

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

**COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES AND
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

Tuesday, January 25, 2022

Video Conference

Active Transportation

Printed and Published by Nova Scotia Hansard Reporting Services

**NATURAL RESOURCES AND
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**

Tom Taggart (Chair)

Dave Ritcey (Vice-Chair)

Kent Smith

Trevor Boudreau

Chris Palmer

Ronnie LeBlanc

Carman Kerr

Claudia Chender

Lisa Lachance

[Chris Palmer was replaced by Danielle Barkhouse]

In Attendance:

Heather Hoddinott
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Natural Resources & Renewables

Karen Gatien,
Deputy Minister

Keith Collins,
Executive Director of Sustainable & Renewable Energy

Jonah Bernstein,
Director - Clean Transportation

Department of Public Works

Bonnie Rankin,
Executive Director of Strategic Infrastructure and Priority Policy

Diane Saurette,
Executive Director of Finance, Strategic Capital Planning

Gregory Sewell,
Director, Community Transportation



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, JANUARY 25, 2022

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

1:00 P.M.

CHAIR
Tom Taggart

VICE CHAIR
Dave Ritcey

THE CHAIR: I'd like to call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Natural Resources and Economic Development. My name is Tom Taggart, the MLA for Colchester North, and Chair of this Standing Committee.

Given the direction of Public Health, this committee agreed unanimously in an email poll to hold this meeting by video conference. All participants present today should keep their video on throughout the meeting with their microphone on mute unless I recognize them. Remember to turn on your own microphone before speaking and then put it back on mute afterwards.

You can indicate you wish to speak by raising your hand icon on the system here. That will allow us to keep everything in order and make it easy for me. Please try not to leave your seat during the meeting unless it's absolutely necessary. If you do leave, leave your camera on with your audio muted. That way we know we have a quorum, and we know whether you are present if a vote is called for.

If you have another device with you such as a phone, please put it on silent. If you need to confer privately with the clerk or Legislative Counsel, or if members wish to confer before a vote, I will call for a brief recess. If any members have technical problems, please phone or text the clerk.

I'm going to ask the committee members to introduce themselves using the list that we have before us.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: For the purposes of Hansard, I acknowledge the presence of Chief Legislative Counsel Gordon Hebb, and Legislative Clerk Heather Hoddinott.

Our topic today is active transportation. Everybody's name is on there, but our witnesses today from the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables are: Karen Gatien, Deputy Minister; Keith Collins, Executive Director of Sustainable and Renewable Energy; and Jonah Bernstein, Director of Clean Transportation.

From the Department of Public Works: Bonnie Rankin, Executive Director of Strategic Infrastructure and Priority Policy; Diane Saurette, Executive Director of Finance, Strategic Capital Planning; and Greg Sewell, Director of Community Transportation.

Deputy Gatien, I'm going to ask if you'll give us some opening statements. I believe you have a bit of a slide deck for us there. If you want to go ahead, please.

KAREN GATIEN: Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you our shared work in active transportation between the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, and the Department of Public Works.

Here with me, as you've already heard, to assist with responding to your questions are Keith Collins and Jonah Bernstein from the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables; and Bonnie Rankin, Diane Saurette, and Greg Sewell from the Department of Public Works.

Nova Scotians have a strong connection to our natural environment. There are several things our departments are doing to ensure it remains a key asset for our residents, visitors, and businesses. Our provincial park system creates numerous opportunities for people to enjoy the outdoors, reconnect with nature, and explore the many aspects of our great province.

Active transportation, or AT, includes walking, cycling, and other modes of self-propelled transport. Active transportation is destination-oriented, such as travel to work, school, retail areas, recreation and leisure pursuits, and other activities of daily living. It's one of the best ways to increase physical activity, and it contributes to the overall health of our citizens.

It also helps reduce carbon emissions and makes neighbourhoods more attractive and enjoyable for families and businesses. The goal of an active transportation network is to improve accessibility and mobility regardless of age, ability, gender, or socioeconomic

status. The Province supports the vision of an integrated network of active transportation infrastructure across Nova Scotia that connects people within and between communities.

We are working with communities to support their AT in community plans to encourage investment in active transportation infrastructure to provide clean alternatives that promote a good quality of life and contribute to our climate change goals. We continue to invest in projects across the province to support and advance community-based clean energy and transportation initiatives through the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program, the Low Carbon Communities Program, and the Connect2 Program.

These investments create green jobs while improving the environment and our communities. Through the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program, Nova Scotia has contributed \$13 million to date, which allowed us to leverage just over \$26 million from federal and municipal governments. This represents a total investment in Nova Scotia to date of \$40 million. It enabled six core active transportation projects in the towns of Port Hawkesbury, Kentville, Antigonish, Yarmouth, and two within the Halifax Regional Municipality: one in the regional south centre, or downtown core, and the other in the community of East Preston.

Connect2 funding is available for active transportation projects that advance community AT designs and small-scale infrastructure that improves connectivity within and between communities and supports emission reduction. Since 2015, the Connect2 program has provided over \$4 million in grants to municipalities and local not-for-profit groups to jump-start local projects and initiatives.

The province has also supported the community engagement and design of core AT networks through the Bicycle Nova Scotia or BNS Bicycle Hubs Project. To date, BNS has worked with Bridgewater, Lunenburg, Mahone Bay, Antigonish, Wolfville, Port Hawkesbury, New Glasgow, Middleton, and Annapolis Royal. Along with these investments in AT infrastructure, the Province has also put in place an incentive program for e-bikes as part of its electric vehicles initiatives. The program has been very successful, and in 2021, over 1,300 Nova Scotians purchased e-bikes from Nova Scotia bicycle shops.

The Department of Public Works is also working with several departmental partners to develop a framework to establish a provincial active transportation strategy to increase active transportation options. The government's goal is to increase active transportation options by 2023.

Public Works is leading the government work in partnership with Bicycle Nova Scotia to develop the Blue Route Cycling Network around the province. Blue Route is a province-wide cycling network connecting communities across the province using selected provincial highways, trails, and municipal infrastructure. It will help create more opportunities for healthy, active living and enable the development of economic

opportunities by connecting more people to local businesses and enhancing bicycle tourism.

By promoting and encouraging active and community transportation, we're working to improve quality of life for all Nova Scotians. Now we'd like to provide a joint presentation on this topic, and then we would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

I'd like to turn it over to Jonah to start our presentation.

JONAH BERNSTEIN: Thank you, deputy. I think you have the presentation in front of you, so I will guide you through. It's going to be a collaborative effort between our department and Public Works, but I will start us off by providing some of the background on active transportation in Nova Scotia and the many actions that we are taking in Nova Scotia in this area.

It is truly a collaborative effort. Today you have the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables and the Department of Public Works before you, but there are also many other departments that are involved, including the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and other provincial departments. In addition to that, all levels of government - municipal and federal partnerships - as well as partnerships with communities and many stakeholders. The deputy mentioned Bicycle Nova Scotia, but there's also Clean Foundation, Ecology Action Centre, the Federation of Nova Scotia Municipalities, and many others.

The deputy mentioned what active transportation is. You're going to hear us use words like "active transportation" and "AT." I don't like using acronyms, but sometimes I slip. We really mean bicycling, walking, rolling, skating - all kinds of modes of self-propelled mobility options. What we're trying to do is make it safer and more convenient for Nova Scotians to be able to use these modes, both between communities and within communities in Nova Scotia.

I'm with the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, and our focus for this work is really about energy reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. The transportation sector in Nova Scotia makes up over 30 per cent of the greenhouse gas emissions. Clean transportation options like active transportation are essential for helping us reduce those emissions.

Active transportation is about much more than just energy and greenhouse gas emission reductions. That's why so many departments and so many partners are involved in this work. It's about health. It's about air pollution reduction. It supports businesses. It helps ensure thriving communities. It helps with tourism and also accessibility - and that's a really key component to the work that we're trying to do.

We're trying to advance active transportation infrastructure that's accessible to all Nova Scotians. We use a term that we call AAA - a concept where we want infrastructure to be used by everyone from eight-year-olds to 80-year-olds and beyond. We truly want this network to be as accessible as possible.

The bill called the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act was passed in Fall 2021. It is a really important piece of legislation that makes strong links between the environment, the economy, and social equity. It includes over 20 goals, and there are two goals that are specific to active transportation.

Through this Act, the government will support the well-being of Nova Scotians through active transportation by completing "core active transportation networks that are accessible for all ages and all abilities in 65% of the Province's communities by 2030." Also, we are going to develop "a Provincial Active Transportation strategy to increase active transportation options by 2023." As I mentioned previously, many departments are involved in both of these actions.

In this presentation, we will highlight and give you details in four critical areas that the Province is pursuing and actions that we are taking. The first one is around our Blue Route initiative, which is those connections between communities. The Department of Public Works leads this work and will speak to this work.

There's also what we call Core Active Transportation Networks. Those are those connections within communities - those key pieces that link us to our services and our businesses. The Department of Natural Resources and Renewables leads this work.

There are also supporting programs like Connect2. The Department of Public Works and Greg Sewell are here to speak to that. We also have things like e-bike incentives as part of our overall electric vehicle incentive program, and we'll speak a little bit to that as well. We also have the AT Strategy and Framework, which is being led by the Department of Public Works.

I'm going to pass it on to Bonnie Rankin, who is going to provide us some details on the Blue Route.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Rankin.

BONNIE RANKIN: Thank you, Jonah, and good afternoon to the committee. The Blue Route is the province-wide cycling network that connects communities. It's the network that is used on provincial roadways, trails, and some municipal infrastructure.

The Department of Public Works is the lead department on developing the Blue Route, but we do collaborate significantly with other stakeholders, such as Bicycle Nova Scotia. They're an important partner in delivering that program. They work quite

extensively with municipalities and trails groups across the province to help us continue that work.

The goal of Blue Route is connecting Nova Scotia with one continuous, comfortable, and convenient bicycle network across the province. The vision, ultimately, is for 3,000 kilometres of road and trail network that is usable by cyclists - both on road and on trail. To date so far, we have opened 470 kilometres of Blue Route, and that includes 140 kilometres on provincial roadways and another 330 kilometres on trails. We've got another about 30 kilometres planned for opening in 2022, and then more are expected as we move forward implementing our five-year highway plan.

[1:15 p.m.]

JONAH BERNSTEIN: Next, what we want to provide some details on is what we call the core active transportation networks. These are those key networks that are within our communities and towns. We define them as safe, convenient, accessible routes that are through the heart of Nova Scotia's communities. We're trying to put in place spines or the minimum networks that then communities can build off of. It's not supposed to be the end result but it is the core connected pieces that are put in place that we can build on in terms of AT networks going forward.

Our focus for this work within communities is around - this is where we can really address some of those energy and greenhouse gas emission reductions. If we can help people move away from needing to use a car to get to some of their trips and move on to active transportation modes, this can really enable energy and GHG savings. It's also, as I mentioned in the past, about providing access to AAA networks - that's that AT infrastructure - and also an equity piece around helping municipalities that might not have other mobility options. This is a really useful technique, especially in some of our rural municipalities.

How we've been doing this is that we've been working with communities and municipalities to invent their AT plans and priorities, and we've been working with our key AT stakeholders such as BNS, NSF, and the Ecology Action Centre. It's really also been making our major infrastructure investments through the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program.

If you go through to the next slide, we want to provide you a little bit of detail on the overall program, but the key area that we're making investments in, which is the greenhouse gas reduction stream. The Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program is Canada's comprehensive, long-term, 10-year plan for building a prosperous and inclusive country through infrastructure investments. This work is being led by Diane Saurette, who is with us today and she leads this work through Public Works.

There are some key streams of part of this program. There's a public transit stream; a green infrastructure stream; a community, culture, and recreation infrastructure stream; rural and northern communities; and there was more recently a COVID-19 resiliency stream, where quick projects can help us respond to the pandemic. The Department of Natural Resources and Renewables is leading a part of the green infrastructure stream that's relatively new that is around greenhouse gas reduction projects.

If we go to the next slide, as I mentioned, this is a relatively new stream. This is the first time there's been a comprehensive stream that focuses purely on greenhouse gas reductions. Natural Resources and Renewables is leading this stream because in Nova Scotia, a lot of those reductions or a lot of the emissions are in the energy sector, so a lot of the reductions need to come from the energy sector as well.

There are three general priorities for this stream. One of them is around clean electricity, another one is around clean transportation and clean buildings. The Province has put effort into opening up active transportation networks as part of that clean transportation stream. We've been looking at funding through this program, a central and interconnecting network of active transportation routes that will facilitate walking, biking, and other forms of mobility.

To date, we have funded six core networks in Nova Scotia. This includes Port Hawkesbury, the Town of Kentville, the Town of Antigonish, the Town of Yarmouth, and we funded two projects, or two core networks, in Halifax: one for the Halifax regional downtown grid that includes the downtown grid for both Halifax and Dartmouth, as well as the community of East Preston, and we are continuing to work on more networks.

Now I'm going to pass it to Greg Sewell, who will talk about Connect2 and other supporting infrastructure programming.

GREG SEWELL: The Connect2 is a provincial program that was developed in response to growing interest and need for municipalities and communities to create active transportation solutions that increase connectiveness and accessibility, improve quality of life, and reduce carbon emissions. It's intended to jump-start local project initiatives by funding feasibility studies, designs, pilots, engagement sessions, and the implementation of a variety of active transportation initiatives.

The program is for smaller active transportation projects, as well as designs or studies for larger active transportation projects that could be eligible for federal funding programs. Projects through the Connect2 program are eligible for funding up to 75 per cent of the total project cost.

On the next slide, the first bullet just reiterates some of the eligible projects underneath the program which I've already mentioned. In this past fiscal year, we've

provided funding to seven municipalities and not-for-profit groups for 80 projects in their local communities.

JONAH BERNSTEIN: Another supporting program, which is also a very interesting story in terms of uptake, is our e-bike incentive program. The Province has an incentive program for electric vehicles. In Nova Scotia, we tried to open that incentive program up to not just new vehicles, but we also have an incentive for used and second-hand vehicles, as well as e-bike purchases, and we're hoping that more Nova Scotians, because of this, are able to take advantage of these types of programs.

The program is called Electrify, and it's delivered through the Clean Foundation. It provides a \$500 rebate on electric bikes. They must be pedal assist bikes, so not mopeds, but they assist you to varying degrees as you're biking. The minimum price for the bike needs to be \$1,200, and it has to be purchased from a retailer in Nova Scotia. If anyone hasn't tried an e-bike, I strongly encourage you to try one. We have one that we use for the department. They make you feel like a superhero when you're on them. They're extremely fun.

I find - and there's data that shows this - that they really get you on your bike more. They also get you going longer distances. That's really important for opening up what I've talked about previously around that accessibility issue. This will allow more Nova Scotians to get on bikes to go longer distances, and also throughout the year. When I'm feeling slightly tired, it really motivates me to get on an e-bike.

The program I mentioned has an interesting story here. It's been extremely successful. There have been over 1,300 e-bikes purchased in Nova Scotia in 2021 from local retailers. The program has been very popular and successful to date.

Lastly, we're going to talk about the AT strategy and framework, and Bonnie's going to come back and provide some details on that.

BONNIE RANKIN: As Jonah mentioned earlier, in the last sitting of the Legislature, the new Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act was passed. One of the goals in that Act is to have an active transportation strategy by the end of 2023. We've been working on that. We've actually been working on that for a while. As I think you can appreciate from previous discussion here today, active transportation is a file that encompasses many departments of government, so we've been working together on that.

Really, what we're trying to achieve with the strategy is strong, healthy, sustainable, and connected communities that provide Nova Scotians of all ages and abilities access to active transportation.

We do have a provincial active transportation team, or PATT - I'll try not to use that - which was created to develop and implement a strategy. It's led by the Department

of Public Works but it includes many other departments and agencies across government, including the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables - our colleagues here today - as well as the Department of Health and Wellness, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, et cetera. You can appreciate that this file touches almost every portfolio.

We do have various initiatives across these departments that all contribute in some way to advancing the AT initiatives within government. As I said, the framework is still underway. However, we can give you some broad strokes, some highlights. There are some high-level policies and actions that will enable the provincial advancement of the active transportation policy initiatives. We'll have some details on how departments will coordinate on those activities and the role of partners - specifically municipalities, community groups, and others with an interest in advancing active transportation.

There are six key directions that are guiding the framework thus far. As I said, it's still in development, but here's where we are to date: leadership and governance, community planning, building and upgrading routes, public buildings and facilities, education and awareness, and monitoring, reporting, and evaluation. All of these initiatives will be supported through existing resources with the expectation that we will be able to hopefully leverage some federal funding to support those initiatives as well.

That concludes the presentation.

THE CHAIR: I'm prepared to take some questions. As I said before, it's by show of hands. I would like whoever is asking the question to identify who they want to direct it towards, because we have to keep Legislative TV in the loop here. If it's a general question, whoever is going to answer it, maybe raise their hands so I can advise Legislative TV.

Go ahead, MLA Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thanks so much for the presentation. It's really helpful. We have a bunch of questions that we probably won't get to. At the outset, I'm struck by both the ambition and great work going on and also the relative paucity of funding compared to some of the other things that we see happening in government right now, particularly around roads and highways. I noted the discrepancy between 30 kilometres of Blue Route, but we're going to spend \$500 million on highways. Hopefully we can get to that down the road.

I want to start by asking about something that I've seen in my constituency but that's also in the news. It's an issue that seems to arise - I know it's addressed by programs like the Low Carbon Community Fund and others - around a disconnect between municipalities and the Province in funding some of these issues.

I know it comes up for me in Dartmouth because I have a 100-Series Highway that borders my constituency, so when I talk to the folks at the Department of Public Works, the line is always: we move the cars, HRM moves the people. It's not really that simple. We know from this presentation, and from the great work happening, that that's not entirely true.

In particular, there has been an issue in Pictou County where there's a stretch of four-lane highway that goes under an underpass where people actually have to move. It's not like a nice-to-have - it's a must-have. People with strollers and reaching doctors and child care services and things like that . . .

[1:30 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: Excuse me, MLA Chender. We really need to get to a question, please.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'm getting there right now. When we spoke to one of the councillors, what they saw was just kind of a stonewalling. They couldn't get the Province to pay attention to it. They can't get the funding to fix it.

I'm wondering if you could speak to this. I know I'm starting in a narrow way, but it's sort of emblematic of things that go on. I guess the question is for either department. I don't know if it's for Deputy Gatién or for Public Works. Are you aware of this? Has anyone been in conversation with these folks?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Gatién.

KAREN GATIÉN: Actually, Diane Saurette is going to speak.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Saurette.

DIANE SAURETTE: With that particular project, I am not aware of it, but in the work that we're doing with the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program, there was a call for proposals through Natural Resources and Renewables, through that green stream. As Jonah had mentioned in the presentation, there have been six or so projects that have been formally approved.

We are working on other projects. Unfortunately, we can't provide the details, because then they could be deemed ineligible through the program. We're going through the process with the federal government. You had mentioned about Public Works: We do the roads and we're moving the cars. I will tell you that in our five-year plan, we do consider the shoulders. That is part of our process.

As those sections open up, as more sections of the Blue Route are now complete, when we look at that 460 kilometres of trails and roads, we say that - because it's connected. For instance, through one of the programs that we've done through ICIP, on a project, it's about six or seven kilometres and it's actually going to connect to a piece. We have a lot of pieces in the province that are Blue Route but they're not considered Blue Route because we haven't connected to them.

So as we go through our five-year plan - 30 kilometres may not seem a lot, but this year we'll do a section of 6.9 and it's opening up 23 kilometres. So there's a lot of those pieces, and it really comes down to our five-year plan, how we integrate it.

It is part of our process, in terms of the strategy, but we're also thinking about the cost: how we can integrate it with the work that we're doing, how we're leveraging federal dollars. We're always trying to leverage federal money, and it's wonderful that we have this ICIP program. As Jonah said, it's new. It's climate change reduction. We have one of those projects he announced - we actually put it to the transit stream. That's the HRM one. It's over \$25 million.

It may not seem like we want to get to 3,000 kilometres of highways and trails - we're at about 15 per cent - but there's a lot actually done in the work that we do every day in our plan. As we connect them, you'll see a lot more than that 426 as we go through our program.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thanks. Just a quick follow-up, if I may, Mr. Chair?

THE CHAIR: Yes, please.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: That's really helpful, and that connectivity piece is really - I didn't understand that, so that helps for understanding those numbers.

Just to put a point on this one in particular, I know there are a bunch of RFPs, and I know Mr. Bernstein mentioned the equity piece. For those municipalities or groups who may not have the resources to be actively seeking that kind of funding, is there a piece - and probably this would be a good example - where the department is proactive?

I know under the 2013 Sustainable Transportation Strategy, one of the goals is to engage with communities to create integrated solutions. What is the Province's role? Are you guys going out and doing that engagement? Again, that's to whoever is best.

JONAH BERNSTEIN: Yes, thank you. As we mentioned, there's a lot of work. Natural Resources and Renewables is doing a lot of work on the infrastructure side, but there's pre-work, as you mentioned, that needs to happen around engaging with communities, providing supports and partnerships to be able to come up with designs and implementation plans.

Connect2 is one example of that, but also, we've been working with Bicycle Nova Scotia on what's called a Bicycle Hubs Project. That's to really get out what you're talking about there in terms of having an organization that's reaching out to communities and municipalities to gauge interest and start supporting them, and also do some lessons learned from other projects as we're going forward.

Halifax has done a lot of excellent work in the active transportation space, and over the years we've gone from painted lines to separated, very safe infrastructure. Translating that and providing support to municipalities to help them design that is part of that work, and some of that engagement is happening in this space.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: I just had a couple questions on the Active Transportation plan funding. Is there a timeline on when the Active Transportation framework document will be public?

KAREN GATIEN: I'm going to ask Bonnie to respond to that.

BONNIE RANKIN: The goal in the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act actually requires us to have that completed by the end of 2023. That is definitely what we're working toward. I don't know if we'll overachieve, but we're going to aim to.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Bonnie.

I'd like to call a 10-minute recess if I could, please. There's something I need to attend to.

We'll be back - actually, I think I'll make it five. I can do it in five, but I'd like to call a five-minute recess.

We'll be back at 1:42 p.m., I guess. Thanks.

[1:38 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[1:43 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: I'm a little bit late. I apologize. We finished with MLA Ritcey, I think.

DAVE RITCEY: I do have a follow-up question, if I could, Mr. Chair, or I could wait.

THE CHAIR: I'd like to go with just one question with each person and try and circulate throughout the whole committee. Then we'll come back around again, if I could.

MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: Thank you for joining us today, everyone. I'm an urban cyclist so I appreciate all efforts to make the roads more accessible and safer for me and my family. My partner is a new e-bike owner, and so is also really benefiting from that. It's just great to see all this work happening.

Just wondering about balancing out the goals around active transportation obviously linked to climate change goals, and then also thinking about our population goals, so to double our population and hopefully grow in the rural areas. Just wondering how those population goals are being taken into account. Specifically, I know right now we're seeing some growth in some areas, other than HRM, in the province, but we've also seen the advent of working from home. That doesn't seem to be going anywhere too soon, so people can work in any part of Nova Scotia, hopefully.

I don't know if I would point this towards perhaps Mr. Collins, or whoever feels best placed to answer this question around considering those broader goals around population growth and immigration with the active transportation strategy.

KAREN GATIEN: I'll start and then perhaps we'll ask Jonah to add some detail as well if he has any comments.

I think as our communities grow, what we're trying to do is to really build supports and interconnect them as much as possible to allow for any population growth. Certainly that's what we all want across the province, and in particular in our rural communities as well. The more that we can provide safe and accessible opportunities for Nova Scotians to access retail, schools, doctor's appointments, and really be able to maximize the benefits of connections to the Blue Route as well and within their own downtown cores of their smaller communities, the better we'll be as the population grows. They won't be so dependent on having to get in a car to drive to their neighbourhood corner store or doctor's office.

Certainly, that's part of it. It's reducing gas emissions, it's getting people out and about in different ways: whether they're roller skating, as Jonah mentioned, or they're on a bike or walking, pushing a stroller, what have you. Safe, accessible routes will be key to being able to support the growth of any population in any community: whether it's downtown Halifax, downtown Dartmouth, which is close to where I live, or Port Hawkesbury.

Jonah, I don't know if there's anything that you had to add to that.

[1:45 p.m.]

JONAH BERNSTEIN: The only thing that I'll add is if you look at where we've made the investments so far, you're seeing investments in both urban and rural. It actually ties in very well with the comment around growth happening not only in urban areas, but especially we're starting to see with the advent of working from home - entirely new work patterns and entirely new ideas as to where you can live and work.

As we build out these networks, if you start seeing folks moving and immigrating into some of our towns in Nova Scotia, they would demand this type of infrastructure. It ties very nicely with that need, as well as what we mentioned in terms of the links to economic development. You're seeing investments in Port Hawkesbury, in Yarmouth, in Kentville as examples of where we can build out these networks and provide the services that people expect in those communities.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Saurette, did you have a comment there?

DIANE SAURETTE: I do. I just want to really add on to the deputy's comments and to Jonah's comments. When it comes to immigration, it's almost like an indirect. The work that we do through the whole program through ICIP is across our province. We look at it from a lens that we need to support our communities.

When you look at the makeup of Nova Scotia, we have one urban community and the rest are all rural. From an active transportation viewpoint and the projects that we have supported and the ones that we are working on, it's really about meeting all those goals that we link to active transportation and supporting these communities. It's about making these communities attractive for people to want to stay in a rural Nova Scotia with other infrastructure that we also have to think about - like our schools and our hospitals and keeping them full - and these types of supports for this type of infrastructure or social infrastructure and all that. It's so important for our communities to keep people in our communities.

We may not necessarily look directly at the lens of immigration, but it's certainly, from an indirect perspective, a consideration for all of the different projects that we support through various programs.

THE CHAIR: MLA Smith, do you have a question, please?

KENT SMITH: I think my question is going to be directed toward Ms. Rankin. First of all, thank you very much for the presentation - very informative. I'm really glad that you touched on Bill No. 57, the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act. It's certainly something that our team is really proud of - and proud of our department for putting that legislation forward in the Fall. I'm also really happy to hear you talk about PATT - the Provincial Active Transportation Team.

Keeping in mind the accountability and the goals for 2023 - I did hear you say that you didn't want to be too optimistic, but you might bring it to fruition before 2023. I'm just looking for an update as to where we are at right now, Ms. Rankin. What is the next step with that team to advancing that provincial active transportation strategy?

BONNIE RANKIN: The team is right now in the process of reviewing all of the initiatives and actions that have been identified so far, and just reconfirming commitment, reconfirming resources, reconfirming mandate, and reviewing to see if there's anything new that we can incorporate, just to flesh out that document even further. Then we'll have to go back through some approval processes within the departments.

As I noted, there are several departments and agencies involved in the Provincial Active Transportation Team because this portfolio does affect so many departments. There will be a process. We've got staff looking at it to confirm all the actions that have been identified so far. Then we'll be going back through the senior levels of the departments to reconfirm commitments and see if there are any new initiatives that may fit into the framework that we would like to highlight in that framework. Then we'll be going through and finalizing the document and seeking government approval.

KENT SMITH: Thank you. Mr. Chair, can I ask a quick follow up?

THE CHAIR: If you don't mind, MLA Smith, I'm trying to keep everything in order and give everybody a chance to go first, and then we'll swing back around.

KENT SMITH: Understood. Thank you, Mr. Chair. You're doing a fantastic job.

THE CHAIR: Okay, thank you. MLA LeBlanc, please.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I think my question is for Bonnie Rankin. We all know that active transportation is a lot more challenging in rural Nova Scotia. It's less densely populated, there might be less infrastructure, and we have to drive longer distances to access services. A lot of the projects seem to be more suited for the city and towns.

I guess I'd like to hear your thoughts on how - when you're working on the active transportation strategy - you take those two realities into consideration to make sure that those communities can take advantage of what the province is offering. It is important for all communities to become more active.

BONNIE RANKIN: I can start, and then I think perhaps Jonah might have a few words on that as well. Certainly, we know that rural parts of the province are in a very different situation than even our towns, and certainly different from Halifax, of course. That is taken into consideration in the strategy, as one of the main priorities in those areas would be completion of the Blue Route.

As my colleague Ms. Saurette pointed out earlier, although it doesn't seem like there has been a lot of progress - 470 kilometers completed - there are actually a lot of little segments that have been completed throughout the province. We're just not claiming victory yet because they're not connected in a larger way, I guess I could say.

Definitely, in those very rural parts of the province, the Blue Route is one of the top priorities to provide a means for active transportation and also connecting with trails. That's another portion. The Blue Route connects to trails as well. It is certainly a priority in the more rural parts of the province. I don't know if Jonah has anything to add

THE CHAIR: Mr. Bernstein.

JONAH BERNSTEIN: Just to echo what Bonnie is talking about there with an example, I think Port Hawkesbury is an excellent example of what AT infrastructure can look like in rural parts of Nova Scotia, and there are many more examples of that.

What infrastructure looks like absolutely differs where you are in the province and whether you're in an urban or rural setting. The trails network Bonnie mentioned is extremely integral to what would be active transportation and links to active transportation networks in rural parts of Nova Scotia, but what you see in Port Hawkesbury is also where they're creating separated multi-use paths along their main street.

I think that that is a really important type of project going forward: looking at how do we link up our towns. What that project does is link the Nova Scotia Community College into the town, into the amenities that the town offers, and is providing an extremely valuable connection network in what would be considered a smaller town.

THE CHAIR: MLA Boudreau, please.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: As a former town councillor for the Town of Port Hawkesbury, I'm very well aware of what this can do in a community, and certainly Port Hawkesbury may be considered a rural town to some of you, but it is an urban centre. That is a very urban area for rural Cape Breton. It does do a tremendous job of connecting our education to our commercial district, but there's more to come with that as well, where it's connecting kind of our waterfront as well. There's more to come on that file.

You talk a little bit about the trail system and the Ceilidh Trail, which is in Inverness County that connects. It's incredible, if you ever get a chance to ride on the old rail bed, bike-wise. It would be impressive to actually connect Port Hawkesbury to that trail because then you're connecting communities together. That might not be in my riding, but my riding is on the other side of Port Hawkesbury attached, and Richmond.

We've had a little bit of success with some of this infrastructure that you're talking about. We've had a bit of sidewalk build, we've had a bit of shoulder expansion in areas,

but for a lot of the small communities, it's vitally important to have access to those active transportation networks. It's still not there so I'm hopeful with the goals we're looking at, that that is a priority.

What is the Province doing to build some awareness with municipalities and organizations and community groups to make sure they understand what's out there for options, and to make sure we're looking at different funding, or different alternatives of modes of active transportation for them? For those little communities of 300 people and 200 people that are very much important in my riding, that all need to be connected.

THE CHAIR: Who's going to take that question?

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I'll open it up to anybody. It seems like there's a joint effort, but whoever would be willing to take it.

THE CHAIR: I've got Mr. Sewell.

GREGORY SEWELL: I can speak from the Connect2 perspective. Over the years of the program, we've developed a list of contacts from people who have either applied through the program or made queries in to staff about the program. Each year, when we're ready to launch the program, we do a mass e-mail distribution to that list that we have developed over the years.

I know from previous years that there's been staff that have worked with municipalities and groups to talk about AT and develop some plans and strategies for applications as well. Speaking through this last round of applications, we had questions coming from people who were looking to apply to Connect2 about other funding programs as well.

We're able to pass on the information that we're aware of about, for example, the ICIP program, and also look for further opportunities for them to access funding.

THE CHAIR: I'm taking MLA Barkhouse - unless I see another hand that's never been up. We'll go from there to MLA Lachance and then Chender for our second round through.

MLA Barkhouse, please. Sorry, just before you start, MLA Kerr has got his hand up, so we're going to go with him after you.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I just want to thank everybody for coming today - the witnesses - to speak to us. We know that community groups like Bicycle Nova Scotia have a particular interest in the Blue Route incentive - and, I might add, so do people with disabilities.

Could you expand on that - how it originated, and the current status of it? What areas are identified for Blue Route work in this coming year? That would be to either department - whoever has an answer.

[2:00 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: I don't see a hand, so I'm going to put Deputy Minister Gatien on the hot seat.

KAREN GATIEN: Sure. The Blue Route is actually led by Public Works, so I'm going to - is it Diane who will answer?

THE CHAIR: Who have we got? Diane Saurette. Go ahead, please.

DIANE SAURETTE: For this upcoming year - I'm just looking at my notes here, because we've got a few different projects that are on the go. Through ICIP, there are three sections that we've been working on, and it's linked to our regular highway program. That's going to connect to almost 19.1 kilometres.

One piece is the Windsor town line to Lighthouse Road. We have another one: Ferry Road, which is on Trunk No. 6, to about 300 metres south of the Gulf Shore Road. That actually is the one where it's 6.9 kilometres, but it's going to open up 23 kilometres. That's one of those connectors where it's ready to go but it's just really getting that connection.

Another section that we are working on is Route 376. It's at the Pictou Roundabout. That's about 7.8 kilometres. I want to look back on MLA Chender's previous question around Pictou - I'm not sure if this is linked to that, so I'll have to do a follow-up.

There are some other sections. I think that approximately we are looking at about 30 kilometres this year, but it's what it could also potentially open up. I hope that answers the question.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: A part of it. I also wanted to know how it originated with Bicycle Nova Scotia and the current status of all of that as well.

DIANE SAURETTE: I can certainly answer that. It initially started with Bicycle Nova Scotia in early 2007, I think. Our department has been engaged with Bicycle Nova Scotia for quite a few years now, but it really originated with Bicycle Nova Scotia. Throughout that process - the engagement with the organization and other departments and the work that we do just on our highway system - it's an opportunity at the time that we're doing that work to be able to expand it and look at that active transportation lens.

The ultimate goal is to get to 3,000 kilometres and that could cost almost \$200 million, so all these federal programs that we have access to, we certainly try to link to those and leverage as much federal money as we can. We look to what we have on an annual basis in our envelopes - what we do on the rehabilitation of our highway system, we have a regular envelope. So what can we do when we're doing that work, which is prioritized based on a process and needs? At that time, what is the work that we can do to also look at this active transportation network and the Blue Route?

As we have mentioned a couple of times, it doesn't look like a lot has been done, but there is a lot of work that is done. As we start to do those connectors, you're going to see more of the Blue Route and the trail system open up. We are hoping that we're going to get to that within 10 years to have it hopefully complete, but it doesn't mean that it's not continuous, and we're always looking at other ways to add to our active transportation.

THE CHAIR: MLA Kerr, please.

CARMAN KERR: Thanks to everyone for joining today. My question is around the Bicycle Nova Scotia hubs projects. We're fortunate here in Annapolis. I represent a rural constituency and we have two projects on the go - I think Town of Middleton and Town of Annapolis Royal.

I was hoping anyone could elaborate on those projects provincially - maybe funding-wise and timeline-wise. The essence of that question being that I'm getting other towns and councils asking when they can be part of this project, and I'm sure other MLAs will get the same question.

THE CHAIR: Who is taking that? Ms. Gatién.

KAREN GATIEN: I think I'll ask Jonah to respond to that. It's among our six core AT networks.

JONAH BERNSTEIN: We can't speak to projects that haven't been approved yet, so I can't fully answer that question at this time. On the bicycle hubs work, I can get back to you in terms of some additional information as to how we can engage with further communities on that work and put them in contact with the right people at Bicycle Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: I'm going to go to MLA Lachance now. I think we've got 35 minutes left, so I want to really try to do short snappers so I can get around to everybody one more time.

LISA LACHANCE: In terms of the active transportation strategy, I know that you noted that there is a sub-theme around education and awareness. I wonder if you could

speaking in particular to what sort of elements you're looking at, what circles you would have for that.

Again, as I mentioned, I'm an avid urban cyclist in HRM and I would say that bicycle awareness across Nova Scotia has definitely increased, both here and in rural areas as well. I think drivers are more aware, for instance, which is great, but I think there's a long way to go, and particularly . . .

THE CHAIR: I really need a question, please.

LISA LACHANCE: I actually started with the question, but I was just going to note too that my father-in-law was killed as a pedestrian in a marked crosswalk last March. It's really bringing home the need to really think about active transportation safety. We want people out biking and walking. That's exactly what he and I think three others had been doing in HRM this past year and have died - they'd been doing all the right things, they'd been in the right places. I think there's a real cultural shift that's needed.

Again, just to repeat my question, under the active transportation strategy, under education and awareness, I'm wondering what the approach is. What sort of themes are you're looking at and how do you measure change in that area?

THE CHAIR: Bonnie Rankin.

BONNIE RANKIN: First, let me offer condolences for your loss. I'm very sorry to hear that. I can't really speak to the very specifics of the framework, as it hasn't been finalized, but certainly we're looking at continued work with our key stakeholders in the area.

We've got a variety of programs that we work on with stakeholders like Bicycle Nova Scotia and the Ecology Action Centre. Also, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is part of the Provincial Active Transportation Team, so we're looking at how we reach into schools - not just in terms of their infrastructure planning, but also in their messaging.

Also, I'd like to tie back to the new Traffic Safety Act passed in 2018 that we're working on the regulations for, and that we've been consulting quite broadly over the past year on. The whole philosophy of that Act - it's in the title of the Act alone. It's no longer the Motor Vehicle Act but the Traffic Safety Act, which is meant to really highlight the importance of all road users. It's not just about vehicular traffic, but it's also about pedestrian traffic and cyclists and other road users as well, trying to balance the priority between those different road users using the common assets.

I would like to think the whole philosophy and how we look at using our roads is shifting ever so slightly, even beginning with that legislation that's coming forward.

THE CHAIR: MLA Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I wanted to ask about the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act. One of the amendments we tried to put forward was around adopting the federal building codes, adopting them more quickly. I think that most experts agree that building codes are a pivotal piece of the puzzle in terms of the climate action we need to take.

My question, especially when we get to EVs - we know that our provincial legislation sets a target of 30 per cent of personal and light-duty vehicle sales to be zero emission by 2030, and the federal target is higher. Because so much of that charging happens in homes, including my own home, there are things we can do to the building code to ensure that all new homes - especially multi-unit residential buildings - are constructed with charging stations, or at least are EV-ready.

Is that a conversation that you're all having at these inter-department tables? Is there anything you can speak to in terms of trying to modify the building codes to get us to those targets?

THE CHAIR: Who's taking that question?

KAREN GATIEN: I can say a few things.

THE CHAIR: MLA - sorry, Deputy Minister Gatien.

KAREN GATIEN: Never MLA, thank you. (Laughter) I don't know if this is going to fully answer your question, but I believe when Jonah introduced the presentation he talked about our areas of focus at Natural Resources and Renewables, in terms of clean transportation and clean buildings.

Certainly, it's early days, but we're working with our colleagues at Environment and Climate Change, as well as Public Works, to think about what pieces we need to put in place, what we need to do to make sure that our buildings are as clean as possible, just as our transportation is as clean as possible, just as our energy production is as clean as possible.

It's a topic of conversation. We don't have a concrete "this is what we're going to do" at this point. Jonah, I don't know if you want to add anything as well?

THE CHAIR: I don't want to go too far with that, anyway. It's not really active transportation.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Mr. Chair, just to be clear, it is active transportation. We're talking about these funds, but also electric vehicles, electric bikes - all of this charging infrastructure is important in terms of achieving our climate change goals.

THE CHAIR: Not building codes, though. Anyway, I'd like to move along. MLA Ritcey, please.

DAVE RITCEY: Mr. Chair, this question is for maybe Ms. Saurette. You mentioned the federal funding program in your opening remarks - ICIP. How much money has been used for that program to date?

DIANE SAURETTE: The agreement that we have is almost \$840 million - we just had a little bit of a top-up for COVID resilience. That is the federal portion. To access that, there has to be a provincial contribution, and normally it's around one-third. Then there are also municipal or non-profit or other types of contribution.

When you look at that funding, it's about \$2 billion of spending in our province. To date - it's a 10-year program. We're in year five of the 10-year program. We've already committed over \$500 million. It's in the area of transit, so we've got a couple - I know there is an active transportation project within HRM, about \$25 million. That was approved out of that pot. Then there were a couple of big projects linked to electrification, so definitely moving in the right direction when it comes to reductions in our GHG emissions. As Jonah mentioned earlier, 30 per cent of our emissions are linked to transportation. That's one area where we really want to focus on.

There's obviously the Green Infrastructure Stream, which climate change mitigation is a portion of it. Almost \$400 million of the \$800 million, and \$172 million has been committed out of this for these types of projects so active transportation is definitely a big one.

We're looking at solar, there's district energy, there are all kinds of different types of projects. The Department of Natural Resources and Renewables certainly has a better understanding of it - the social infrastructure, which is all those projects that are important in our communities: rinks or a pool or a track or all these different types of infrastructure.

Then there is the Rural and Northern Communities Infrastructure Stream. There's a variety of stuff that can be approved out of that. Then, of course, it's the COVID-19 resilience stream.

That's the program. We've committed over \$500 million. We are active working on the other \$300 million. The feds would like to get it committed, not spent, because it is a 10-year program. We are pushing actively to get top-ups to our green infrastructure because climate change mitigation is important. It's this government's mandate so the work that we do on these programs definitely aligns with it. We see more funding need in that

green infrastructure, as well as in our rural and northern infrastructure because that's funding for our rural communities - green infrastructure, water wastewater, all kinds of different things can be funded out of that as well.

It's a big program. It's only one of many that we work with. We also have a lot of different projects that are funded out of competitive merit-based programs. This is allocation based, so the province can determine the priorities. They've identified it through the climate change mitigation, water wastewater, and some other programs that have been identified out of this ICIP program.

THE CHAIR: MLA Smith.

KENT SMITH: This question is for Deputy Minister Gatien. Going back to Bill No. 57, the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act that passed with unanimous approval in the Legislature in the Fall, can you quickly just help me understand the important role that active transportation plays in our fight against climate change?

KAREN GATIEN: Yes, certainly. As you've already heard, our number two GHG emitter in the province is transportation. It's really important to our climate that we get those numbers down and that we do everything possible to reduce what is getting emitted, such as the EVs that we talked about earlier. Really, it's also about combining accessible ways for people in Nova Scotia to be able to be a part of that reduction. Active transportation has real health benefits, whether it's mental health or physical health. It's gets people out, gets communities walking, roller skating, biking.

In terms of a rural community, the community may not see themselves as rural, but I think in the urban centre, East Preston is considered more rural certainly than downtown Halifax or Dartmouth. Just the paving of a safe walkway in that community to allow people to take their children to a local daycare or school has real benefits. It reduces the GHG emissions. They don't have to get in that car to take their child down the road to the daycare, as I said. It gets the family out and increases their health and wellness as well.

THE CHAIR: MLA Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: Maybe I'll direct my question to Ms. Rankin or somebody with the Department of Public Works. In Richmond, we have a number of different organizations that advocate for different purposes. We have a group that works on accessibility, we have a group that talks about active transportation, but we also have a group that's heavily involved with our seniors.

Maybe this isn't necessarily restricted to rural areas, but many seniors - particularly in more isolated communities - have a hard time finding active transportation alternatives to driving. What programs are available or being worked on to improve access to active transportation for seniors?

JONAH BERNSTEIN: I reference that as we're moving forward with our core AT networks, but it also expands across and beyond that into the connections between communities. We are really looking to advance those networks that are for eight- to 80-year-olds.

I've got young kids so I'm really passionate about making sure it's also safe for young kids, and I want to get my kids to school by walking and biking. Equally important to that is ensuring it's also accessible for older Nova Scotians. That's what we mean by that AAA infrastructure. It's really about designing infrastructure that is safe and feels safe to all road users, and that includes seniors.

I mentioned where cars are going fast. It's not about just providing paint, but separation. Ensuring that the grades are safe so that it's not just gravel - which can be quite difficult to walk on - but providing the right type of surface where necessary. Also, it's about proper maintenance of that as well in Wintertime - road clearing, et cetera - to make sure that it's safe and free from ice and that people can get through it and not have to jump over barriers and things like that.

Really, what we're trying to advance is that concept of safe for everybody.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse, please.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: To whichever department, what does a core active transportation network that is accessible for all ages and abilities look like to you guys? When you sit at the table, what does that look like?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Gatien.

KAREN GATIEN: Jonah, do you want to maybe walk MLA Barkhouse through what it looks like in a concrete example?

JONAH BERNSTEIN: Absolutely. I'll provide two high-level examples of what we mean by that, but it will be specific to each community that's designing this. It's really important to note that these are really community-led initiatives and it really is dependent on what the community needs and also the structure of the town that it's going into.

When we think about what a core network means, we refer to two visual concepts. One would be what I would call a spine. That would be you have a lot of towns where there's a main road that goes through. It's really important to note that towns have centres, and they're really important economic centres. Some towns are designed around a spine that has a key road that goes through that town, and so providing active transportation sector along a spine.

It can also look a little bit more like a grid. When I visualize that, I picture more of a subway map. It's not all roads, but there are some connections within that. You would see roads that are intersecting. As I mentioned in the past, it's not meant to be everything and it's not meant to be everything at once, but the core pieces that are connected so that you can get from A to B without - the connections are made within that town.

That's how I describe the two visual representations of what we mean by core networks. Again, it would be specific to each town that it's being designed for.

THE CHAIR: After me rushing everybody along, I don't see any hands. Gracious.

MLA Chender, please.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I guess back to what the coordination looks like between departments, one of the things I encountered a lot as education critic - which I'm not anymore - is the issue around kids getting to school. Often the catchments and the busing allocations are based on the theoretical distance a child could walk. This is in HRCE that I have the most experience, but in many particularly rural parts of HRCE - and not just rural - kids actually can't physically walk those distances because it's either on the shoulder of a highway or something else.

Is there some kind of liaising happening with folks in education and where other large infrastructure projects are being built by government to ensure that the active transportation plans and programs that are being leveraged that we're talking about today dovetails with those projects? We've built schools on highways in the middle of two communities for a long time in Nova Scotia. I'm hoping we're getting away from that, but I wonder if you could speak to schools as an example of how we're dealing with large infrastructure projects and the need for active transit.

THE CHAIR: Who's got that?

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Probably Public Works, but I'd leave it up to the witnesses.

THE CHAIR: I'm gonna put Ms. Rankin on the spot, then.

BONNIE RANKIN: Thank you. I can address it at a very high level. Obviously, from your time as education critic, you'll know that school siting is a very complicated process with a lot of inputs into that process. As part of the strategy, I know that's one of the areas that we are looking at to try to ensure that active transportation considerations are made as part of that school siting process.

Again, I'll say the framework is still a work in progress. It's not formalized, but we certainly recognize that as a concern and an issue, and certainly an opportunity to make

schools a lot more accessible in their communities. It is definitely a flagged issue that's being actively discussed between the departments.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Hello. Just a comment to MLA Chender: She should look up the Oglemobile.

My question is: What incentives are there for municipalities to be involved in active transportation projects?

DIANE SAURETTE: I can answer that. There are a few things that we're doing here. Just as we develop our five-year plan - and it's a rolling plan - this year will come off, and then we'll add another year at the end, so it's always a five-year iterative rolling plan. I don't know if I said that word right.

There's engagement with our communities when we're doing that plan. If there's ability for us to be able to add more paved shoulders in the work that we're doing, that's what we try to do. We also try to align that with what the municipalities' capital programs are, so that we're not out there and then they're planning to do something three years later. We're trying to really focus on more consultation and communication so we can align our work together, and we've seen some of that through some of the active transportation projects that have been approved through ICIP.

The ICIP program itself allows a community to get almost 75 per cent funding. So it's 40 per cent from the federal government and then the Province will contribute a third of that - so 73 per cent funding to be able to give to communities so that we can look at some of these active transportation projects in those communities.

When I think of an incentive - maybe Greg can go in a little bit more around the Connect2 project and the funding that we have in the department. That funding program actually was in another department and we brought it into Public Works because it aligned so well. It's a funding program. It's not a federal funding program, but it's a provincial funding program. It's also an opportunity to look at how we could use that money to maybe leverage federal money.

We obviously have insight into the ICIP program, but there are a lot of other programs out there that we are aware of. We have the relationship with Infrastructure Canada and Transport Canada and all these other federal departments, and bringing that work into Public Works. Connect2 came from Natural Resources and Renewables, but some of these other programs came from Communities, Culture and Heritage. It just gives us that alignment so that we can link that work and have access now to communities.

[2:30 p.m.]

Greg is working with communities on a regular basis and organizations, but we're now aware of that. We can have strategic conversations around the work that they're doing, the work that we're doing, potentially connecting, linking to a federal program that maybe they might not be aware of.

This is new. It's a new structure in this department, but it aligns with the importance of the role and the mandate that we're trying to get to around the active transportation strategy and the mandate of government.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: You've certainly all spoken about how interconnected the strategy is, and these commitments are. I think that's absolutely an important way of seeing the world, so we can actually solve complicated problems.

One of the other areas I'm curious about is our commitment in terms of increasing protected areas in the province. Again, coming out of our environment and climate change commitments, but obviously really linked to thinking about things like rural development, jobs, and what else can be the impact. Wondering how that commitment is being considered in the active transportation decisions that are being made.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Gatién.

KAREN GATIEN: I'll start and if Jonah wants to add anything, he can. I'll just say one of the advantages of the department's current configuration is that what was our former Energy and Mines Department that led our pieces of active transportation, and then the protected areas work that was done in the former Lands and Forestry Department, we're now one department.

In terms of the protection, we work hand in glove with our colleagues in Environment and Climate Change as well. Certainly, as we did the work previously, we were working together and should have been, but now it's even easier for us to work in a more streamlined way because we're under one tent, so to speak.

Any time we would consider a development in terms of active transportation or any kind of development, whether it's resource development, we have to consider the Crown lands, the protected areas, what will the impact of any of that be on any kind of development.

THE CHAIR: MLA Kerr, please.

CARMAN KERR: Last Fall session, the Joint Regional Transportation Agency Act, I believe it was called, was brought forward, and the intent was a review of all modes of transportation. I'm wondering if there's an update on the stage of that review and how active transport is being included in that review.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Rankin.

BONNIE RANKIN: Yes, the Joint Regional Transportation Agency legislation was passed in the Fall. I can say at this point we're still in the early phases of getting the organization stood up. We've got an interim board in place. We've actually requested stakeholders to provide nominees for the minister's advisory board as well, and we're hoping that that board will have their first meeting here in a few weeks.

Certainly, the mandate of the new agency will be to review all modes of transportation within the region to coordinate planning amongst the various different transportation stakeholders, to make sure we're doing it as efficiently as possible given some of the population goals and the current growth. Halifax has grown at a much faster pace than even StatsCan predicted, which is leading to some of the issues that we're seeing.

We're still at the early stages of getting that agency stood up, but we're hopeful that we'll begin to populate positions and have a leader in that chair soon and start to have some progress to report, hopefully by the end of the year.

THE CHAIR: We have about ten minutes left if somebody has additional questions. MLA LeBlanc, please.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I have a question around community transit organizations. I know it's not bicycles, but for rural communities, it is important for seniors to get around. In Clare here, we have the Transport de Clare, which was one of the first community transit organizations in the province, which we're very proud of.

I guess my question is around supports coming out of the pandemic. We know that with inflation going up and ridership going down, it's putting a lot of pressure on these organizations. I wonder if somebody would want to talk about how these organizations could be supported to make sure they come out of the pandemic, especially for seniors.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Sewell.

GREGORY SEWELL: The Department of Public Works has a variety of community transportation programs that support the door-to-door services like Transport de Clare. We have an operating grant program for each of the organizations. They get a grant from us. We provide grants toward purchase of vehicles as well. We have constant dialogue with community transportation providers. I attend any meetings that the

community transportation providers have. I listen to their concerns and will bring any of those concerns back to the department for further dialogue.

It was last fiscal year that we did reach out to all of the community transportation providers to ensure that they were sustainable during COVID due to the loss of ridership. We did provide them an opportunity to request some additional funding. Out of the 18 providers that were operating last year, only two of them asked for any additional assistance. They found that between decreased costs of running their vehicles, less staff being required to transport clients around, and some funding from the federal government, they were in the same or better financial position than they were in the previous year.

I have yet to hear concerns from them that they are experiencing financial losses due to COVID. Their ridership is fluctuating with the restrictions that are in place, but we are gradually seeing ridership start to creep back up.

THE CHAIR: I see Ms. Saurette has her hand up.

DIANE SAURETTE: Yes. I just wanted to add to Greg's response. Under ICIP, under the transit stream, it's been a challenge. That transit is only for transit authorities, and we know in our province there's a lot of community transit. That funding for Kings Transit, Yarmouth, CBRM, HRM - HRM gets almost 97 per cent of the pot, and it's linked to transit authorities that are members of CUTA. It's been an ongoing debate and discussion with Infrastructure Canada.

We need to fund our community transportation, and some of these other organizations, they have announced a new permanent transit funding stream. We are having regular conversations with them now to understand the stream. There's what they are calling a new rural transit fund. It's providing \$250 million over five years. Now that's a challenge because that's for all of Canada, and \$250 million will go pretty quickly, but for small organizations, if we can provide them with any level of funding, we are going to try to do that.

This rural transit fund is expected to be flexible and fund creative projects, to really address the needs in those rural and small communities. Examples of projects would be on-demand services, publicly-owned electric vehicle rideshares, volunteer community carpooling. They're looking for innovations. These are topics of conversations that we are having with Infrastructure Canada to really try to understand what types of funding we can access, given where we are with community transit in Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: I'm going to go to MLA Ritcey. It will be the last question we get - about four minutes left.

DAVE RITCEY: This is to the Department of Public Works. Can you give us some further details on the sustainable transportation fund, and how many of our community partners received it?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Saurette.

DIANE SAURETTE: MLA Ritcey, you said the sustainable transportation fund - I apologize, but I'm not aware of that fund. Can you provide a little bit more detail around it?

DAVE RITCEY: I'll look into it further.

THE CHAIR: I think that'll do us. We're pretty much on time. I wonder if there's a wrap-up from our invited guests. Deputy Minister Gatien.

KAREN GATIEN: I just want to thank you for your interest in the topic, first of all. We know that there is a lot of work still to do, but we're very proud of our work jointly - not just with this department, but also with our colleagues at other departments. Certainly, if there are any follow up questions, we'd be happy to answer them, particularly that last one. If there are others, feel free to send them along and we'll endeavour to get you the response. Thank you very much for your time.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for being with us here today, everyone. We'll move on to committee business if we could, please.

With respect to committee business, we had a question. The witnesses for the next meeting - I believe we've heard back from Nova Scotia Power, and maybe Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration that they recommended other folks. Does anybody have any thoughts on that? I'm looking for direction here.

THE CHAIR: MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: Is the next stage just to make a motion for that change?

THE CHAIR: I think that's correct. I'm going to look to the clerk to help us with that. Ms. Hoddinott.

HEATHER HODDINOTT: Yes, somebody needs to make a motion because the witnesses were previously named at our agenda sitting. It's just a motion to amend the witness list if everybody's in agreement to change the department and to change the witness for Nova Scotia Power.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We'll go to that vote. I'm asking for a motion and then the vote. The motion is - I'm going to suggest it came from MLA Kerr that we accept the changes in the witnesses as recommended by the initial list. Is that okay?

[2:45 p.m.]

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

I guess next on my agenda here for committee business is our next meeting, whether we're virtual or in person. MLA Smith, please.

KENT SMITH: I'd like to offer that in order to do our part to help stop the spread that we carry on virtually until otherwise directed.

THE CHAIR: MLA Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I believe on the agenda it said that we would have a poll to hold the meeting virtually per January. Maybe this was the agenda from last time, but it said poll to hold the meeting virtually.

I am fine to vote on holding the next meeting virtually. There is no one who directs this committee other than the committee, so I would suggest that the language of that motion doesn't actually make sense. We're happy to meet next time virtually to do our part for Public Health as Mr. Smith says, but I would just make a friendly amendment to ask that we just vote on holding the next meeting virtually, and we can continue to do that going forward.

THE CHAIR: MLA Smith.

KENT SMITH: We're certainly okay with that. I do contest that it doesn't make sense. We're following the recommendations of Public Health and what the Public Service does. It would certainly be something that should be considered by this committee, but we're open to that amendment from MLA Chender.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Hoddinott, do you have the motion there? Do you want us to word it different, or how do you want us to proceed with that?

HEATHER HODDINOTT: I think as long as everybody understands and the motion has been voted on, then I think we're okay. Who's moving the motion?

THE CHAIR: I think it was moved by MLA Smith, a friendly amendment by MLA Chender, and the friendly amendment I believe was to - I need help on this. I think it was to remove the reference to Public Health, correct?

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Just to clarify, my suggestion would just be to say that the next meeting of the Natural Resources and Economic Development Committee take place virtually. There had been a reference to “until otherwise directed,” and I absolutely agree we should watch Public Health and follow the rules of the Public Service, but just that we vote on meeting next time virtually, to keep it simple.

THE CHAIR: I have MLA Kerr. Please go ahead.

CARMAN KERR: Just a point of clarification: Excuse me, everyone, but there was a request for Mark Sidebottom, COO of Nova Scotia Power, to be added as a witness, I believe. I think that was on request of Nova Scotia Power. Have we already covered that by making that previous motion?

THE CHAIR: I think so, MLA Kerr. Maybe it was the way I worded it, but I think basically I said we would accept the changes to witnesses as directed by the original - Sidebottom is on it, anyway. We were just following that recommendation.

On the original motion here, MLA Smith, are you okay to go ahead with that? I’m calling for a vote.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

That next meeting will be virtually on Tuesday, February 22nd, and the tentative topic will be about protecting employment in the transition from coal.

Unless we have any further business, I’ll call for adjournment. Thank you all very much.

[The committee adjourned at 2:50 p.m.]