the new building Canada plan. We want to see that money invested and we want that investment to be ongoing. There's a history. Before I became an MP, I spent seven years as a mayor, so I know how much support we got from the previous government.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: I have one last question for you. *[English]*

The Chair: Go ahead and make a closing comment, but your time is up.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Very well.

The government said it wouldn't sign a framework agreement with the provinces. What are you going to do to make sure you have an agreement by April 1?

● (0910)

Hon. Denis Lebel: Talks are already well under way in terms of the overall plan. I am convinced that we won't miss out on any construction seasons. Don't worry about that. Officials are working very hard. I look forward to announcing agreements with the provinces soon.

[English]

The Chair: Your time has expired. Thank you.

Mr. McGuinty, you have seven minutes.

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Monsieur le ministre, welcome back to committee.

Minister, I want to go right to the money. When I hear your presentation today, and I've watched your responses in the House in the last little while about the money, I'm reminded of a card trick, kind of a shell game.

I've gone through your report on plans and priorities. I've read the whole document. I've gone through the estimates. I've read that document. I'm looking through this document on 2014-15 estimates and I'm looking for the money.

You keep saying there's money available on April 1. Where is the money, and how much is available on April 1?

Hon. Denis Lebel: I think you know how it works. We pay the provinces and our partners when the job is done. We can estimate how they will realize their project. About the estimates, it's always the same.

[*Translation*]

I will ask Mr. Lévesque to elaborate on the numbers.

[*English*]

Mr. Louis Lévesque (Deputy Minister, Infrastructure Canada): I'll explain that what is in the estimates does not reflect the new plan that has been announced in budget 2013, and funded and reannounced in budget 2014. This will come to supplementary estimates. What's in the estimates reflects both making the gas tax fund a statutory element—

Mr. David McGuinty: I understand.

Let me ask you this. In previous estimates, funding for the building Canada plan was present. If I'm the mayor of Laval, or if I'm the mayor of Victoria, and I'm now looking, casting out over the next federal fiscal year, how much money am I eligible to apply for? What is the size of the fund available on April 1?

Mr. Louis Lévesque: What is currently before Parliament for the estimates is fundamentally the continuation of the programs that are largely committed, but not entirely—

Mr. David McGuinty: Okay. Is there any new money?

Mr. Louis Lévesque: That's not in the estimates.

Mr. David McGuinty: There's no new money on April 1?

Hon. Denis Lebel: No. It's not in the estimates.

Mr. David McGuinty: So we don't have a deal, do we, frankly speaking?

I keep hearing that you're negotiating with the FCM, that you're going to have a deal on April 1, that there's going to be money available. Today is March 25, if my calendar is right. So where's the money?

I keep hearing these numbers being bandied about, \$54 billion, Mr. Chair. We know this is a gas tax transfer here, and it's a GST rebate over there. I know it makes for great slogans, Minister, because your government is big on slogans. It makes for great slogans.

Right here, the Library of Parliament's researchers ask the question why these expenditures have been omitted from the 2014-15 main estimates. Why? This is the Library of Parliament research staff asking the question.

Where's the money?

Hon. Denis Lebel: The money will be.... We sent the renewal of the agreements to all provinces and territories which is starting on April 1 on November 5. We'll make some announcements soon for the agreements signed with provinces and territories. All mayors in the country know that the renewal of the gas tax fund is available on April 1. That's more than \$2 billion a year. They know that's money.... We will invest \$32 billion over 10 years in municipalities through the gas tax fund, just—

Mr. David McGuinty: I'm sure you will, in years six, seven, eight, nine, and ten.

Hon. Denis Lebel: I was a mayor when you were in government. I remember that era. We had no money. We have money on the table now.

Mr. David McGuinty: Isn't the truth here really—

Hon. Denis Lebel: That's the truth.

Mr. David McGuinty: —that Minister Flaherty on the way out the door has issued a decree to all the departments, including you as a minister, to say, “You're not getting the money right now because we have to eliminate the deficit, we have to balance the budget for political purposes before 2015”?

Isn't that the real reason we see no money booked here for April 1?

Hon. Denis Lebel: Absolutely not. The gas tax fund is available April 1. That's more than \$2 billion a year. We can't answer how much money will be invested in national infrastructure—

Mr. David McGuinty: We're talking about the new building Canada plan.

Hon. Denis Lebel: That's what I'm doing.

The main part of that is GST rebate and the renewal of the gas tax fund, and that will be available April 1 for municipalities all across the country.

• (0915)

Mr. David McGuinty: Let's turn to the second issue. I want to talk to you about the bridge.

Your government was warned in 2011 in a secret briefing note that this 51-year-old bridge, the busiest span in the country, an essential component of North American trade, was in “poor condition” and required “comprehensive strengthening and other repairs to avoid jeopardizing public safety”.

In the recent budget your government proposed to spend only \$165 million over two years for a replacement bridge.

You've been given estimates here. We've been given estimates of between \$3 billion and \$5 billion to replace this bridge. Now we're told there's a consortium interested in the public-private partnership. It's going to be asked to apply in the spring. The winning bid is going to be announced only in 2015. Ministerial briefing notes for you show the government has known about these issues since well, well, well before 2011, in fact, since 2006. When you achieved government, you said, “We'll roll on the bridge in 2018.”

Why has the government not acted sooner? Minister, isn't this again a case where you're delaying this bridge construction in order to meet your almighty deficit elimination deadline?

Hon. Denis Lebel: Absolutely not. We will never jeopardize the security of the population. That's completely wrong, completely wrong.

The bridge is safe because JCCBI is doing the job. We have invested over \$380 million to keep that bridge safe. The Buckland & Taylor report said that we have to put in more money. That's what we will continue to do. They were supposed to deliver the bridge in 2021. We have changed the schedule to have it sooner because of the Buckland & Taylor report. Probably the former government did not look at this bridge as seriously as we're doing. We're delivering the job and we'll make it on time and on budget.

Mr. David McGuinty: Minister, it gets very thin after a while. You've been in power for eight years. I remember one of your candidates, a senator. Do you remember him, the CFL player? He was appointed to the Senate so he could run a campaign. Then he quit the day the campaign was kicked off. He ran as your candidate in Montreal. He went to the bridge, made an announcement. Do you remember that? What has been happening here? You've been playing politics with this bridge now for eight years.

I want to turn to something else you've said. You've said over and over again, "no toll, no bridge; no toll system, no bridge". The problem is Canadians, Montrealers, and Quebecers are looking for any analysis you might have actually conducted, if you've done any, to explain to them what the effects of that will be.

Let me ask you this. If you put a toll on this bridge, what will the effects be on other bridges in the Montreal area? What will the effects be on public transit? What will the effects be on roadways? If you have that analysis, could you table it here today?

The Chair: Mr. McGuinty, your time is up.

Mr. David McGuinty: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'll let the minister answer the question.

Hon. Denis Lebel: You are wrong because if we had played politics with this issue, probably we would have had to announce it during the campaign in 2011. I announced it on October 5, 2011. That's totally wrong.

Already in the Montreal region there is a toll on Highway 25 and Highway 30. The population knows how it goes. The impact is certain: if we don't build the new bridge, there will be a huge impact on the traffic in the Montreal region. We're delivering a bridge on time. We will continue to work very hard. The population in Montreal knows how important an issue it is, and we're taking that very seriously.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Braid, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Peter Braid (Kitchener—Waterloo, CPC): Thank you, Minister and officials, for being here this morning.

I want to start from an infrastructure perspective and talk about the new building Canada plan. There are a number of important pillars under the plan: the community infrastructure fund, which includes

the gas tax fund, and the new building Canada fund, which includes a provincial and territorial component and a national component.

I want to start with the gas tax fund. It's such an important pillar of the overall plan.

Minister, could you highlight the enhancements that have been made specifically to the gas tax fund and the increased flexibility that is available for municipalities under that particular component?

Hon. Denis Lebel: Since we have been in government, we have taken this issue of the gas tax fund very seriously. We have made it permanent. We have doubled it. Now we are indexing it, and now it's permanent in a bill, in law. That's very, very important.

Municipalities were asking us for more flexibility on that gas tax fund. Now I can tell you that the categories available under the gas tax fund include public transit, drinking water, waste water, solid waste, green energy, local roads—including bridges on local roads—short-line rail, short-sea shipping, regional and local airports, highways, connectivity and broadband, brownfield redevelopment, disaster mitigation, tourism, sport—for sure non-professional sport—recreation, culture, and capacity building. There are a lot of new categories accepted under the building Canada plan, and municipalities are happy with that. For sure we will have to continue to support them on this program, but that's a very effective program, very well known now.

What is very important is predictability. When you're on a city council and you have in front of you a 10-year plan, you can plan how much money you will receive from the Government of Canada through the gas tax fund. It's very important to have predictability, and now they have it for 10 years. With the \$6 billion of the former plan, that's \$38 billion available for cities through this new building Canada plan. I know they're very happy about that for sure. If you ask mayors if they want more money, they will say yes, but they're already receiving 71% of the building Canada plan. As I've said before, we have to work with our partners in municipalities, provinces, and territories, and we will continue to do so.

• (0920)

Mr. Peter Braid: Let's talk about the funding that's available under the new building Canada plan beginning in the 2014-15 fiscal year, because for some reason there seems to be a lot of confusion on the other side of the table. Under the gas tax fund alone, as I understand it, it represents \$2 billion for municipalities over the coming year, and that of course is available to them in stable, predictable funding this year and for the next nine years after that.

Hon. Denis Lebel: Absolutely. You are totally right. That's why when we want to split the building Canada plan, we have to take each one of the components. The money for the gas tax fund will be available from April 1. Municipalities know that. It will be indexed through the years. There will be \$32 billion through the 10 years through this, more than the \$6 billion of the actual building Canada plan, which flows next summer. In 2014 there will be a lot of construction everywhere in the country because of the former program and the new program.

Mr. Peter Braid: Let me pick up on that last point, Minister. Under the former program, in addition to the \$2 billion that's available in 2014-15 under the gas tax fund, there is a portion of the original building Canada plan that gets carried over, that wasn't fully spent, and that represents another significant amount of money that is available to municipalities and provinces and territories this coming year. Is that correct?

Hon. Denis Lebel: Absolutely. There is still \$6 billion from the former program, which will continue to flow this year and in the next years, too, because, as you know, we're paying our partners when the job is done and they have sent us their bills. That's the way it works. You're right: there is still \$6 billion that will continue to flow in the former program.

Mr. Peter Braid: Okay.

Finally, as I understand it, there is even more, because under the provincial-territorial infrastructure component, which begins this new fiscal year in 2014, all the provinces and the territories will know exactly what their funding envelope will be. Is that correct?

Hon. Denis Lebel: That's right too. All municipalities can apply for a project through this program. That's why it's impossible for me to tell you today how much money will go to municipalities. They will have to apply in a provincial-territorial program. After that, the province will decide what are their priorities. After that, some years from now, we will be able to say, "This amount of money has been invested through municipalities." We can do that through the provincial-territorial program.

Mr. Peter Braid: It's only logical that we won't know exactly the amount of money that will be spent under the provincial and territorial infrastructure component until applications are made and receipts are received.

Hon. Denis Lebel: It works like that. Everybody knows, then, that there would be at least \$2 billion available through the gas tax fund, and we will expend the money when we have done the projects and have received the bills from the provinces and territories. That's the way it works.

Mr. Peter Braid: Minister, thank you for clarifying that.

In addition, could you also explain how the investments that our government has made for infrastructure since we became government in 2006 compare—the original plan and the new plan—to those of the previous Liberal government?

Hon. Denis Lebel: I was a mayor between 2000 and 2007.

● (0925)

[*Translation*]

What we had in 2006-07 was preliminary; it wasn't permanent, so that changes everything.

Mayors are very glad to have some degree of predictability, a plan they can rely on. All the money from the gas excise tax, for instance, goes to municipalities, enabling them to make their own choices. Those choices vary depending on the region as well as local priorities. In some parts of the country, municipalities decided to invest all that money in public transit, and that's their prerogative.

There is no longer any doubt that, now, the infrastructure plan gives municipalities access to funding over a 10-year period. That wasn't the case under the previous government.

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Braid: Last, Minister, how would you compare the original building Canada fund of 2007 to the new building Canada plan?

Hon. Denis Lebel: There is more money. We have changed some categories. We have the experience of the former plan.

The money will continue to flow. Municipalities know how it works, too, and they are prepared to invest in that. I think we will have better results.

The Chair: Thank you. Your time has expired.

Mr. Toet, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Lawrence Toet (Elmwood—Transcona, CPC): Thank you, Minister, for being with us today. We appreciate it very much.

I recently met with two municipal councillors in my area. I can tell you that the conversation we had that day was very positive. They were very pleased not only with the previous building Canada fund but also with the new plan, the certainty they have in it, and the understanding that they have this going forward, especially with regard to the gas tax fund, but also with regard to the 10-year plan. They know what they can count on over the next number of years. It is very much appreciated by them.

In line with that, here's what I wanted to talk about. You mentioned a few times that we have to look at the totality of these funds, the complete totality of the various components of the infrastructure building fund. Maybe you could touch a little on the flexibility. One of the things in the conversation I had with them was that understanding of the flexibility under the different components. Maybe you could brief us on how much we've enhanced the flexibility through the new funding.

Hon. Denis Lebel: It's mainly through the gas tax fund that they ask for more flexibility. As I have said, and I've read all the categories, and that was very important for them. When you have fixed your water and waste water problems and your road problems, you want to continue to invest that money in your municipality. Now they have the opportunity to do that in other categories. That was very important.

With the new building Canada component, the national infrastructure component, we now have, in categories such as highways and major roads, public transit, rail infrastructure, local and regional airports, port infrastructure, intelligent transportation systems, and disaster mitigation infrastructure, a national infrastructure component to create more jobs.

Municipalities know that now they have more flexibility in the gas tax fund. They know too that we have a national infrastructure component to continue to support job creation all across the country. That works well with the provinces and municipalities, for sure. Like us, they always want to have more money to invest in programs; that's the same. They are very proud of the flexibility we gave through the gas tax fund.

Mr. Lawrence Toet: One of the important things to remember, too, is with regard to the flowing of the funds for this coming construction season. There has been some concern brought forward on that, but it is very true that the former program funds are still flowing. I can think of two very major projects happening in the city of Winnipeg right now from the former fund that will still be going through this current construction season before they're completed. These are fairly major projects. There is a continuation of the ability to....

In fact one of the challenges raised in some of our meetings in the last week with some stakeholders was the concern about the construction industry being able to keep up with the pace of this infrastructure project and the jobs that will be required over the next couple of years. That's actually one of the challenges the construction industry was concerned about.

Hon. Denis Lebel: We understand that. We have to respect the capacity of municipalities too when we're doing projects. They know that normally they have to pay a third, their share, in projects. It's more difficult now for some municipalities to have their local money to support the program. We have to respect that and go at the pace of some municipalities.

They already know, as I've said, that it's still \$6 billion of the former program, and that will not be over at the end of the next fiscal year. There are still some projects that will be under way for some years to come. The new plan is effective from April 1. I repeat, there will be \$2 billion available for municipalities of the country on April 1, 2014, in the new plan that will continue to do so...and they expect to be ready for development. That's why they asked for more flexibility, to have some tools to create their own development too, and they have them now.

• (0930)

Mr. Lawrence Toet: Minister, you and Mr. Lévesque were beginning to explain to us the process on the allocation, especially under the new building Canada fund, and how the payout is done at the end of the project. That's important to remember, because to me, I think we'll see a real reflection in supplemental estimates.

Am I correct that as these projects come forward and are actually applied for we'll start to see some of the adjustments showing up in that component?

Mr. Louis Lévesque: Yes. As the program elements will be finalized and announcements will be made through the fall, through the normal process, supplementary estimates will be brought to dedicate funding to the components of the \$14-billion element of the new plan. The main estimates already include the \$20 billion for the gas tax. The GST rebate is already legislated. The main estimates reflect the ongoing disbursements on the \$6 billion in remaining funds to be disbursed on projects under the previous building Canada plan.

Mr. Lawrence Toet: There's no concern that we're going to have a construction season with nothing happening all of a sudden. There's still lots ongoing.

The last thing I wanted to touch on was P3 screenings. I'd like some clarity on that. The P3 screenings, from what I understand, are only mandatory on projects of \$100 million or more. Is that correct?

Mr. Louis Lévesque: Yes.

Mr. Lawrence Toet: Does that mean any project under \$100 million is not eligible for a P3 screening, or can they still be applied for going through the P3?

Mr. Louis Lévesque: If proponents prefer to look at P3s, they are absolutely eligible to do so. That will be considered. What is mandatory is that if there's a project for over \$100 million, it will have to go through a P3 screening.

Mr. Lawrence Toet: That comes back to the timing issue of going through the P3 screening. If it's \$100 million or more, it will be a very significant project. There will be a lot of work on engineering and all these things. As it's going through that process, it can also be going through the P3 screening.

Therefore, this concern about delaying a construction project probably is not true at all, because a P3 screening will probably move at a faster pace than the actual engineering work that will happen on a project of that kind of significance.

Hon. Denis Lebel: That normally happens with this kind of project. You can't deliver a \$100-million project without having all these preparations. When you're planning a \$100-million project that's because we have been told to do it. P3 is one of them, and often they look at it and say they don't have a mandatory obligation to do it, and now we have it. I think that will be helpful because P3 will be on time and on budget normally, and I think that's a better result.

Mr. Lawrence Toet: I can definitely speak to the P3s in Winnipeg when you talk about being on time and on budget. One project was completed almost in half the time. It was scheduled for two years, and it was done in just over a year's time. It speaks to how effective those can be. It was also brought in under budget.

P3s have a proven track record of being very effective ways of getting our infrastructure done.

Hon. Denis Lebel: We respect the choice of our partners on the \$100 million. They can do what they want, but they know we all want to be effective and to have a better result for taxpayers' money.

The Chair: Your time has expired.

Mr. Mai, you have five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Hoang Mai (Brossard—La Prairie, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, minister.

As you know, the matter of the Champlain Bridge is extremely important to my constituents. You have frequently been criticized for how long it took the government to announce that the bridge would be replaced. You had the Delcan report, which highlighted the need to replace the bridge, but you waited nearly a year to announce the bridge would be replaced. It took the public, the Quebec government and municipalities putting pressure on the government before any action was taken. It's as though you dropped the ball and now you're trying to play catch-up. A responsible government would have replaced the bridge. We've known about the problems with the bridge for 10 years. The Liberals were in power back then, yes, but the fact remains that your government did nothing to replace the bridge.

And now it's a race to meet timelines. There's no transparency and rules are being bypassed so contracts can be awarded without being put out to public tender. The government is not handling this file properly. We want more transparency, minister.

Earlier you mentioned the issue of tolls. You say in your brief that the bridge will be built with a toll, "no toll, no bridge". That's blackmail, minister. It's akin to bullying. Just think of the people who use the bridge and know all too well what kind of shape it's in now. It scares a lot of people when they are told that if they don't pay the toll, they won't get a new bridge, so they'll have to keep using the existing one in its rundown state. That simply isn't okay.

Why don't you want to work with the provincial government and the municipalities? Even the business community, chambers of commerce and the NDP are now urging you to give up your plans for a toll bridge. From the outset, you've said "no toll, no bridge", but now you're not telling us anything about the studies you have addressing the impact on traffic and the economy. You aren't even telling us what the toll will be used for.

In a public-private partnership, isn't the point of a toll simply to pad the pockets of the company in charge of the bridge? Isn't this basically a scheme for companies to turn a profit?

• (0935)

Hon. Denis Lebel: Could you be more specific please?

Mr. Hoang Mai: Are you able, today, to give us the reports showing the costs or at least the rationale for the toll? Where is the research to justify a toll bridge?

Hon. Denis Lebel: Mr. Chair, I would first like to point out that much of what the member said is simply not true, so I am compelled to correct him.

My colleague should know just how long it takes to prepare and publish a document on a project worth between \$3 billion and \$5 billion.

Mr. Hoang Mai: I appreciate that, but—

Hon. Denis Lebel: No, I cannot let you make false claims without addressing them, sir. What you said is completely untrue.

We took the time necessary to prepare the project. We made the announcement on October 5, 2011. Look at the date of the Delcan report. You said we did absolutely nothing to address it, and that is completely false.

Mr. Hoang Mai: Minister, you have not handed over any study showing the need for a toll bridge. The report done by Consortium BCDE says very clearly that a public-private partnership will cost taxpayers more than a public one, in other words, the usual method. And that is straight out of the BCDE report, minister.

Hon. Denis Lebel: That is not true, sir. The business plan shows that the savings could be as much as 17%. And the plan will be made available to the public once the contract is signed.

As you know, this is the only place in the country where we own bridges in a province. We've had more than 100 meetings with the municipalities and the Government of Quebec. And here you are claiming that we don't consult them. That is absolutely untrue.

Mr. Hoang Mai: If you ask the Government of Quebec, the CMM or the Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec what they think, they will tell you unequivocally that they do not support your plan and that you aren't listening to them.

Hon. Denis Lebel: The NDP wants to generate \$21 billion in new tax revenue to pay for things like the bridge.

Mr. Hoang Mai: Okay, that's fine. Thank you.

Hon. Denis Lebel: Our government has cut taxes 160 times since the beginning—

Mr. Hoang Mai: I am going to give the rest of my time to my colleague, Mr. Sullivan.

Hon. Denis Lebel: Mr. Chair, I was asked a question.

On the very first day, we announced a \$3-billion to \$5-billion investment in the only province in Canada where the federal government owns bridges. We are going to pay for this bridge with tolls.

Obviously the NDP relies on the carbon tax to generate \$21 billion in new spending money. We, however, prefer to cut taxes, not raise them.

Mr. Hoang Mai: Unbelievable. That wasn't an answer, minister.

[*English*]

The Chair: You have 35 seconds for your question.

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): I have a very quick question. The finance minister, in his 2013 budget, said, "we will ensure that government contracts and funding for infrastructure and maintenance support the employment of apprentices."

We have not heard anything more from any part of the government since that time. We have been trying in Toronto to get the local provincial Liberal government to actually support the employment of apprentices on major infrastructure projects with no success.

How is it that the federal government will actually achieve the hiring of apprentices?

Hon. Denis Lebel: We'll do that in the partnership that's in the provincial-territorial component of the plan and we will continue to work with our partners. That's our goal.

Everybody in the country knows we need more workers. We need some new workers and we have to create for them opportunities to learn and to become better workers. That's what we'll do with this plan, and that's in partnership with provinces and territories.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Komarnicki for five minutes.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): We've heard in the news a lot about the safety of bridges. Before I get into my specific questions that relate more to my constituency, could you perhaps highlight the various ways our government has ensured the safety of federal bridges in Montreal?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Lebel: It's essential to bear in mind the way we've approached this project. Jacques Cartier and Champlain Bridges Incorporated is doing a very thorough job. The work is happening at the front end. The reason that the reports coming in were written before problems were identified has to do with the fact that we are being proactive.

There is no doubt that the bridge is getting old and isn't ageing well. Today, the bridge needs daily monitoring and checks. It's probably the most monitored bridge in the country. With the help of sensors, numerous checks are done every single day. We have experts doing those checks. Our government is investing what it has to to keep the Champlain Bridge safe.

As for the Honoré-Mercier Bridge, which we are half owner of, we've had an action plan in place to ensure its integrity for a few years now. Repairs on the federal government's portion of the bridge are well under way. We have to work with our partner, the Government of Quebec, which owns the other half of the bridge. Last year, for instance, the Quebec government's half of the bridge needed repairing, and those repairs were done by a federal organization, which delayed the work being done on our half of the bridge. Nevertheless, we are working diligently to ensure that the Honoré-Mercier Bridge, too, remains in proper condition to meet the needs of the population.

We are full owners of the Jacques-Cartier Bridge. Work is done regularly to keep it in good repair. A significant amount was earmarked in the last budget for that ongoing work, a total of \$380 million.

So we are being extremely diligent to make absolutely certain that when a federally owned bridge is in operation, it is safe.

• (0940)

[*English*]

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Thank for you for those assurances, Minister. I certainly appreciate that.

With respect to the new building Canada plan, small communities under 1,000 certainly appreciate having that particular category. The question that I have heard from some municipalities is are they restricted to that particular fund, or can they also apply under the provincial-territorial fund? If they do, do they have to establish a regional component to it or not? Could they take the same project and have it apply to either one?

Hon. Denis Lebel: For sure they can apply on the rest of the provincial-territorial plan, but there are different systems in different provinces. I'll give the example of Quebec where you can't, if you're a city councillor or a mayor, depose your plan directly to the federal government. You have to go through the province. We have to respect the jurisdiction and the way provinces are managing that. The money for the provincial-territorial plan is available for small communities, and depending on the region of the country, the province of the country, there are different systems. But they know how it works in their own province and this one is available for them.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: So they're not restricted just to the small community fund.

Hon. Denis Lebel: Absolutely not. They already know they have the gas tax fund. What's more, they have the \$1 billion reserve in the PT program for them. They can apply for the rest of the provincial-territorial program.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: There's another aspect, which is you don't see the money allocated here today, but many of the projects are yet to be applied for and to be completed and the funding won't come until some later time. It's understandable why you wouldn't have the funding allocated today, because it's a process.

Some communities indicate that in their consideration for major projects, there's a timing issue with respect to engineering and there's a timing issue for other aspects. They've said that if they have a project in mind and when the application process opens, they may not be ready to proceed in the 2014 construction season, but they may proceed in 2015, 2016 or 2017. They've asked whether they are able to apply in 2014 for their particular project, knowing they may not start in 2014, but maybe in 2015 or 2016. Are they able to put those in for consideration? Have those rules been worked out yet, or is that something that's still being developed?

Hon. Denis Lebel: I will ask the deputy minister to repeat how it works to be sure we all understand how it works.

Mr. Louis Lévesque: As of April 1 the government intends to have the plan open for business. This means that projects will be identified, prioritized by municipalities, provinces, and the federal government. Obviously, smaller projects tend to proceed much faster than bigger projects because they're less complex, but as soon as projects are approved, the municipalities or the provinces can get on with the work. As soon as they have interim eligible expenses and the proof of those expenses are provided to the federal government, reimbursement can begin.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Let me put a specific question.

The Chair: Your time has expired, Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: It couldn't have, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Well, magically, it did.

We are getting to the end of our time here, but I'm going to give two and a half minutes to Mr. Mai and two and a half minutes to Mr. Watson.

• (0945)

Mr. Hoang Mai: Before I use my time, Mr. Chair, we have all the officials here today. I understand that the minister has to go. He has been here for a long time, but after that, for the second hour, could I ask that we have the officials here so we can ask questions of them directly?

The Chair: I think I would need their approval to stay, but if there's consent around the table.... When notice of the meeting went out it was for an hour, so—

Mr. Hoang Mai: I understand it was an hour for the minister, but I'm—

Mr. Peter Braid: I have other commitments. It said until 10 o'clock and I planned accordingly.

Mr. Hoang Mai: At 10 o'clock?

Mr. Peter Braid: Yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Hoang Mai: Minister, I'd like to discuss how the investments are made.

You mentioned \$70 billion in funding. Is the government conducting a study on the economic repercussions locally? When investments are made, is there a requirement to ensure that the communities concerned derive economic benefits?

Let's take the Champlain Bridge, for example. Imagine how many jobs would be created if there was a Canadian component requirement, which would be entirely in keeping with the free-trade agreements we have with other countries.

[English]

The Chair: Yes.

Okay.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Lebel: We, of course, work with our partners as part of the overall plan.

I would just like to mention, by the way, that the repairs to the existing Champlain Bridge and the new bridge for the St. Lawrence have nothing at all to do with the infrastructure plan we're discussing.

[English]

That's not at all financed; it's important to remember that.

[Translation]

We are going to hold two open houses when site visits will be conducted. We hope that Quebec and Canadian companies will be awarded many contracts; it is important to point that out. We are going to put out a call for tenders. Highway 30 was done by a Spanish consortium in partnership with Quebec stakeholders. We hope that as many Canadian companies as possible receive contracts in Montreal.

Mr. Hoang Mai: When Quebec solicits bids for its public transit project, local economic spinoff is one of the requirements.

In the case of the Champlain Bridge, we're talking about a project valued at \$3 billion to \$5 billion, which could generate up to 10,000 jobs. But if the government does nothing, in other words, if it doesn't impose a requirement, we could lose all those jobs. If the whole thing is left up to a private firm, it could solicit bids, and the concrete could come from China, for example.

Hon. Denis Lebel: Public-private partnerships create jobs for many people in the region. I imagine the local company that builds the consortium and wins the contract for the bridge in Montreal will also want to win the contract for the Windsor-Detroit bridge. It would have two contracts in Canada instead of just one, and that would give it the ability to employ even more people in the region.

We are doing everything we can. The open houses are specifically for local contractors, to give them access to consortiums that will submit bids. Then we will make our decision. That's how we intend to proceed, sir.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Watson, for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): Thank you to the minister for being here.

You know the program is a good one when the opposition have to go to great lengths to try to manufacture criticisms about it. The biggest whopper is the one perpetrated by the Liberal Party that there are actual cuts in funding for infrastructure. I think they are hoping to count on the complexities of what's in a budget, the timing of spending in an estimate, and the public accounts that verify at the end of it. I think they are hoping Canadians will buy that argument.

The truth is, the money is budgeted, announced in budget 2013. The estimates will track the actual timing of spending as the allocations are made. Gas tax transfers will go out first, because they are a direct transfer to a municipality. Invoices as they come on stream from completed projects will be reflected in estimates, and then ultimately, the public accounts will clean up how much was actually spent in a year.

Is that a fair, accurate representation, that there's actually no cut to the funding? It's the timing of spending they are trying to use as a means of somehow suggesting there's no funding available.

Hon. Denis Lebel: If we announce a project in 2014-15, and some of these projects will take years to build, we can budget the money the year it starts. That's the way it works. That's always the way it worked.

Mr. Jeff Watson: A good example would be the DRIC, Detroit River international crossing, funding. A border and gateway crossing fund was set aside in budget 2006. The budget made it a cash allocation in this current budget. The estimates ultimately will track the timing of the spending, and then at some point the public accounts will clear up how much we're spending.

That's the process, but there has been no cut to DRIC funding, for example. Nobody would suggest that based on estimates.

I know that's not your particular piece of infrastructure, but it's a good example of how they're creating a ruse with this one.

● (0950)

Hon. Denis Lebel: You're right. We had some comments that there is no money for the construction of the new bridge in Montreal in that budget. That's exactly the same. We're preparing the process, and at the right time, the money will be there.

Mr. Jeff Watson: Also, the NDP.... On the idea of there being a construction delay because of P3 screening taking some time, the reality is other components of the building Canada plan will be kicking in and construction projects will be happening every single construction season while those screenings are happening.

Hon. Denis Lebel: You're right.

Mr. Jeff Watson: Very good.

Thank you, Chair.

Mr. David McGuinty: I have a point of order, sir.

The Chair: A point of order, and not debate.

Mr. David McGuinty: Mr. Chair, I think we're coming to the end of our session, but I wanted to follow up on something.

I thought I heard the minister make a commitment under questioning that he would deliver up to the committee all the internal and external analyses conducted with respect to Pont Champlain, to the bridge. I want to make sure I got that clear, and that it's on the record the minister will be delivering up all the analyses inside and outside the department that justifies the question of tolls.

The Chair: I didn't hear that, but I'll let the minister—

Mr. David McGuinty: I thought I did.

Hon. Denis Lebel: You know exactly where we are. We already have announced that we're in the process to give a contract to a company, and this information is sensitive for the way it will go.

[*Translation*]

We're working on putting a call for tenders together and companies will bid. I did not say what Mr. McGuinty believes he heard. But we have already said publicly that any information that might benefit a company in preparing its bid would be released after the contract was awarded.

The same thing was done in the case of highways 25 and 30 in Montreal. In those cases, the tolls were revealed weeks, if not months, before the roads were opened. We will release that information way ahead of time.

The calculations have been done. For the time being, however, that is confidential, sensitive information that cannot be released because it could influence the public bidding process under way. We don't want to drive costs up. If the member wishes to do so, that is his prerogative. We balance budgets. We know they don't do it themselves.

[*English*]

Mr. David McGuinty: I take it that means he's not going to deliver up the analyses, Mr. Chair. If I got the translation, I take it that means he will not deliver up to this committee the analyses for the bridge.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Lebel: He wants to play games, Mr. Chair. All the reports related to safety and all the information of a public nature has been released. The member should not try to prove something that doesn't exist.

We already said financial information that could influence the cost proposed by the company in its bid would not be made public until after the contract was awarded. That's what was said before, and I just repeated it.

As for other reports on the bridge's safety and the work that's been done, representatives from the corporation in charge of the file, Jacques Cartier and Champlain Bridges Incorporated, could answer the member's questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Just something for your own information, one of the longest elected Liberal MPs stopped me one day and was concerned there was going to be no toll on that bridge. When I told him, yes, my understanding was there was, he checked it out and called me back and said he was very happy about that. I just thought you should know that.

Thanks very much. We do have a little bit of committee business to do. We all of a sudden have a vice-chair vacancy we have to deal with, so we'll recess just for a minute.

Thanks again, Minister and staff.

● (0950)

(Pause)

● (0950)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order. I'm going to turn it over to the clerk.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Philippe Grenier-Michaud): As clerk, I will preside over the election of the first vice-chair. Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the first vice-chair must be a member of the official opposition. I'm now ready to receive motions for the first vice-chair.

Mr. Jeff Watson: I'd like to nominate Hoang Mai as the first vice-chair.

● (0955)

The Clerk: It has been moved by Mr. Watson that Mr. Mai be elected first vice-chair. Are there any other motions?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Mr. Mai duly elected first vice-chair of the committee.

The Chair: Congratulations, Mr. Mai. I look forward to working with you in that role as well.

We do have the estimates here today. Do you want to deal with them? It'll only take a few minutes. What are the wishes of the committee? Is everyone okay?

Mr. Hoang Mai: Our wishes would be not to deal with them right away because we still haven't heard from the minister on the main estimates. We still haven't received the plans and priorities, and we still have until the end of May to look at all these issues.

The Chair: That's true.

Mr. Hoang Mai: I'm not sure why we would want to do them today.

The Chair: I'm just asking. We have witnesses scheduled for the rest of the meetings, so we had time today. That's the only reason I ask.

Mr. Hoang Mai: From our side, we'd rather not do it right away because we might have further questions obviously, without having the plans and priorities.

The Chair: That's fair enough.

The meeting is adjourned.

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