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STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Tuesday, May 4, 2021

Via Video Conference

Supporting Community Transportation

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Hon. Leo Glavine, Chair
Rafah DiCostanzo, Vice-Chair
Hon. Ben Jessome
Hon. Gordon Wilson
Bill Horne
Steve Craig
Brian Comer
Lisa Roberts
Kendra Coombes

[Hon. Gordon Wilson was replaced by Hon. Suzanne Lohnes-Croft.]

In Attendance:

Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Transportation and Active Transit

Paul LaFleche
Deputy Minister

Bonnie Rankin
Executive Director, Policy and Corporate Services

Greg Sewell
Director, Community Transportation

Leslie Taylor Nauss
Coordinator, Nova Scotia Community Transportation Network

Bernie Swan
Chair, Nova Scotia Community Transportation Network



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, MAY 4, 2021

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR
Leo Glavine

VICE-CHAIR
Rafah DiCostanzo

THE CHAIR: I'd like to call the Standing Committee on Community Services to order. I'll be your Chair today. Leo Glavine, MLA for Kings West.

Just a few reminders before we get under way. Keep your microphone muted until you are called to speak and wait until I, as Chair, have recognized you to unmute your microphone and indicate you wish to speak by physically raising your hand. That will be the easiest way to move the meeting along.

Working with us all today is Kim Langille. I'd like for her to introduce herself.

KIM LANGILLE: Kim Langille, Committee Clerk.

THE CHAIR: At this time, also keep your phones on Silent or Vibrate, of course. I will start with the honourable member for Clayton Park West for the committee to introduce themselves.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I believe we have Suzanne Lohnes-Croft filling in for Hon. Gordon Wilson.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Mr. Chair, Suzanne is having some trouble. She is trying to sign in.

THE CHAIR: Okay, so we're ready to start. At this time, I'll introduce the agenda topic today. We have officials from the Department of Transportation and Active Transit here to discuss the ways in which they are supporting community transportation. At this time, I would ask the witnesses, starting with the deputy minister, to introduce themselves to the committee.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: At this time, we'll have a presentation from Deputy Minister LaFleche. In this type of committee meeting, presentations are important to the questioning that will follow.

PAUL LAFLECHE: Good morning. I think we have already done the introductions, so I'll skip them. We do have a couple of guests from the Nova Scotia Community Transportation Network, as were introduced: Bernie Swan, who did work with the Department of Transportation for many, many years; and Leslie Taylor, the coordinator.

I would like to thank the members of the Standing Committee on Community Services for requesting that community transportation be on today's agenda, so that we can share how we are making community transportation more affordable, accessible, sustainable, and reliable.

Community transportation initiatives help Nova Scotians get to work, school, and important appointments. It helps them stay connected with friends and neighbours and maintain active independent lifestyles.

In collaboration with partners and stakeholders, we support local community transportation services in rural areas of Nova Scotia. There are currently 19 community transportation providers in Nova Scotia offering door-to-door services. These providers are supported by their community and municipal partners and provincial funding. In addition, the province provides capital funding to seven fixed-route service providers. New transit services are planned to be launched in at least three communities in this calendar year.

This work makes it easier for Nova Scotians to access services, jobs, and schools in their community and to travel between communities and to central regions like Halifax and CBRM. Together through community-based planning, we ensure Nova Scotians are connected to services, to opportunities, and to each other.

Our activities and initiatives are guided by the Community Transportation Action Plan. The intent of the plan is to work collaboratively with other government departments and the sector to coordinate community transportation initiatives across this province.

Like many other government initiatives, COVID-19 has had an impact on community transportation, both in terms of demand and the services being provided. We understand from hearing from communities that this has had a significant effect on ridership, though these decreases have begun to reverse.

Nova Scotia is indeed fortunate to have affordable transportation in many communities, but gaps still exist. Working with partners and communities, the government of Nova Scotia is investing in new ideas, approaches, and programs to close these gaps. The goal is to improve transportation accessibility within and between communities and to make it easier for people to get to the places that they need to go.

Greg Sewell, the director of community transportation and who has been instrumental in helping to develop and deliver this program, will now take you through a brief description about community transportation and the program.

GREG SEWELL: I'm going to share my screen. Kim, how can we show the presentation?

KIM LANGILLE: You can't. All members have been provided with the documents that you folks sent previously.

GREG SEWELL: Okay, very good, thank you. So we know in a pre-COVID-19 world that transportation helps Nova Scotians get to school, to work, important appointments, stay connected to the community, with their friends and maintain an active and independent lifestyle, which is all very important to maintain the vitality and viability of communities. However, not everyone can afford a vehicle or have access to a car or the ability to drive. Community transportation helps to fill the void for those individuals.

The first community transportation providers were developed 25 years ago in Pictou County and in Clare. Since then, community transportation organizations provide free, booked, door-to-door, accessible service that has been developed in many areas across the province. Government funding for transit started in the late 1990s and both the number of programs and the funding is growing over time to support community transportation.

During the development of the shift strategy, the conversation around transportation was raised at every meeting. It was identified that the lack of transportation limited older adults' abilities to participate in society and the economy and have access to services, including health, especially in rural areas.

To ensure a coordinated approach to grow and build transportation with communities, it was determined that government needed to appoint a lead department to help drive community transportation. With their connections to and involvement with communities, Communities, Culture and Heritage was identified as that lead department in 2018.

A community transportation action plan was developed to focus on capacity and awareness, developing policies that support community transportation, promotion of a broad vision, improve measuring, monitoring, and understanding and innovation. In April 2021, with the reorganization within governments, community transportation moved to Transportation and Active Transit.

I previously mentioned the growth of community transportation across the province. Ten years ago, in 2011-2012, there were only 11 community transportation services. Ten years later, we have 19 and there will be a 20th that will be launched this fiscal year, with the Eskasoni First Nation developing their door-to-door service. This will be the first First Nation community that has their own transportation system.

We are continuing to work and there is still more work under way to develop a community transportation system in Guysborough. In addition to the door-to-door services, there are also seven fixed-route service providers in the province. The development of services in Bridgewater and soon to be in New Glasgow and Stellarton show that municipal councils are understanding the need for transit in their communities. However, the province needs to be a significant funding partner in the development and piloting of these services.

The map on Slide 4 shows where the community transportation providers in the province are located. The white areas are the gaps where no community transportation provider exists. You'll see that in Lunenburg County, there's not a community transportation provider from the border of the Municipality of Chester into Bridgewater, there is not a community transportation provider in Guysborough County and community transportation does not exist in the larger areas of Halifax and CBRM due to the population. Community transportation providers work in rural Nova Scotia.

Slide 5 shows where the seven fixed-route services are located, so we have the two larger ones in Cape Breton and Halifax and we have five in rural areas of Nova Scotia: the towns of Antigonish, Bridgewater and Yarmouth; Kings Transit, which operates in Kings, Annapolis, and Digby Counties; and Strait Area Transit, which runs a fixed-route service in Inverness County.

Community transportation has provided over 205,000 trips in 2019 and in the years prior to COVID-19, ridership was increasing at an annual rate of around 11 per cent. This growth was very significant for some service providers, where they are getting close to a point where they could not keep up with demand.

[10:15 a.m.]

The slide also indicates how people are using the service. There are a lot of organizations that provide transportation to sheltered workshops, medical appointments, educational opportunities, work, and opportunities to reduce social isolation. The average trip is 28 kilometres. The client pays a fare of \$11. However, the cost to the operator is \$25 per trip. The difference between the fare that's paid and the cost to the provider is made up from municipal funding, provincial funding, and some small donations that are provided to the service providers.

Our progress since 2018 has been substantial. In collaboration with our partners in the Department of Energy and Mines, the Nova Scotia Utility and Review Board, Nova Scotia Business Inc., the Office of Aboriginal Affairs, the Nova Scotia Health Authority, the Rural Transportation Association, and the Nova Scotia Community Transportation Network, we have made significant progress on the projects that are listed on Slide 7. It's fair to say that without these partnerships and the focus of the economic deputies through the policy sprint, we would not be as advanced on attaining our goal of having sustainable, connected, and affordable transportation for rural Nova Scotians.

We have found that by including the sector in our work and on our committees, we've been able to gain community support. Citizen-centric policy development and policy implementation have been key to advancing these important initiatives.

Just like every other sector, transportation has been significantly impacted by COVID-19. We know that transportation is one of the most important wraparound supports, as has been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our ability to address community and citizen issues often circles back to their ability to access affordable transportation. However, community transit providers are remaining financially sound due to lower vehicle expenses and reduction of staff during the pandemic while receiving the same amount of provincial funding and continuing to receive municipal funding and accessing funding from the federal government.

Ridership has been down significantly, but we were starting to see progress before the latest wave of COVID-19. Maritime Bus has reduced their service from daily to four times per week, and they're experiencing a ridership decrease of 72 per cent. Fixed-route service providers are also seeing a significant reduction in ridership, but they've been able to access funding from the federal Safe Restart program.

With every challenge comes opportunities. The community transportation providers identified opportunities where they could work better together. This includes the development of COVID-19 safety protocols to ensure the safety of their staff and clients; working together to apply to the Red Cross to access funding for PPE; working with other community organizations to ensure that vulnerable citizens in their communities had access to food and meals delivered to their homes; and now providing transportation to

vaccination clinics. To date, they've delivered 375 people to vaccination clinics and have 150 trips planned for the future.

Maritime Bus continues their ridership, and they're seeing it start to stabilize. Individuals are using the service to access medical appointments in Halifax, and Maritime Bus continues to transport blood for testing.

Our goal is to have a connected and affordable, sustainable transportation system. The initiatives that we are undertaking and the investments we are making are moving us towards our goal. Each service provider sets their fares in accordance with their licence application to the Utility and Review Board. The structure helps ensure their financial sustainability, but is not necessarily affordable for those on a limited or fixed income. Individuals who are taking longer-distance trips for dialysis or chemo treatments are faced with larger fares, sometimes which they are unable to pay. In these cases, service providers use other sources of funds to subsidize the costs for these individuals. If we're able to get more clients using community transportation, this provides greater opportunity for self-sustainability, especially with the opportunities in a post-COVID-19 world to have multiple people on one trip. We can work with our government colleagues to identify opportunities to redirect current government investments in transporting clients so that these investments support community transportation.

Communities need transportation options to ensure citizens feel connected to medical, social services, food, friends and social events in their communities. While there are 19 community transportation providers and seven fixed-route services in the province, there are still gaps that need to be filled. This would include the need for transportation services in Guysborough County and the western part of Lunenburg County.

As we move forward, we have some areas that we need to focus on. We need to work on affordability for those with low incomes. There is an opportunity to work with community transportation partners to pilot \$5 in-county trips. A \$5 fare will better align the cost of community transportation with fixed-route service providers and becomes an affordable transportation option for those participating in or looking for work.

The pricing model will also help incentivize individuals to use community transportation instead of ambulances for non-emergency transport. By collectively working with the Department of Health and Wellness, EHS, the Health Authority, and the Department of Community Services, there are opportunities to increase the number of passengers using community transportation while increasing efficiency in all organizations.

As we move towards sustainability, we'll need to ensure that the community transportation providers have sufficient assets and resources to handle the increased capacity. We did not want to put them in the position to not have enough vehicles to transport new clients.

Coordinated medical appointments, say by postal code, for individuals going for bloodwork, dialysis, cancer treatments, et cetera would help provide opportunities for efficient transport of people by having more people in community transportation vehicles.

To ensure connectivity between services and their clients, we're exploring options for a modernized booking dispatch system to allow users to book either online via an app or continue to call their service providers. This will also allow service providers to efficiently combine rides going to or from the same location. The system will also have the capability to accept files from other systems such as EHS.

We will continue to work with community and community partners to identify potential service providers in Guysborough. This Spring, we will see the launch of a three-year fixed-route pilot in the towns of New Glasgow and Stellarton that will operate within the two towns. If this pilot is successful, there will be the opportunity to expand the service into other areas of Pictou County if municipal councils are interested.

There has also been some interest in the province in exploring ride sharing. Ride sharing is different from an Uber model, where you have one person in the vehicle. Ride sharing is led by the Department of Energy and Mines and is an initiative to link passengers together to create efficiencies and savings. This initiative is on pause at the moment due to COVID-19 and the risk of transporting multiple people from different households in the same vehicle.

Thank you. That is the end of my presentation.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for that enlightened presentation. We also have Bernard Swan, Leslie Taylor, Bonnie Rankin available to answer specific questions. We will now start with the PC caucus for 20 minutes. The honourable member for Sydney River-Mira-Louisbourg.

BRIAN COMER: Thank you, everyone, for your presentations. My first question would be for you, Greg. I know you mentioned it in your remarks. And that is in relation to mobile testing for COVID-19. I'm just wondering your thoughts, I guess, because I know I hear a lot about it at my constituency office. There are limitations, especially for seniors in the rural parts of the province, getting access to COVID-19 testing, both at the primary assessment centres and the pop-up centres. I'm just curious to hear your thoughts and if you think there's proper, I guess, infrastructure in place now for this population to get access to these testing sites.

GREG SEWELL: I'm not sure if I can talk about the number of sites and whether or not the number is the correct amount or not. That's more of a question for the Department of Health and Wellness. What I can speak to is that the 19 service providers are transporting individuals to those vaccination clinics. They are offering \$5 fares for anybody they are

transporting to a clinic. They are only doing it for those clients within their service areas, so they are not coming into, say, downtown Halifax to transport somebody to a vaccination clinic because that's not the area they serve.

BRIAN COMER: A follow-up, I guess: I know it has been discussed briefly throughout the last number of months that there would be an opportunity for mobile vaccinations, especially for people with pre-existing health conditions who are at home. I know I have spoken to a number of constituents who meet the age requirements for eligibility for vaccination but they don't have the physical capacity to get to the vaccination sites.

I'm just wondering what the conversation looks like at present between the Department of Transportation and Active Transit and the Department of Health and Wellness, to be making this available in the near future.

GREG SEWELL: I have not been part of any conversations about mobile vaccination clinics. To my understanding, those conversations are being held within the Department of Health and Wellness. If they need any of our community transportation providers to help out, they will reach out to me for dialogue. I do have a weekly meeting with the Department of Health and Wellness to talk about any issues on the transportation of individuals to vaccination clinics and that topic has not come up.

BRIAN COMER: Something else I would like to discuss - this would be best suited to the deputy minister and that is in regard to the relationship between the Department of Transportation and Active Transit and the emergency medical transportation. I know it was talked about a great deal during budget estimates, that there will be some sort of mechanism in place for non-urgent medical transfers in the province to alleviate some of the pressure on the current ambulance system.

I'm just curious if the deputy can explain maybe to the committee how many of these units are currently being mobilized in the province and maybe how are they staffed. I know they wouldn't have the equipment that you would see probably in an ambulance. I'm just wondering about the equipment and what these transportation mechanisms look like across the province.

PAUL LAFLECHE: I'll let Greg Sewell answer that question.

GREG SEWELL: I know a little bit about that initiative that is being undertaken by the Department of Health and Wellness. So they have purchased, I believe, three vehicles to transport patients from one facility to another who do not require an ambulance. I believe they are looking to expand that, but again, that's more a Department of Health and Wellness project than it is a Transportation and Active Transit project.

We have had dialogue with the Department of Health and Wellness about that initiative but it has been more about the fact that the individuals they are transporting are still patients of the health system and they need to be moved by DHS. They cannot be transported by any other service provider.

[10:30 a.m.]

BRIAN COMER: Just some clarification: There would be three of these units provincewide? Would that be correct?

GREG SEWELL: I do believe three is the number at this time.

BRIAN COMER: I guess I just find that a very low number. Just a little bit worrisome. I'm just wondering: This transportation infrastructure would be staffed by paramedics is essentially what you're saying, but there needs to be more of a dialogue between the two departments in order to increase the availability of these units. Would that be an accurate summary?

GREG SEWELL: I believe this was a pilot project that was undertaken by the Department of Health and Wellness to see how that new form of transportation would work. I have not had any conversations with them recently on whether they're looking to expand that across the province. That initiative is being led by the Department of Health and Wellness. Those vehicles are EHS vehicles, and we're not involved in the transportation of patients who are a part of the health system.

BRIAN COMER: During this time last year, when restrictions were kind of similar during the provincial lockdown to curb COVID-19, I know the municipality here in CBRM spent a significant amount more on municipal transit due to increased PPE for staff. They needed more buses because of social distancing. I know it significantly impacted their budget in the municipality here.

I'm just wondering - maybe this would be best suited for the deputy: Will there be an increase in the budget or a reimbursement of increased transit costs for the municipalities in the province due to COVID-19?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LaFleche?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I'm going to hand it back to Greg Sewell again.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Sewell.

GREG SEWELL: Thank you. I am aware that each of the fixed-route service providers were able to access some funding through the federal Safe Restart program. I'm not aware of the funding that was provided to CBRM or CBRM Transit. I do believe that

the province also provided some PPE to transit services. Again, I do not have the number for CBRM transit or any of the other transit services.

BRIAN COMER: I'm going to hand it off to my colleague.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Sackville-Cobequid.

STEVE CRAIG: Thank you all for being here today. It's really an interesting topic when you realize that transportation - moving people around in our municipality and our province, whether it's rural or urban - is so important, especially for those with low income or those with disabilities, whether they be physical disabilities or mental disabilities. It's important that we do talk about this topic today.

The first question I have, and MLA Comer approached it, so I suppose it's to Director Sewell. What is the Community Transportation budget for this fiscal year?

GREG SEWELL: We have a Community Transportation budget that's approximately \$7 million spread across a variety of programs.

STEVE CRAIG: When I take a look at the fixed-route service boundaries of - let's say HRM, for example - they go out only so far. I'm curious to know what the consultation is, both with the department as well as the Community Transportation Network with Halifax Transit, and determining what those service boundaries might be, and more importantly, how to supplement access to those nodes when service boundaries do change.

You will recognize, some of you, that in HRM there are a number of community organizations. There's Bay Rides, there's East Hants & Area Community Rider, MusGo Rider - both Musquodoboit Harbour and Valley Sheet Harbour. I'm just curious to know how much work is actively engaged in and working with the municipality of HRM when it comes to examining getting transportation throughout the rural areas of HRM.

GREG SEWELL: We don't have consultations with HRM on their fixed-route service. That is a municipal responsibility, all of Halifax Transit. They have certain ridership thresholds that they have developed that determine where a fixed route goes and when it doesn't meet those thresholds, they're going to discontinue the service. They don't check in with me when they're looking at routes that may not be sustainable for consultation purposes.

STEVE CRAIG: I'd have the same question of the representatives here from the Community Transportation Network. Maybe I can perhaps qualify this a little bit more. I fully appreciate that Halifax Transit would have total control over those access routes. However, part of the preamble in the presentations was that the Community Transportation Network, as well as the department, works with municipalities. The municipality of HRM and Halifax Transit would be that key entity that one would work with.

I'm curious to know if there's any proactive work going on to take a look at - let's say, for example, expanding MusGo out to Cole Harbour and Eastern Shore way. That's what I'm looking for. Or does the department and the Community Transportation Network rely on initiatives from the municipality to approach these organizations to do something?

GREG SEWELL: We do not develop services. We work with communities to help develop services once the community has approached us with a need within their community. If HRM approaches us, or a community group approaches us to talk about services, we would certainly be engaged in those conversations, but we do not approach Halifax Transit to talk about how they operate their system.

STEVE CRAIG: We're in more of a reactive mode than a proactive mode when it comes to this. I ask the question of Ms. Nauss and Mr. Swan from the Nova Scotia Community Transportation Network: How do they actively engage the municipalities and the other organizations to achieve their goals?

THE CHAIR: I recognize Bernard Swan and perhaps Bonnie Rankin can also provide a further answer.

BERNIE SWAN: I'll start off with a comment. I spoke to Leslie before this and we agreed that she would be the lead on this. I will provide information when necessary, but Leslie is our coordinator and she does all the day-to-day stuff, so I'm going to hand it over to her and then add where I can.

LESLIE TAYLOR NAUSS: In terms of engagement as the network and representing the entire province, we engage with all municipal units throughout the province in a number of ways. We also work very closely with RTA, which was referenced in the slides - the Rural Transportation Association - which is the organizing body for the 19 collective providers that are funded through the Community Transportation Assistance Program (CTAP).

It depends on the community, so I'm going to use a gap area as an example. Lunenburg West was referenced as a gap area. I am in active conversations with municipal elected officials in the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg (MODL) and the Town of Mahone Bay and the Town of Lunenburg on how that can be solved for their community. MusGo Rider is another example where they were approached by the municipal unit. Oftentimes, the municipal unit identifies that there's an issue and they will reach out to the provider in their area. East Hants was the same. I had active conversations with councillors who then were connected to East Hants & Area Community Rider and they were able to do their expansion to Fall River.

It does depend on the community. It depends on circumstances of the route reductions. It also depends on the population of the community that's being served.

Sometimes community transportation is not necessarily the appropriate solution, so as the network, we work with communities to identify what the appropriate solution is and go from there - provide them guidance and connections. Sometimes it's connecting with the department and with Greg's team, sometimes it's sharing information, and sometimes it's working with the providers to identify if they're able to expand in this specific area based on their licencing through the NSUARB. Sometimes it's working with the NSUARB to provide education for the municipal units as to what is possible and not possible in terms of service expansion or service development.

STEVE CRAIG: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you both for those responses. I want to turn a little bit to disability support. In HRM they have a program called Access-A-Bus, which most of you would know provides service to those with disabilities. There's an area that they have to be accepted at. They pay the same as a Metro Transit. It's a shared-ride service. It's door-to-door. You need to be able to book 24 hours in advance, and they have a booking system that they utilize. A lot of what the director indicated earlier, Mr. Chair, led me to believe that some of these factors for accessibility in transportation are the same as what they're building into the criteria, if you will, to look at transportation in the rural context or in the community transportation context.

My question is: What consideration is given to community organizations when it comes to accessibility? For example, in HRM, they had accessible taxi service, and that was found to be cost-prohibitive by a number of the providers because it would be \$70,000 or so to outfit a van, and the usage on that would be quite low, so it really didn't take root.

Again, my question is: What role does accessibility play in any of the conversations at either the department level or the network level when it comes to talking with community organizations to provide service?

THE CHAIR: Whichever witness would like to respond to that question.

GREG SEWELL: I'll start off, Mr. Chair. Each of our 19 community transportation providers has accessible vehicles in their fleets. Collectively, the organizations have approximately 100 vehicles, 75 of which are wheelchair-accessible. We do require that each organization has a minimum of one when they start off, and we also have a funding program that helps those organizations buy vehicles. We have an accessible transportation assistance program that provides 75 per cent of funding up to a maximum of \$75,000.

STEVE CRAIG: Again, the question would be to the director, and that is: Is the grant program fixed or variable? Let's say a grant of so many thousands of dollars is provided plus so many dollars or cents per kilometre?

GREG SEWELL: Our operating grant is a formula-based grant, and it's a fixed amount every year for each of the organizations.

THE CHAIR: I recognize Suzanne Lohnes-Croft, MLA for Lunenburg, who joined before the questioning began.

I now turn the questioning over to the NDP caucus. If we could have a hand to see who is going first. The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

[10:45 a.m.]

LISA ROBERTS: Thank you very much, and thanks for bringing us information about this important aspect of the new Department of Transportation and Active Transit.

Before moving on to some questions, I just wanted to ask the deputy a little bit about what we can expect given this reorganization of responsibilities for the department. MLA Craig asked about the budget for community transportation, and we heard back from Mr. Sewell that the budget is \$7 million for community transportation. In budget estimates, we asked about the budget for active transit, and the only investment in this year's budget explicitly for that is the Connect2 grant line of \$400,000. Given that the department has a \$555 million budget, it seems that a very, very small portion of that is allocated to community transportation and to active transportation.

How will programs that are so small in the context of your responsibilities, and in the context of the department's responsibilities, really get attention? Is there a potential for those line items and budget priorities to shift, recognizing the importance of both of these areas of government work and also recognizing the renaming of the department?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I would note that Active Transit is 50 per cent of the department's name. It may not have been 50 per cent in the perception of the observer of the budget of the department, but it's 50 per cent of the name. We take the mandate very seriously. It's in the minister's mandate letter.

There are two components of that, of which Greg is the director. One is the active transportation - biking, trails, walking. Things are being done there, and I'll get to it in a minute. The other is the community transportation component, which we're here to discuss today.

I won't get into great detail on active transportation, but the active transportation budget operating capital would be in the many millions in any particular year. It's not a specified line item because a great deal of it, as many of the members sitting there know, is in capital. Some of it is accessed through partnership, through the federal infrastructure initiative. Several are under construction at this time. I don't know if there's a member for Dartmouth here, but there are several trails and sidewalks and active transport components being worked on in the Dartmouth area at this time.

In fact, later today, we have a meeting with a municipality about a \$10 million active transit system. A lot of that is done in a different way. It's not an operating line item to a group. It will become a grant in a capital nature when the program is funded and announced. Those are basically open budget. It depends on what our partners want to bid. A competition is generally run through Energy. We have many applicants, and applications are judged as to merit and as to need.

We have a group under Greg which is just coming together, which will look at where the best places are to fund active transportation in Nova Scotia to fill a network. We have a Blue Route - we have a trail Blue Route, we have a road network Blue Route under construction. We have community active transportation projects, commuter projects, which we're funding in different municipalities. I won't get any more into that because that is a different subject for a different day, Mr. Chair.

On the community transportation side, the same thing sort of applies. The program we just integrated came over from the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage and I would be remiss if I didn't mention Bill Greenlaw's incredible astuteness in hiring Greg and building that program up over the last few years. He is the executive director and, of course, he is not here today because it has now moved to a different department.

We are early in the mandate for the new government. The budget was fairly well put together before things came into the budget zone and we will be looking to put together a budget for both modes of transportation and community transit. In next year's cycle, in the interim, as the member suggested, we have a very large budget in this department.

I don't want to forget the budget that exists in my other department, Lands and Forestry, on the active transportation side and the group there who work on the trail system. They are also going to be integrated in some way and there is also a budget that still exists, I believe if I'm right, in Municipal Affairs, is it? Yes, I believe so.

All of that together, we are trying to pencil together as we build a new department with a new theme added to it and we get ready for the next budget cycle. I am hopeful that the needs in community transportation and active transportation will be well addressed over the next few years. I am pleased to be part of this and pleased to have acquired the services of Greg and the group that was under Bill Greenlaw.

LISA ROBERTS: Maybe just a quick follow-up question to Mr. Sewell before I move on to more substantial questions about community transit. Again, recognizing these new kinds of coming together of various responsibilities from various departments, do community transit vehicles that are often acquired with provincial dollars - you mentioned that many of them are accessible and that all fleets would have at least one accessible vehicle - do they also come with bicycle racks in order to facilitate active transportation, or is that something that is in the future?

GREG SEWELL: The service providers certainly have the option of putting bicycle racks on their vehicles. How many actually have them? I'm not sure off the top of my head. I remember a few years ago there was a bit of an initiative by a couple of providers to put bike racks on, but I don't recall seeing any of those come through our department in the last couple of years. So there might be a couple that have bike racks but I'm not really sure.

LISA ROBERTS: All right. Well, maybe working adjacently to the extent that that is, in fact, the case in these COVID-19 times, maybe there will be some thinking about accomplishing multiple aims with the same public dollar because I think that is where a lot of creativity happens in Nova Scotia, certainly.

In your presentation, you talked about the gaps that existed and I am wondering if you could dive into one gap and talk about, I guess, the way that that is being approached; I am thinking about Guysborough County, for example. How do you, in your role, sort of start to work to address the gap there?

GREG SEWELL: The gap in Guysborough County was recognized a few years ago when we were doing our policy sprint on community transportation. From that sprint, the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage engaged a consultant to work in the community to find out what a transportation model in Guysborough would look like, where people wanted to go. The consultant came back with some ideas, talked to some people within our department, went back to the community with a bit more of a view of what a model would look like and developed a business plan that was accepted by the department.

Unfortunately, two challenges arose: One was that through their work there was not a service provider identified and then COVID-19 hit as well. So that was kind of put on the back burner for a while. We have recently engaged with community to see if we can find somebody who will provide service in Guysborough. We do believe that we've identified somebody who will start in the Municipality of the District of Guysborough and the Town of Mulgrave with a vision that, over due course, it will expand into the Municipality of the District of St. Mary's. I do have plans to visit with the municipal councils in late May and early June to talk about our progress to date.

LISA ROBERTS: I wonder if Ms. Taylor would want to add anything to that, so I'm sort of understanding kind of the role of government and then the role of the Community Transportation Network.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Taylor.

LESLIE TAYLOR NAUSS: We have been working actively within the community. Prior to the sprint, there were individuals living within the area who had connected with us and identified the transportation needs within their community. There have been community consultations held. It just so happened that those conversations

happened just before the policy sprint, which enabled us to really connect community and government.

We've supported the consultant who was hired to have connections within the community and do research on samples of like communities and solutions that have worked in other areas, what that could look like for Guysborough. We are also supporting the individuals whom Greg referenced in terms of navigating funding programs, licensing and regulation through the UARB, any support they need connecting with other organizations who have been through that. We have a phrase we use quite often with folks when they come to us and say we have a transportation issue. The first thing we say is, "There is no need to reinvent the wheel - we just need to look at what's out there."

We have been connecting those individuals with service providers who can provide them detailed operation plans, business plans, anything they may need.

LISA ROBERTS: Back to Mr. Sewell, transportation generally accounts for 31 per cent of the province's greenhouse gas emissions and is the only major emissions sector where emissions are not declining or expected to decline substantially.

What support is being made to community transit providers to electrify their services?

THE CHAIR: Director Sewell.

GREG SEWELL: I have had conversations with my colleagues at the Department of Energy and Mines and the Department of Environment about electric vehicles for community transportation providers. One of the challenges we are facing in the industry right now is that there are no electric vans that are accessible. It has something to do - where the components for the ramps and the accessible features are built into the vehicle interferes with it becoming converted to an electric vehicle. That does put a significant barrier in front of us, as most of the vehicles in the fleets are accessible vans.

There are opportunities to work with the service providers that have some buses, but in order to have electric fleets the service providers also need electric charging stations. There need to be electric charging stations across the province as well, so they are able to travel longer distances to medical appointments without having their vehicle not have enough charge. Those are some of the conversations I need to continue to have with the Department of Energy and Mines and the Department of Environment and Climate Change to ensure that the appropriate infrastructure is in place before we really start to move our community transportation providers to electric vehicles.

LISA ROBERTS: The Community Transportation Action Plan refers to one particular action, which is to change legislation and policies to support community

transportation. I assume that plan was developed by the Community Transportation Network, represented by Ms. Taylor. That action is referred to as in-progress, upcoming.

[11:00 a.m.]

I'm wondering if Ms. Taylor or Mr. Sewell can explain what legislation might need to be strengthened or changed to support community transportation and if there are any timelines or updates on that work.

LESLIE TAYLOR NAUSS: In terms of the legislation and policies, it oftentimes takes quite a period of time to look to change legislation, so we initially focused on policies. I guess a real world example that I could provide for you would be the licensing and regulation through the UARB that our 19 providers are required to have.

It prohibits them from connecting with each other to move people. For example, we have Community Wheels in Chester and Bay Rides in the St. Margaret's Bay area. As it states right now, those organizations are not able to transfer passengers to move them to the urban core of Halifax. It's prohibited in the way the legislation and the licensing states.

It's working with - and I referenced this earlier - the UARB to help organizations navigate the regulations of their licensing and also identifying for the UARB and the departments that need be, the barriers that such legislation and policies put in place for having our community transportation providers work better together.

It's not just around the 19 providers that make up the RTA. It's also if we want to talk about Maritime Bus working with the 19 providers to move folks around. At this point in time, there are policies in place that prohibit that. If providers were to not pay so much attention to that, then they run the risk of being pulled off the road and having their licensing revoked.

LISA ROBERTS: I'm sorry - Ms. Taylor, could you specify what - you referenced the UARB, but what specific piece of legislation? Then I would throw it back to the deputy as to whether or not we could expect speedy action from government. Obviously, it's our job as legislators to address things like this.

LESLIE TAYLOR NAUSS: The majority of our 19 providers have one of two types of licensing: motor carrier licences or commercial vehicle licences. For motor carrier licences, they are not able to do what is referred to as tacking, which means passenger sharing. Again, the Bay Rides and Community Wheels example: They're not able to collect one fare. Community Wheels picks up within the municipality of Chester and then transfers the rider to Bay Rides, which then proceeds on to Halifax. That's considered tacking and it's not allowed under the Motor Carrier Licensing Act.

Commercial vehicles are required to cross municipal boundaries and what we've identified is that there are some policies within that licence that may be somewhat misunderstood, but also there may be some changes. We've been working quite closely with Paul Allen at the UARB to provide some education to our providers around the parameters of commercial vehicle licences, what they are able to do and not able to do, and then identifying the changes that may need to be made to those licences to allow our providers to work better together.

THE CHAIR: The time has expired for the NDP caucus. I now recognize the honourable member for Clayton Park West for the Liberal caucus.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Thank you for all the amazing information I'm hearing about the rural areas, as well as the city.

Mr. Sewell, in your opening remarks, you mentioned that there are 375 people who have been vaccinated and have used the transportation, and you have another 150, I believe you said. Can you tell me: How is that working in the different rural areas, where is the demand for this, and is the money from your department or the Department of Health and Wellness helping with that? How is this working where the community transportation is helping our community get the vaccine? This is wonderful, excellent news - just how has this happened, and what more can you tell us about it?

GREG SEWELL: I don't have the breakdown by each provider in front of me, but I do remember through my conversations with them - I believe the service providers in Antigonish and in Clare had transported the most individuals. They had a seniors' facility there that they had taken a large number of people to their vaccination clinic, and that's why their numbers were so much higher.

The Province has provided some funding - \$200,000 was provided from the Department of Health and Wellness and the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage to help the providers transport any individual going to a vaccination clinic for \$5. It wouldn't matter what the distance is - the individual paid \$5, and that funding that was provided would be used to cover the actual cost for the service provider. It's a great way to help ensure that those with low or moderate income are getting to a vaccination clinic and don't have to make choices between core essentials such as food or going to get a vaccination.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Is there a demand also in the city, or just in the rural area for this vaccination? Are we using, for example, seniors, or did we use that to help in the city as well as rural areas, or just in those areas for vaccination? Mr. Sewell again.

GREG SEWELL: People who are being transported are in the rural areas. As I mentioned earlier, there's not a service provider in, say, Clayton Park or in downtown Halifax or in Sydney. Those individuals are encouraged to use Halifax Transit or Transit

Cape Breton or the accessible services that are offered by Halifax Transit and Transit Cape Breton.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I also wanted to ask a question about something that actually - my parents live in Oakville, and my mother used a service called care-A-van. That was \$3 for a taxi service that - I'm not sure who had care-A-van, whether it was municipal or community, but it was getting the seniors to where they need to go. I don't know if that's something you've heard about or are working on something for the cities where seniors can access less expensive ways to get to a medical appointment or to the library. I know my mom used it, and it was wonderful. Is this something you've heard about? Are you looking at options similar to that?

GREG SEWELL: No, I had not heard of that program before. As I mentioned earlier through the presentation, affordability is a key issue for community transportation. We do have a funding program. It's called the Fare Assistance Program, so we do provide some funding to the community transportation providers to subsidize fares for low-income individuals. There is a fixed budget for that program, so it's possible that at some point they would run out during the year, so they may not be able to subsidize every ride, but it is for low-income individuals. That would be the program that we would have in place to help, whether it be seniors or adults or youth who are living in poverty or with a low income.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I had another question about accessibility for the buses, but my colleagues have already asked that one. I'll pass it on to my colleague Suzanne Lohnes-Croft.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Lunenburg.

HON. SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: It's good to be here talking about community transportation. I have worked with Leslie Taylor, and I think I know Bernard a little bit from some community transportation, and of course Greg. We miss you at the department already. I have enjoyed working with you over the years.

I want to talk a little bit about how small projects turn into - how it benefits many communities at one time with how you link up communities to one another, and maybe talk a little bit about the Maritime Bus project which we did from Halifax to Bridgewater, which looped in Lunenburg, Mahone Bay, and Bridgewater - connected them a bit, and how it connects up to other communities. Liverpool benefits, and the Chester area has a route that goes to the Valley that can benefit from it. One project can have an effect on so many other communities.

LESLIE TAYLOR NAUSS: The Maritime bus project is servicing all of Lunenburg County. Its originating point of destination is Bridgewater, but western Lunenburg County is one of the identified gap areas in Greg's presentation.

When we started to talk about how to service that area and how to enable or allow folks to be able to move to Halifax for medical appointments and other desired destinations, we recognized that it was an opportunity to link that gap area to the rest of Lunenburg County and also to Halifax, so therefore it didn't just start in Bridgewater and end in Halifax. It does go through the communities that Suzanne has referenced. It picks folks up and brings them to whatever point they wish to get off of the Maritime Bus route.

Working with Maritime Bus, we also identified that there was a need for folks to be able to access other parts of the urban core rather than just their bus depot down at the Westin, the VIA train station. They were able to go to the URB, and they now have a stop at the QEII. Folks are able to hop on the Maritime Bus from any of the five points of pickup within Lunenburg County and get directly to the QEII.

We also worked with them to identify, within those gap area communities where there isn't any other form of transportation, there may be a need for folks to be able to get from their home to that pickup location because they're not able to provide that door-to-door service. As a private industry, they were able to work with the taxi services within the municipal units of western Lunenburg County.

They have what they call the Last Mile Program and the First Mile Program. They're able to book a ride with Maritime Bus that will arrange for a taxi service to pick them up, get them to the bus location, and then transport them to Halifax or back again. They also offer that at the VIA Rail terminal for folks who need to get to other parts of the urban core to get to medical appointments. If their medical appointment is not at the QEII complex where the bus stops on Robie Street, they're able to go to the VIA terminal, get off, and then hop a taxi that can get them to a medical appointment in Dartmouth or a professional building out in Clayton Park, that way of connecting to the entire community.

What we have seen with the Maritime Bus program is it's used for all sorts of reasons. Some folks like to travel just to Halifax and back, but we're also seeing that it connects people to the rest of Nova Scotia and beyond. We see students using the bus to get to universities in other parts of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. We see, oftentimes, children and families accessing services in the urban centre of Halifax that aren't offered here in Lunenburg County. We also see that folks are using the Maritime Bus routes to access Lunenburg County for whatever reason they want. I hope that answers your question, Suzanne.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Yes. Perhaps you can tell us how a community can go about and engage with your organization to improve their transportation locally.

LESLIE TAYLOR NAUSS: So, as the Network, we are a membership-based organization. We recognize that we have to meet communities where they are. We have a number of different avenues of connecting with communities. We have a monthly eNews.

We present regularly to municipal units, to various stakeholders that have provincial scopes. Recreation Nova Scotia is a strong partner of ours. We have a very strong relationship with the 19 organizations that are represented by the Rural Transportation Association (RTA).

[11:15 a.m.]

We also work quite closely with the for-profit industry. Reaching out to the for-profit industry, they are one of the transportation solutions within our province. Depending on the community and the type of service that we want to reach, we identify who is our partner to be able to get us into that local community - what is the conduit - and then we work to build those relationships. We have a very strong relationship with NSCC. We have a very strong relationship with a number of other provincial in-scope organizations - Community Links, which is a senior-serving organization. I hope that answers the question.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: You know, we do surveys all the time in our municipalities and locally about transportation and how can we service people better. We always give the response, "Yes, I agree with public transportation," and then when we get to the part, "Would you use public transportation?," we just don't get that uptake sometimes. It's been a really frustrating point for municipalities that - you want something to succeed if you put it in place.

Can you speak to the, you know, how different regions may vary in their uptake in these transportation opportunities or how can we build and get people to take more public transportation?

LESLIE TAYLOR: One of the things that I've learned as a community developer in the transportation world is transportation isn't an issue until you don't have it or don't have access to it. In theory, everybody says that absolutely it's necessary, but not for me right now.

One of the things that we have really pivoted in our conversations with the municipal units is around the fact that it needs to be there for your tax base when they no longer are able to drive. It's being proactive.

There's been a lot of stigma that has surrounded community transportation. I think as part of your presentation, there was a timeline of when the first organizations started. Back in 1996, when it was CHAD Transit and Le Transport de Clare Society, they started as accessible transportation. Unfortunately, it got branded as the wheelchair bus. I don't need that. It's also, in the past, been branded as well, that's for the low-income individuals in our communities, and I don't need that. Or that's for seniors and I'm not a senior yet.

One of the things that the Network has been doing with the sector for the past number of years is the Transportation Literacy Program. I believe that was referenced on a

particular slide. It was work that came out of the sprint project. Essentially, it's the focus to bring awareness to community transportation and the benefits that it could bring to an individual, and to also set aside some of that stigma that has existed and some of that reluctance of communities.

In rural Nova Scotia, folks are very proud and they are very stubborn and they are very independent. So again, it's breaking that barrier to be able to have people look at it as that's a way of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. That's a way of reducing our carbon footprint. We can live in rural Nova Scotia and not have to own a vehicle if affordable and accessible transportation services are available. Then it's working with the sector to make sure that if we send that message and we bring the communities on board and on side, they are able to have a service so they can look at that.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Can you talk a little bit - do you see anything that is generational in the uptake of transit in rural areas of Nova Scotia? I mean, I know you said in your previous remarks about you how don't realize until you don't have it that not having transportation available comes in to play a role in your needs where you live.

Are young people less likely to take it than older people? I think we had some work with Liverpool students coming up to Bridgewater to take part in the community college, which was beneficial. That was a good partnership, but are we seeing more students in colleges and secondary institutions uptaking in some of its rural transportation or is it more for seniors? I think a lot of people see it as getting seniors about more than servicing all generations.

LESLIE TAYLOR NAUSS: I would say yes, the trend is changing. There's still a lot of work to be done, hence the Transportation Literacy project that I referenced a few seconds ago. Two of the outcomes of that project were a Find a Ride webpage, which lists all the transportation options for Nova Scotia - private, not-for-profit, public, fixed-route, door-to-door. Certainly we are seeing traffic to that website and uptake of that.

The other thing that has happened is the RTA - Rural Transportation Association - has now standardized their website so that a user in Cape Breton who wants to get to the other end of the province - Yarmouth - is able to go onto the Rural Transportation Association's website and identify the service provider in their area, and the information is consistent in Yarmouth.

Greg can speak to the demographics of the 19 transportation providers, but certainly from a Maritime Bus perspective, we are seeing - I wouldn't say it's equal to the senior population and the other demographics, but certainly we are seeing adults, we are seeing youth travel on that route on a regular basis.

Again, it's reaching out to those partners who maybe weren't partners in the past, so NSCC - and Suzanne, you referenced the partnership with Queens Transit and the NSCC

and bringing people from the Liverpool area to the Bridgewater campus. Again, that's the reason for identifying those provincial scope partners and working to help them be the conduit for people to access community transportation.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: I'm just wondering: You mentioned Find a Ride and also the Rural Transportation Association. Could you send the contact information for that to our clerk so she can distribute it to the members of the committee? I think those links should be on every municipality's website, and even as MLAs we could have those links on our own personal - our own constituency websites to help people out.

As much as I think I know a bit about rural transportation, I didn't know about those and how available they are. Maybe Kim Langille could get that information from you following the meeting.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the Liberal caucus has expired. We can finish with that note a little later.

I recognize the PC caucus now with eight minutes. The honourable member for Sackville-Cobequid.

STEVE CRAIG: I'll lead off and depending on how the timing goes, my colleague MLA Comer will take over.

A very interesting conversation this morning. I did not realize just how engaged the Nova Scotia Community Transportation Network is. Ms. Taylor Nauss's responses I find intriguing, very informative, and knowledgeable. Not knowing anything about this organization until today, really, and doing some work - how is the network funded?

LESLIE TAYLOR NAUSS: We receive an annual operating grant through the community transportation budget. Greg can speak a little bit more to that, if he's so inclined.

GREG SEWELL: We certainly value the work and the expertise that the Community Transportation Network has brought to community transportation over the last few years. We do provide them with an annual operating grant of \$50,000. They continue to be our partners through a variety of initiatives, some of which Leslie has touched on already today.

STEVE CRAIG: The interconnection really resonates with me. How do you go from planes, trains and automobiles, if you will? Where do you make those connections to go from the mode of one boundary to the other? I'll give you an example. I was going to St. Catharines a number of years ago. I took a plane into Pearson. At Pearson, I booked a bus to St. Catharines, and I ended up on three different vehicles as I went from Mississauga

to St. Catharines. It was absolutely seamless. I paid one fare. I don't know how they divvied it up.

When you get into a population like southern Ontario, that's a different thing from the population of Nova Scotia and the geography that we have. What are the challenges, when you look at the population that we have, the geography we have, to come up with and perhaps even to entice either public or not-for-profit organizations to step up, knowing full well that - not the case in non-profits, but any public system is highly subsidized - how does that conversation take place?

LESLIE TAYLOR NAUSS: I think the conversation is the same, whether it is the not-for-profit public sector or the private sector. Maritime Bus is an example. It is a challenge, absolutely. I think that the other piece of the conversation is within all three levels of government and the support of communities. If you want active, vibrant communities that are outside the urban core - even within the urban core - there is a responsibility. There are four responsibilities, or four avenues of responsibility.

The community needs to want it and so it's having the conversation as to what's possible within a community and what would a community support. The three levels of government need to support that by supporting the residents of the province, the residents of the municipality, and the residents of the country. Then also the organization itself - whether it's a not-for-profit or a profit-driven organization. They want to be able to move people around. They're in the transportation industry for that very reason.

It's being collaborative - thinking outside the box - innovative, and not being afraid to fail. There are some organizations that are very slow to start. There are some organizations that take off and they have the complete opposite problem: They aren't running a vehicle with no bums in seats, they don't have enough seats for bums. I think it's being able to work with each community to figure out what's going to work for them and what's going to be sustainable for them.

STEVE CRAIG: I look at what you're doing as being an advocate, a catalyst, a facilitator. You talk about the challenges between the different orders of government and perhaps even the communities, the needs of the communities, the geography of the communities, the demographics of the communities, and how that might change the opportunity - I'll phrase it that way - of public transit or community transportation. How do you see the network's role in playing that advocate through the different orders of government - the catalyst and the facilitator - to ensure that we do have for our citizens the best community transportation that they could have?

LESLIE TAYLOR NAUSS: I think it comes down to education and speaking the language of the audience. A great example is the conversations that we're having with our federal government right now. There is money available federally for transportation, but our 19 providers, because of the way they are created - they're not-for-profits - they don't

qualify for federal funding, so it's educating our federal government on, sometimes, the barriers that policies put in place for organizations.

[11:30 a.m.]

Then I think it's having or setting or working with communities to set realistic goals. You can start slow and grow, but if you go big and you out-capacity yourself, it's not going to happen. It's slow paces with community transportation.

STEVE CRAIG: In the remaining time I have, I just want to thank all the witnesses today. It's a very important topic. Transportation is key. We need to be able to move people around, whether it's down the block or it's down to the next community. We need to be able to have affordable, sustainable transportation in this province of ours, especially as we're increasing the density. We have challenges, we know, around transportation. The key here is, I think I'm seeing an advocate around the table today, and that's reassuring. I know I'll be reaching out later. Mr. Chair, thank you. With that, I thank you and turn it back over to you.

THE CHAIR: Your timing is perfect. I now recognize the NDP caucus, with eight minutes. The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre.

KENDRA COOMBES: I want to talk about social services providers. In speaking with social services providers around the province, it has been raised again and again, particularly in the rural and suburban areas, how absolutely critical transportation options are for Nova Scotians. We cannot be successful in providing services to people, whether they are health, employment, shelter, mental health, child care, social services - it runs the gamut - if people cannot reach them.

This has become a foundational issue. I'm wondering if the department is considering that - because community transit is so crucial - is there thought to expanding the support provided to municipalities and organizations providing community transit?

LESLIE TAYLOR NAUSS: Certainly, we work with municipal units, and again, I'm going to go back to the education comment that I made, and pointing them in the direction of funding pots, understanding of the services, what's required, what they would need from a funding perspective, from a human resources perspective. I can't speak, though, to the financial piece of that. That would be more a conversation or a response from Greg.

GREG SEWELL: At this time, we have not had conversations about providing operating funding to municipalities or other groups that provide some form of transportation within their communities, but those are always types of topics that we like to hear about, to see if there are opportunities that we can help further enhance communities.

KENDRA COOMBES: To follow up with regard to co-operational funding and grants, as you know, grants are not consistent. Those funding streams of money are not always consistent, whereas operational funding is very consistent and would allow municipal units to build their transit system in a more cohesive manner that is working. Has the department actually been looking at doing core funding, rather than the grants? Has that been looked into at all, in any discussions?

THE CHAIR: Director Greg Sewell.

GREG SEWELL: I think my answer is very similar to the previous question. We have not engaged in any internal dialogue to provide core operational funding, via grants or other ways, to municipalities that are providing fixed-route transit service.

KENDRA COOMBES: May I make a suggestion that the department should look into that, because I think it would be very helpful?

I just want to clarify something. I may have missed it. I had to step away for a second. The background material on the \$5 fare pilot: Is that the pilot that was mentioned when the member for Sydney River-Mira-Louisbourg was discussing the COVID-19 system that was happening for those going either to get tested or to get vaccinated? Or is there a different pilot for a \$5 fare?

GREG SEWELL: We currently have, I guess, a program in place that is providing funding to the community transportation operators to transport individuals to get vaccinations, at a cost of \$5. It's not to get tested - it is for vaccinations only.

In the presentation, there was a comment about the - I think it was under Sustainability for Future Focus, looking at having \$5 in-county fares for individuals. Again, the whole concept behind that is to bring the cost of community transportation more in line with the cost of public transportation. It is something that is on our radar and we will begin to have some discussions and identify transportation partners with that. Again, it would be something we would have to pilot in one or two communities to start, just to see what the financial impact is.

KENDRA COOMBES: Yes, this is a different type of pilot that you're looking at.

Also, I'm just wondering, in that same area - the department explained that the average fare is \$11 in the community transit service. Can you speak to the department's approach to affordability? Are there benchmarks or goals and standards that are being used?

GREG SEWELL: We collect financial information from each of the service providers, so we get an overview of their operational expenses and the revenues they've

been able to generate throughout the year. We also collect information on ridership. With that information, we're able to provide stats on each operator, like cost per ride, cost per passenger, a whole gamut of different information. We can use that to compare organization against organization, to see what the costing structure differences may be.

We also have to take into consideration the differences in the fleets, as well. Comparing costs of an organization that is running three or four vans is going to be a lot different than an organization that has ten vehicles that are primarily buses. The information that we do collect does provide us some benchmarks for each organization that we can go back and historically compare to see if they are becoming more efficient over time.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre, with 30 seconds remaining.

KENDRA COOMBES: Okay, I don't know if I really have time to ask a question with that, so I will say thank you for your time and for being here today.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Waverley-Fall River-Beaver Bank with eight minutes.

BILL HORNE: I would like to first say that I could be an advocate for this program. I think it's a wonderful one that has come a long way over the last year or two, and we do have abilities to have the Hants East Riders coming down into the Fall River area. We're supporting that program and it has been supportive for both groups.

Anyway, I would like to talk to Mr. Swan about his carership of the Nova Scotia Community Transportation Network and ask him a couple of questions about maybe the economics of the transportation system and what it has created in the community besides what has been happening okay now quite a bit with the ridership.

I am wondering if you could answer a question on the economics. Have you had the opportunity to look at the economics of this program, also probably including the residents who might want to live here longer because they have the transportation network?

GREG SEWELL: Yes, community transportation is a significant economic opportunity for growth in the province. Community transportation moves people around. It provides transportation to individuals who are going to community colleges and universities or seeking out training opportunities to re-enter the work force - all individuals who can contribute to our economy at some point in time.

Collectively, the operators employ around 100 drivers and 40 office staff. There is a significant amount of salaries that are paid to those individuals. Between fuel purchases and vehicle maintenance, the providers will spend over \$1 million in their local

communities. That's \$1 million spent mainly in rural Nova Scotia. COVID-19 has destroyed the operators' volumes. It's a huge challenge.

One other question was about interconnectivity in the ideal world. In an ideal world, you could get on a van in rural Queens County, hop on Maritime Bus in Bridgewater, come to Halifax - these are hop-on, transfer on the bus to another place or the train, or Maritime Bus will take you to the airport.

[11:45 a.m.]

But guess what? Nobody's travelling now. It's really horrendous. How many of us are going to survive through this, I don't know. I feel really bad for small businesses. The operators are doing the best they can in very difficult circumstances. I think the fact that we're talking about this today across government is fantastic. I think you all walk away from this with a much better knowledge of what community transportation is and know that we have a whole whack of dedicated people out there who are trying to make this work.

I'll stop there. I have a passion for this area. If we ever get through COVID-19, let's hope there's something left.

BILL HORNE: Earlier in our conversations, there was talk about having 19 communities hooked up on this transportation system. Where do you see the future going? I heard also that there would be three new communities coming on board, I think, this year. I'm wondering what the future looks like. What do you see as the future? What would you like to see?

GREG SEWELL: That's a wonderful question. I shared a couple of maps in the presentation. I think the ultimate goal is to make those white spots on the map disappear. I mentioned we have some conversations going on in Guysborough starting with the municipality and the Town of Mulgrave. Ideally we get a service there up and running in that area, the citizens and the council and St. Marys say, yes, we want that too, and then in a couple of years' time, we have the whole County of Guysborough covered.

I think the great news story is the development of transportation in Eskasoni. It's the largest First Nation community in the province. Not only are they going to start with the door-to-door service probably in the Summer, they're also interested in doing a fixed-route service into Sydney to connect their citizens to central services in that area. That is hopefully going to be maybe late Fall or early Winter.

Leslie talked about great conversations she's having with councils in Lunenburg and the Town of Mahone Bay and the Town of Lunenburg as well. That would cover off all of the kind of gap areas. I know the Municipality of East Hants had some interest in exploring a fixed route to get citizens mainly to the airport. With the shutdown with

COVID-19, those conversations have been put on hold. There are discussions, some very small, some at a very grassroots level about more transportation options across the province. I think once those gap areas are covered and if the service gets up and running in East Hants - plus, I mentioned New Glasgow and Stellarton - we're doing really well.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the Liberal caucus is concluded. If any of our witnesses would like to make a brief closing comment - I'll start with Leslie Taylor Nauss.

LESLIE TAYLOR NAUSS: I think this is the time I'll thank everybody for inviting us and allowing us to take part in this conversation today. I just want to respond to the last question.

Certainly, from a network perspective and a personal perspective, which is why I do the work that I do, I want the ideal world. I want people to be able to have access to an affordable, accessible transportation service that can link them from tip to tail of Nova Scotia, recognizing that it needs to be sustainable and it needs to be unique to fit community needs, but I think that that's a possibility. I want that map. We created that map. I want that map to have lots of bright, vibrant colours all over it. I want it to have lines with fixed-route transits and intercity transits. I want folks to be able to have the experience that, I believe it was Mr. Craig, had in Oakville, Ontario, or somewhere in Ontario.

STEVE CRAIG: Mississauga.

LESLIE TAYLOR NAUSS: Mississauga.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LaFleche for a concluding comment.

PAUL LAFLECHE: I want to thank the Committee. I think Leslie Taylor's comments there are right on.

We were asked about the vision. The vision is that everybody who needs community transit, needs commuter transit, needs a transit between municipalities for whatever reason - recreation, medical appointments, work - they have it. It's available in Nova Scotia.

Last night as I was getting ready for dinner, we had to have some beans. I had to go open a can of beans. I reached into the drawer and found some can openers - I actually had three of them. I thought, this lines up closely with where we are in life. The first can opener was this one here: It's a designer can opener - a famous chef recommends it - and that's what I call the Montreal Metro System. That's not where we are in Nova Scotia. We almost got there with the light rapid transit. Good proposal but didn't quite make it.

Then we have the fixed transit routes. That's the second system. They're really good. They work in large population-based areas. They work in CBRM, they work in HRM

great, and they're very good. We do support them, not in terms of operating funding, but we do support them in terms of capital funding. There'll be some work on that in the near future.

Here is where we are. Everybody knows what this is. Use it in the north, very versatile when the airplane and the helicopter don't come in and you've got to eat a can of beans, that's it. That is where we are. We're doing whatever we can, using whatever tool we have, to make transit work for Nova Scotians. We're not there yet. There are gaps in the map. There're a lot of communities we want to add. We've got to get there because not every Nova Scotian can get out on a big highway and drive a vehicle in. A lot of them have to be connected to some sort of public or community transit system.

So, we've got a new mandate. We cobbled together different mandates within different government departments, and I want to thank all those departments: Seniors, Community Services, Municipal Affairs who worked on these files. And the staff, in the past, for putting together a great system which we have inherited here. We're going to hopefully make this a much better system with the leadership of you, the politicians, who provide us with the encouragement and the funding to go forward.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and all the members of the Committee. It was a pleasure to be here for all of us, and we'll see you next time.

THE CHAIR: I thank Deputy Minister LaFleche, and probably for allowing that visual presentation at the end, I'm probably going to lose my job as Chair, but I do thank you. That'll stay with us.

I want to thank all the witnesses. This has been a - not just an interesting, but a fascinating look at, also, where we are and perhaps what's to come for the future.

With that, the witnesses can now leave the meeting, and we'll carry on with the business of the Committee.

In terms of the business of the Committee from the Department of Justice, information requested from the March 2nd meeting and members were provided a copy: Is the correspondence acceptable in terms of a remark from the Committee members?

Just raise your hand and that will let us know we're all good. Okay, thank you.

The following correspondence has already been received by the Committee as well. Agreement to post it to the Committee webpage per the Committee practice is required. We have correspondence from the Department of Community Services which was requested at the February 2nd meeting, and we have correspondence from the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, which was a response to correspondence from the

December 8th meeting. If everyone is in agreement, that will be posted. You can raise a hand to indicate so. Thank you very much.

We do have a few changes to previously approved witnesses. As a result of changes to approved witnesses, the committee will need to approve these changes. The following changes have occurred: With regard to the topic Housing and COVID-19 and the Homelessness Crisis, the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing is now the Department of Infrastructure and Housing, and Eiryn Devereaux is now the deputy minister responsible, replacing Catherine Berliner. I need a motion to approve those changes. Moved by MLA Craig. Those changes are approved.

Also the following clarification: The Department of Infrastructure and Housing can't speak to homelessness, as this falls under the Department of Community Services, and also note the Family Service Association of Western Nova Scotia is a witness who will be appearing on this topic as well. If we have approval of that, we will move forward with dealing with those changes. Thank you.

I guess that concludes the business, unless any member has something further to raise. I don't see any hands up at this time. Everything good, Ms. Langille, then, to conclude the meeting? I guess we're good.

Our next committee meeting is set for June 1st at 10:00 a.m., and the topic and witnesses will be forthcoming.

With no further business, this meeting is adjourned. Thank you all.

[11:57 a.m. The Committee adjourned.]