

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, March 30, 2022

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER

Gravel Road Program and Highway Improvement Plans

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Public Accounts Committee

Hon. Kelly Regan (Chair)
Nolan Young (Vice-Chair)
Dave Ritcey
John A. MacDonald
Melissa Sheehy-Richard
Trevor Boudreau
Hon. Brendan Maguire
Claudia Chender
Susan Leblanc

[Hon. Kelly Regan was replaced by Braedon Clark.]
[Hon. Brendan Maguire was replaced by Ronnie LeBlanc.]

In Attendance:

Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Public Works

Peter Hackett,
Deputy Minister

Mark Peachey,
Acting Chief Engineer

Don Maillet,
Executive Director - Highway Engineering and Constructions

Brent Pero,
Executive Director of Finance



HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 30, 2022

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Hon. Kelly Regan

VICE CHAIR

Nolan Young

THE CHAIR: Order. I call the meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. I'm Nolan Young, MLA for Shelburne County and Vice Chair of this committee, and I'm filling in for MLA Regan.

Just a reminder to everyone to place their phones on silent or vibrate and keep your mask on except when you're speaking. Now, I'll ask the committee members to introduce themselves, beginning with Ms. Chender.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I note that we have officials from Legislative Counsel Office and the Legislative Committees Office in attendance as well.

On today's agenda, we have with us officials from the Department of Public Works regarding the gravel road program and highway improvement plans. I will ask the witnesses to introduce themselves.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I would invite the witnesses to begin their opening remarks, if any.

PETER HACKETT: It is a pleasure to be here with you today to discuss the Department of Public Works' Gravel Road Program and Five-Year Highway Improvement Plan.

Nova Scotia has more than 8,400 kilometres of gravel road. They make up more than 35 per cent of the provincial road network. Many Nova Scotians travel those each and every day in and out of their communities.

As you know, last Fall, Public Works Minister Kim Masland announced that the provincial government was doubling our funding for the Gravel Road Capital Program, increasing it from \$20 million per year to \$40 million. The minister also announced that the related Rural Impact Mitigation Program was increasing from \$11 million to \$22 million annually.

This investment of these new funds, which is already being acted on, will result in improvements to more gravel roads sooner. They will provide new money for rehabilitating gravel roads, brush cutting, pavement patching, ditching, shoulder gravelling, guard rails, and shoreline protection.

In January, Minister Masland announced the 2022-23 edition of our Five-Year Highway Improvement Plan. It was an investment of nearly \$500 million in capital spending on our highways, bridges, and roads.

Last week's capital budget announcement had an additional \$30 million in new funding for bridge replacement and rehabilitation, doubling the funding earmarked for bridges, and bringing that total to nearly \$60 million in capital bridge improvements. That additional \$30 million for the Public Works capital plan, once approved, will make our total capital budget one of the largest in the province's history.

The Five-Year Highway Improvement Plan maps out government's approach, year by year, to repair and maintain the province's 23,000 kilometres of roads, highways, and 4,100 bridges. This year's plan includes more than 150 major construction and improvement projects for the coming year that will make Nova Scotia's roads, highways, and bridges safer and better.

Ten major construction projects are planned for the 2022-23 season with the focus on ongoing twinning of Highway Nos. 101, 103, 104, and 107, as well as a new Aerotech Connector on Highway No. 102, the Bridgewater interchange on Highway No. 103, and continued work to convert the Port Hastings rotary to a roundabout.

The 2022-23 plan includes the construction of more than a dozen new bridges and the replacement of more than 18 others. The department is working to determine how the

additional \$30 million in bridge work will be utilized going forward. The new plan also honours road commitments made by the previous government in the Five-Year Capital Plan.

As recent storms have reminded us, our infrastructure is facing challenges associated with climate change. We have a strong capital plan and we have already been steadily upgrading and improving our infrastructure across the province. All new projects are designed and constructed with climate change readiness in mind. We are also working to ensure we have spare culverts and spare pre-built temporary bridges on hand to react to severe storms and storm surges when they impact our existing infrastructure.

Transportation is critical to ensure safe and connected communities. That's why we have allocated one of the largest investments in the history of Nova Scotia's provincial highways. Thank you and I'd be happy to answer your questions.

THE CHAIR: Before we begin with the question portion of this meeting, we'll be doing 20 minutes for each Party. The routine is after the 20 minutes, the unfortunate part is that if you're still speaking, I will have to cut you off and move to the next set of questions.

With that said, the current time is 9:06:15. We'll start with the Liberal questions. Mr. LeBlanc.

RONNIE LEBLANC: As a rural MLA, I'd say almost 50 per cent of my phone calls have to do with roads and many of those calls have to do with gravel roads. Seeing how the budget has been doubled, I guess my question is: How many roads do you anticipate will be added to the list? Do you have an idea in kilometres how many will be added - the number of roads?

PETER HACKETT: I will defer to Mark Peachey.

MARK PEACHEY: With the new funding that's been added to our capital program this year, it's anticipated that we will be able to do an additional 300 kilometres worth of gravel roads for this upcoming year.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I have a question around procedure. Oftentimes residents have issues with gravel roads, especially during this time of year. They're encouraged to call the operational call centre. There's a lot of frustration with the public around that process because oftentimes they call, they provide the information, but rarely or never hear back. Those calls often wind up being calls that I receive.

I don't know if you could go through the entire process from the original call to how the Department of Public Works decides when somebody's dispatched or if a road is added to the gravel road project because of the condition it's in.

MARK PEACHEY: The process would be that the general public would make the call to our operational contact centre, as you noted. A ticket would be derived in that location and sent out to the local supervisor, as well as the local area manager, and it is tracked. The manager will have the supervisor and their crew go out, identify what issue has been addressed and brought forward, and put it in the queue for remedying that issue.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I understand, I guess, to that point but once it's in the queue, I'm not sure how do residents or the person making the call get an idea when that will be remedied. That's where I find, as an MLA, most of the calls come in. It puts me in a position to always be the one calling the local public works office to try to get that situation remedied.

I'm trying to understand how there'd be a better way to go about getting back to those constituents or residents through public works rather than passing through the MLA all the time. I don't mind doing it, but it's a very difficult process, since we don't really have any decision-making power when it comes to dispatching crews to fix potholes or even take a look at these roads.

MARK PEACHEY: That's something that I can take away with me and have a chat with our executive director of maintenance and operations and meet with our local managers so that we can tighten up the process in how we follow up with the issues that are brought forward through the contact centre, so that they don't have to go to your office and we can deal with those internally.

RONNIE LEBLANC: Another question is around K-class roads, if I could. As there's more construction - people are building homes and camps - and traffic patterns are changing, I'm starting to get questions around the idea of K-class roads, where at one point they were provincial non-maintained roads, but with increased traffic, the question around what - is there a process to reclassify a road, and could you expand on that?

PETER HACKETT: There is a process to upgrade K-class roads and we have a policy on that. If it's a citizen or group that wants to upgrade the road, it'd normally be upgraded to the equivalent road adjacent to it or the road that comes into it. Then if it's upgraded to a certain class, we would get it reclassified, and take it into our system.

If anybody's interested in doing that, they would first check with their local area office, and it kind of makes its way up through the system for approvals. That's the process.

RONNIE LEBLANC: Maybe you could expand on how, under the gravel road program, the Department of Public Works chooses the roads? Obviously, in rural Nova Scotia, there are a lot of gravel roads and most everybody would like their road to be on that program.

The question is, how do you choose the roads, and how does the MLA or the community play a role in deciding which roads really need work and should be the ones that are on the list versus those that could wait awhile? There must be a clear process to follow.

PETER HACKETT: The capital plan for roads - gravel roads, paved roads, bridges - is sort of an ongoing animal. It's always fluid. We publish the plan that we're going to do in the upcoming year, but there's a long list of priorities that are on our radar somewhere, and we're pulling those things forward all the time.

Initially what happens at the local level is, the area manager is given the task of identifying roads in their areas that are in bad shape, that have to be looked at either for maintenance or from a capital point of view. Capital means they need to have a fair amount of investment in them. What they'll end up doing is having a look at each road: how much maintenance money are they putting into them, how many complaints are they getting on them, and is the road kind of at the point where you really can't pass in the springtime? That sort of thing - if there are some serious issues with it.

Then they'll make their list up of what they think should be the priorities, based on their area, and then hopefully throughout the year, the local MLAs will reach out and talk to the area managers about what's on their gravel road list, or even their paving list or their bridge list. It's not that they're looking for a lot of influence from the MLAs, but at least the MLAs know what that list looks like. A lot of the time in the process, you'll find that what roads the area manager gets complaints on are also going to be the same roads that you get complaints on. Somewhere along the way there's going to be some junction in there, right?

It's kind of a process that you'll get complaints and they'll get complaints and there's maintenance and then they'll make up this list. Then from that list, they'll determine which ones will go into the capital program process, which is in head office, for that year. They'll look at all the roads, they'll look at the finances behind them - which ones they can afford, which ones they can't afford, which ones to put ahead in priority.

Then somewhere throughout the season, we'll ask the MLAs to come in and visit with us before we put the capital program together - that would be Mr. Peachey and Mr. Maillet. Then you'll have a look at how we prioritize those roads that get on that list.

There is a fairly good process in place, and it's both for gravel roads and paved roads as well, that go on the capital plan.

RONNIE LEBLANC: The challenge I face, and I'm sure other rural MLAs face, is the communication or the challenges around working with the local Public Works area supervisor. I understand when we have a lot of roads, there are a lot of calls. It's a bit complicated for me to call there every day, trying to say: this person called about this road.

What I'm hearing from the public is that the process is quite closed to the public in a way, other than the call centre. They don't feel they have the ability to reach out to Public Works on the local level and put their case forward. What happens as an MLA, I get a lot of pictures of potholes, I get a lot of calls, and some are very serious. The frustration is they don't have the ability to meet with somebody within the department and have those discussions. Do you have any suggestions around how to deal with that aspect?

[9:15 a.m.]

PETER HACKETT: The first thing would be to keep that communication very good between yourself and the local area manager, and the operations supervisor, maintenance supervisor. Try to build those relationships as best you can, because they are the ones who are looking after the programs and the process. When you have issues that come up, they're the ones you're going to have to reach out to and get those things addressed. The better that relationship, obviously the better some response to some of these things.

Also build the relationship between yourself and the district director, because the district directors also have a different, higher level on some of these things. If they're not being addressed the way you want them to be addressed, I would go to the district director and say, I'd like some of these things addressed a little differently. How can we do a little bit better for my area, for the district?

Sometimes the area managers are very restricted in the financing they have and the budgets they have, and they feel: I don't know if I can actually do some of this work because of budget constraints. District directors may have a bit more funding, and when you get into head office, there may some other funding, depending on the issue. I'd build that relationship first.

I'd also make it a point, too, that if you're calling and you're getting a hold of the area manager and the supervisors, ask them to come out and see these roads. Make a list of these roads that you have, and when you get in to see the area managers, and eventually you'll get in to see the chief engineer and the executive director, bring those to their attention.

The pothole issue, I think we're probably all hitting that right now - pardon the pun - because it's that time of year for all people who drive and definitely for us, because we're certainly having to deal with all that. It's part of our job, but we can look after it. Certainly, address potholes right away with the operations supervisor and bring it to their attention. If it's the general public, they should be calling there, and if they're not getting the response, they can go on to the area manager and district director.

There's a whole process, obviously, for claims, too, that they have to follow, and they should be aware of how that works. There are a few things on the website which can

be a little convoluted, but there is a process to go through that as well. On the major projects like the big construction projects, you start putting your list together, start getting the complaints together, and bring those to the area manager. If you get to meet with us in the Summer or in the Fall, we can certainly get a lot of those things looked at or addressed. If they can't be addressed this year, in 2022-23 or 2023-24, we get it on the list, so you know that your constituents and the public know something is coming.

That would be my best advice, to build those relationships. But we do have a chain of command, and if you don't get the satisfaction you're looking for at the field level, you can start to elevate it to the directors, and then obviously, the executive directors. We don't want to hear from all you guys every day either, so we'll make a plan to make it work, if that's the case.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I just want to say, I don't want to give the impression that Public Works isn't responsive. They've been very good answering calls and getting back to me. I'd say maybe of all the departments, they're the best one to be able to make those contacts. The point I'm trying to make, as rural residents, the frustration that they're feeling around the sense that they don't have the ability to make those complaints and be heard. Those are the questions I'm bringing here today.

Like I say, you've been very responsive overall - it's just the process with the call centre. They just feel very frustrated with that. If the road is in a condition that needs work, they really want to know if it's being considered, if it's going to be on the list, if any work is going to be done and when. It affects their daily lives.

Again, thank you for answering all those questions. I really appreciated it.

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: Unlike my colleague for Clare, I don't have any gravel roads and very few provincial roads, so perhaps that is a blessing. I still actually have many roads that are full and lots of concerns about transportation.

I did want to ask kind of a big picture question to the deputy. Traditionally, the department has been roads and bridges and all that work, which is really important. I think - and maybe you agree or maybe you don't - there's an opportunity to expand beyond that. I think we're seeing that with the creation of the Joint Regional Transportation Agency moving into transit and ferries and all these different modes of transportation that are really important in the city and across the province, as well.

Maybe, deputy, if you could just comment on whether you think the department is broadening its scope and should be, if it's not, and working closer with other partners to make sure that transportation is a bit more holistic.

PETER HACKETT: Yes, that's a good point. Historically, the provincial government looked after almost all the roads in the province at one point. Then the municipalities had their own collection, sort of. We are kind of a city organization and then we're also a rural organization.

Then in 1995-96, when amalgamation came into play, there was a lot of exchange of roads and a lot of exchange of planning and a lot of exchange of ideas. The Province gave a lot of their infrastructure - at least in HRM - to HRM as part of that process. The two bridges are still under the province and the 100-Series highways and some minor collector roads here and there still belong within HRM.

There was a plan at one point to expand the movement of traffic in the city - this was back before amalgamation. Those plans have kind of been shelved because the province is no longer in that game.

Then we took ourselves to doing upgrades. We would twin highways, we would maintain roads and bridges but our planning - particularly in the city - has been relatively small over the last number of years that I can remember. We're doing the work across Burnside and we're looking at twinning Highway No. 103, but other than that, there hasn't been a whole lot of planning with regard to movement of people, other than roads.

The decision to go to a Joint Regional Transportation Agency was a good decision, I think, because it's going to look at all forms of transportation. As you mentioned, ferries and transit, but we'll look at rail. We'll look at rail, biking, and anything else that can move people. When you get into a city of the growth that HRM is going through, there comes a time - and we're sort of hitting that time - that we do have to start looking at everything.

I don't think it's really the intent at this time for the Joint Regional Transportation Agency to be taking over anything. I think the intent at this point is to work with our partners which would be HRM, the port, the airport, the Halifax Dartmouth Bridge Commission, Halifax Transit, and to look at what's the city looking like in growth and what are the best avenues going forward for transportation and the movement of people in the city. That could be roads, but it could also be passenger vehicles, buses, ferries, trains, and maybe mass transits in the future.

I'm not sure at this point if it's really in our mandate to be taking over any more of that type of infrastructure or those type of movements. Really, the process to start looking at that and planning it is a pretty good idea. You only have so much road system in the city. With the growth of traffic, and not just the population growth within the city - you've got people coming into the city from all parts of Atlantic Canada - that adds to the amount of traffic you have on the roads.

If you want to get people to move well, I think it's a good idea to look at all the forms of transportation that are out there and try to integrate that at some point. That's

really what the Joint Regional Transportation Agency will start off looking at, anyway, and then we'll see what the future looks like going forward.

It's an exciting process. If you've been around this game for a long time - I'm kind of creeping into 30 years here and I probably look it now, but I didn't about seven months ago - it's exciting to start looking at that type of thing. I don't really have a vested interest in just roads - it's all types of transportation. When you see the process and the progress that you can do by making your city better, making the province better, that's certainly one way of doing it.

The traffic is certainly going upward on vehicle traffic, and truck traffic has increased substantially in the last two years because of COVID-19, and that has a lot to do with people buying things online. There are a few big companies out there you're probably familiar with that have increased our truck traffic probably at least about 4 per cent on some of our major highways. It's not just local traffic that's doing this, it's also more traffic and more goods and services coming into the city. It's exciting for us.

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark, you have 12 seconds.

BRAEDON CLARK: I just wanted to note that the government is aging the deputy very quickly, apparently, so I'll just make that for the record. Thank you. (Laughter.)

THE CHAIR: Order. The questions for the Liberal party has ended. I'll move on to MLA Leblanc with the NDP, starting at 9:26:40.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you very much, and thanks for being here, everyone. Just before I begin, I want to shoutout those workers on the ground at those call centres, who are extremely busy right now receiving all of those calls. I was mentioning to you at the International Women's Day breakfast that one of the panelists was a worker in one of the call centres, and I was like, that's got to be the hardest job in the province this time of year. Anyhow, thanks to all those workers and the folks who are maintaining the roads.

Just to recap - and we've canvassed this a little bit, but just so that it's clear and so the public understands - the government has said that the department staff will evaluate and prioritize the gravel roads that need the most work, taking into factors like road conditions and traffic volume. I'm just wondering if you can provide clear details about how that prioritization will happen or is happening. Also, will that priority list be made public?

PETER HACKETT: I can start the question and the answer. You're asking that the priority list be public - you mean the entire list that we have, whatever list we have, whatever each area manager has, per se?

SUSAN LEBLANC: Yes, if you make a list of this is what we're going to do today and this is what we're going to do next month. Is that list public or can it be made public?

PETER HACKETT: Well, on the gravel road list, that is public in the capital plan. That was published and it was released in January. I'm not sure of the amount of roads on that, but there's quite a few. That would be our public list, and that would be made public.

The other lists that we would have are just an accumulation of priorities that our area managers would be putting together. They wouldn't be made public yet, just because of the fact that they wouldn't be prioritized yet. They would try to prioritize them in the district, but then that would be prioritized on a number of different things, whether it's, like I said, vehicle traffic, washouts - that sort of thing. Then you've got to look at the financing behind it, actually, and then you start to prioritize when it comes into head office.

Those lists that are in the field that they put together wouldn't be public, but people could certainly ask where their road is, and then they could give them an answer and say, it's looking like it's going to happen in 2023/2024 or 2024/2025, provided they get approval from the capital program.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Got it. And when you're making those decisions - you just gave a couple of examples of what you look at - like, if there's a road that has serious potholes and washouts that is impassible, I assume that takes a higher priority than a road that has a bunch of little potholes that can be graded or whatever and maintained that way. That makes sense to me, intuitively, but it might not be the way it works.

What else goes into it? If it's going to cost a lot more for that impassible road, does that boot it down, or do you spend the money you need on the roads that need the most work, and then you go from there?

PETER HACKETT: I think I can answer this one - if I can't, then I'm going to put it over to my colleagues here. Let's say the road is washed out or it has a series of wash boarding that is very hard to pass in the springtime. First thing you'd probably look at is the traffic on the road. If there's not much traffic on the road compared to a road that's not quite as bad but you get a lot of traffic, you may want to consider the one with the traffic on it more than the one without the traffic, and is there an alternate route - and depending on the cost.

If it's a major throughfare - a lot of people live on rural roads, but it's also a lot of things like agriculture and forestry and rural commercial work. If they need that road, then it would become a priority and we would start to look at the money to put that road back together fairly quickly. It's based on traffic volume, condition of the road, passable throughout the year, the cost of actually doing the work. If you talk about a culvert, sometimes culverts are deep and sometimes they're very expensive to do, so you have to find the capital money to do that as well.

[9:30 a.m.]

The prioritizing first would be on basically the traffic volume on the road - how many people are using the road and if there is any alternative. If there's not, then we'd start looking at upgrading that. If you had two roads of similar shape, that's what you'd basically balance your decisions on. Depending on what's coming through there too. You may not have a lot of traffic, but maybe you have a lot of commercial traffic. Maybe there's a forest industry issue, and those are the only ones using it, but they have to get out of there, so we would take that into account as well. It may not be a lot of car traffic, but it would be a lot of commercial traffic, so we look at that too.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thanks, that is helpful. You've mentioned commercial versus residential, but what about kids whose school buses can't go down a road because of the condition of it, for instance, and the parents have to drive them to school because of that? I know that happens in Winter conditions when the roads are snow-less, but there are still issues with the buses going down them. Or for instance seniors who might not even walk on the roads. Does who's living on those roads come into account? If there are a bunch of families who can't get to school, is there any consideration of that?

PETER HACKETT: I'm going to pass that one to my chief engineer Mark Peachey.

MARK PEACHEY: Typically, it's more driven from the black-and-white, scientific side of things versus the demographics of who lives on a road - whether they be a senior or young kids, that sort of thing. That doesn't mean that we couldn't intervene to do some intermittent grading or short-time repairs to make it more accessible, but that isn't the primary driver.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Just a question that you may be expecting - in the news recently we heard about how there are still a number of roads maintained by the province that are private roads, and that the minister said she was not prepared to stop the practice even though there's a policy against it. Obviously, it's understandable that people would be concerned about this idea of roads being maintained for favours, even if they're historical.

I'm just wondering if there's any advice been given to the minister about this from the policy point of view in terms of this situation. I also want to say I get that whenever the story broke before - November or December - it's a bad time to say we're not maintaining your road anymore. I get that, but I'm wondering if there are thoughts to what would happen for next Winter, for instance - what has been the discussion around that?

PETER HACKETT: I'll put that in context a little bit, and then I'm going to let Mark Peachey talk a little bit about where we are with the process.

As you probably read in the article or saw somewhere on this, these private roads are a list of a bunch of roads that came together in 1995-96, when amalgamation was going through, as I mentioned earlier. At that time there was an investigation to determine who owned what road before who was going to get a road. When the Province was working with municipalities about road exchange, we had to identify who owned what roads, which ones we were doing service on.

Some of these came out as being private roads, and some of these came out as being who knows who owns it. We're not even sure. We can't find the record. It might have been a road, it might have been ours, it might have been the province. We ended up making a list of these roads that the Province said they would provide a minimum amount of service to, which would be Winter plowing and not much other than that. That list was compiled back in 1995-96, and they've just gone through the process ever since of looking after those roads going forward.

Once again, it's a combination of a lot of things. It wasn't just an operator doing just a road and happened to do that road over the years. There was a lot more to it than that. Like I said, it's hard to identify who owned what, so they listed them as what we call Z-Class roads or private roads.

This came up just recently. We were asked to have a look at it internally of what the practice would look like going forward or even just a review of these actual roads, this road list. I'll ask Mark if he can carry on a little bit about where we are with this.

MARK PEACHEY: As the deputy mentioned, we have been asked to take a review of the private road program. It actually goes back to the '70s and '80s. It was formalized back in the '90s with the Provincial/Municipal Service Exchange.

What we've had staff do so far is go back and review the list that they have internally because they're not on our PRLD - our road listing database - and confirm what is actually on this list versus what's going on in the real world. We're just getting those back now. We'll review those and take those away for thought, recommendations, and probably a review with our policy shop, and then ultimately have discussions with the minister.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just want to talk about trimming of the sides of the roads for a second. There's a couple of issues that I want to ask about.

We're hearing reports of some roads not being trimmed for a long time, like years and years. In fact, we've heard reports of some roads being neglected for decades in terms of trimming so they're completely impassable during the Springtime. We know that trimming is essential, and we understand it, but we also know that wider roads and clearer roads contribute to higher speeds.

I'm wondering, in terms of trimming, if there's a happy medium of how much to trim and if trimming can be maintained so that it's not enticing people to zip down the road, but also so it is at least a passable road. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about that work.

MARK PEACHEY: In the last number of years, we've actually put a significant focus on brush cutting along our 100-Series highways. I'll start with that.

We've had a dedicated allotment of funding to put a focus on this. Over the last four years, we have brush cut the right-of-way for, I would say, the most part of the 100-Series highway network. We're now turning our focus towards the trunks, the routes, and the locals so you'll see that progressing as we move forward.

With respect to roads being possibly impassable, I don't know if those would be a local type of road or a K-class road, which is designated as a road, but those are roads that we no longer spend money on. So that could be the situation you might be referring to, I'm not sure. There is a concerted effort within the department to move forward with brush cutting.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Then the other flip side of this is when that trimming gets done. One of my roles is Environment and Climate Change Critic, and there's significant concern about brush being trimmed and nesting season.

Are there regulations and rules around that, to protect the biodiversity and wildlife from being disturbed when they're in precarious times? Ecosystems are always precarious, but especially during nesting season or the Springtime, essentially.

MARK PEACHEY: For the brush cutting maintenance work that we do along the side of our roadway network, there's no limitation per se for migratory birds or that sort of stuff for our activities.

SUSAN LEBLANC: That's deeply concerning. I wonder if that's something that we'll try to see if there's co-operation. I guess it would be co-operation with the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables. Our migratory bird situation is pretty dire right now in Nova Scotia. We need to protect them as much as we can.

I'm going to ask one more question, then hand it over to my esteemed colleague here. I'm wondering if you have any stats on the Spring weight restrictions and how many kids are missing school because of buses not being able to go on certain roads with the Spring restrictions?

PETER HACKETT: I don't think we'd have that statistic with regard to the buses. It might be something you could defer to, or ask the Department of Education and Early

Childhood Development how much delay they might have had. I don't think we've had anything internally that we've identified from the bus companies.

THE CHAIR: MLA Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Like the two colleagues to my left, I don't have gravel roads - although I have met you both about pedestrian overpasses, so hopefully someday we can talk about that - but obviously it's a huge issue across the province, and we are aware of that.

I want to follow up on the trimming question briefly. One question that we've fielded from folks is that sometimes as roads are improved - so trimming starts to happen on those trunk roads and rebuilding those gravel roads happens - speeds increase. As we know, as roads get wider and better, people can drive faster.

I'm wondering if the department is thinking about or planning any traffic-calming measures that might address that? We do get complaints that as roads improve, people start to tear down them.

PETER HACKETT: I'll defer that to Mark.

MARK PEACHEY: You're right. As we do brush cutting along our roads, there is an inherent ability for folks to have the perception that they can go quicker, although there is a posted speed limit and they're supposed to be enforced. In a number of our rural roads, especially on gravel roads, traffic calming is something that we haven't looked into at this time. Ultimately, we want the folks to drive to the posted speed limit.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: To that issue, one of the conversations that's been happening for a long time - which I suppose engages Municipal Affairs and Housing theoretically, but engages you guys practically - is the idea of municipalities being able to lower their own speed limits. I mean, they can request on a one-off basis as you guys know, but municipalities can't unilaterally change that posted speed limit if they start to see differences.

Are you engaged in any conversations about that, or have a thought about that? Either to the deputy minister or Mr. Peachey.

PETER HACKETT: I have been involved in a few of those conversations, and the biggest issue with that right now is just that there is a process that municipalities can go through the department to get speed limits lower than 50 to 40, which is happening quite a bit around HRM, I've noticed. They're working through our department to do that.

Right now, I think there is an issue with the fact that a lot of municipalities don't have traffic authorities, so the provincial traffic authority is their ultimate person that they

go to for advice and looking at reducing speeds. There are only a couple of municipalities that actually have traffic authorities. The rest rely on the province.

For HRM, maybe - they've got a traffic authority. But for the other municipalities, it would still come back to us. Until we come up with a little bit of a better process in place, or looking at this a bit further, we'll probably keep it the way it is for now.

I know it's a bit cumbersome for the municipality, but it is working for them. They're getting bit by bit. It's probably not exactly what they want, but I think for the Province, because there are 51 municipalities, doing a blanket legislation is a little bit trickier for those that don't have a traffic authority.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: We'll just keep this going for a second. We do have an HRM Charter, and HRM does have a traffic authority, so in theory, this could happen in a stepped way.

I take your point that there are lots of small municipalities right around the province who just don't have the expertise to - and maybe don't even want to have that put on them. But certainly, it's a request that HRM has made, and HRM, contrary to popular belief, has a lot of gravel roads, as you all know. There are very rural parts of HRM.

Is there a sense that this conversation could advance at least insofar as dealing with the HRM Charter and making that a possibility, so that it is, as you say, a less cumbersome process?

PETER HACKETT: I'm not sure how that would under the Charter, but I'm not a lawyer; I don't know how those things come together. I think the process can certainly be looked at further down the road as we're working on the Traffic Safety Act which we put through, but also the regulations for that and how some of these things may fit better in the regulations.

As that gets finalized, which is going to be a few years out, some of these things might be easier to get into the Traffic Safety Act or make changes in the Traffic Safety Act than the current process that we're in under the Motor Vehicle Act.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I've no doubt that books will be written about the Traffic Safety Act some day, if they haven't already.

Before I switch topics, how much time do I have? Just a minute?

THE CHAIR: You have 50 seconds.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: We talked about how roads are triaged to be dealt with by the department. I'm wondering, how are emergency situations triaged? This goes back to

MLA Leblanc's question. When you have 500 calls about potholes - I think you mentioned traffic in terms of fixing - but in terms of what gets addressed first, it would be interesting to hear.

[9:45 a.m.]

Certainly, even in our situation around potholes on Highway No. 111, we have that question a lot. We know there's a service standard, but how do you deploy your teams, I guess is the question. What's the nexus? I won't get an answer probably, so maybe next time around.

THE CHAIR: Order - that concludes the questioning for the NDP. I'll move on to the PC caucus, beginning with MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I woke up this morning so excited because we have Public Works people at Public Accounts Committee today and we can ask all those questions because 'tis the season for potholes, indeed. Yes, the most calls in a rural MLA office have to do with roads. I do say the OCC number and email works quite well, and my area manager is amazing, so thank you.

I just wanted to speak a little bit about last September when our government fulfilled the commitment to double the investment from \$20 to \$40 million in the Gravel Road Capital Program. Can you share with us why this investment was needed to be increased?

PETER HACKETT: It's very welcome. As I mentioned earlier, I think it's about 8,400 km of our road in the province is gravel, and the remainder is paved. Back to a little history lesson, I guess, again, if we've got time.

Back in 1996, when the Municipal Exchange Act occurred, at that time the Province took on a policy that we would not pave any more gravel roads. It may have occurred a little bit beyond that, but it was around - in between '96 and, say, 2000. The reason for that was we had too many roads made of asphalt that we couldn't maintain. We didn't have very good budgets in those days that we could get out and do a lot of capital work to pave those highways.

The Province said that they wouldn't pave any more gravel roads at that time, and I don't know if we've paved too many since then. Maybe the odd one in emergencies - there were some sort of situations that we had to do for commercial, but they've been pretty limited. We didn't pave many, so we didn't upgrade any, and we didn't do much work to gravel roads. We had a lot of gravel roads in our inventory, but there wasn't a lot of work being done to them.

Probably about, I'm going to say, seven or eight years ago, it started to really come to our attention that there wasn't much gravel left on any gravel roads. It was pretty much all dirt. There are a couple of issues with that. First, when you get dirt on a gravel road, you don't really have much of a riding surface and it doesn't last very long. You're going to be driving on dirt, maybe some dust in the Summertime. In the Springtime there's no place for drainage anymore, there's no place for water to run, and, basically, there was nothing really left to a lot of these roads. A lot of them were impassible in the Springtime.

The investment came along a few years ago to put money into gravel roads, and then we went from \$10 million to \$20 million, and now we're up to \$40 million. As I mentioned earlier, gravel roads - people don't see the importance of a gravel road. They see the importance of a 100-Series highway. You drove in from Windsor, maybe today, or drove in at some point. You drove Highway No. 101. It's a good highway, a lot of traffic on that highway, and a lot of people, that's all they see are the 100-Series highways, and maybe some trunk roads, but they don't get to see the gravel roads.

There are a lot of people who live on gravel roads. There's a lot of commercial traffic on gravel roads. It's fishing and forestry and agriculture. They move a lot of their goods on gravel roads to get to the main highways. If you don't have a good, passable gravel road or a good strong gravel road, then a lot of that commercial work starts to shut down or they have to find alternate routes. Sometimes the alternate routes aren't great.

The investment is great news to us. It's great news whenever we get money that is going to be put into the province for our infrastructure and existing infrastructure.

I think we mentioned that we did 300 kilometres last year and we're looking at about the same this year. Over a 3-year period, we almost get 1,000 kilometres of road done. Over a 20-year period, we would get about 8,000 kilometres of road done, so you'd be looking at getting a good chunk of those roads done in a cycle over that period of time if that funding was maintained. I don't think people recognize the importance of the gravel roads to the economy of Nova Scotia. It's a good investment for us, for sure.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Can you highlight some of the projects in particular that you've already done? Is there a big one that we can highlight? How soon can we expect some of these projects? Are we boots and shovels on the ground, so to speak, this season to be working on a numerous amount of gravel roads?

PETER HACKET: I'll defer that to Don Maillet.

DON MAILLET: Yes, to highlight a specific road - their size and nature are pretty well all the same. There's no specific big one, per se.

As to our earlier conversations around the selection process, the district certainly does put forth a good mix of roads be they long, short, and whatnot. Right now, the process

for that is that they prioritize the tendering process in the districts and they send it to our highway Construction Services group to go through the procurement process.

Often, they would probably bundle a couple of gravel roads together for the efficiencies of getting it done, getting a contractor in, cutting down on mobilization costs, and all that stuff. Overall, it's a balance process. There are no large, large projects and there are no small projects. It's basically a good balance of good rural roads.

Procurement is in the process now of the 54 tenders to date. There are probably half-a-dozen gravel roads in there throughout the province that are being procured as we speak.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I hope some of them are in Hants County because I could certainly use some help down there.

In addition to doubling investment on the gravel road capital program, the government also doubled the investments. We did speak a little bit about the Rural Impact Mitigation Fund - RIM, I guess, is the acronym for that.

Can you start off by explaining, for people who are watching, what that entails that would be under that particular part? Can you maybe discuss how the investment in the fund specifically will improve road infrastructure for the province?

MARK PEACHEY: We have doubled the RIM allotment from \$11 million to \$22 million. There is a caveat where we also add \$6 million worth of paving under our capital program for that as well.

The primary budget incorporates gravelling, gravel shouldering, ditching, brush-cutting, and asphalt patching. We've added shoreline protection in there as well, to address climate change issues that have been coming up in recent years.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I'll pass onto my colleague, Mr. Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: Thank you for joining us this morning. I'm just going to pick up where my colleague left off. Could you tell us a little bit about how the department collaborates with municipalities in the identification and selection of gravel roads that need work? I'm not sure if that's for Deputy Minister Hackett or Mr. Peachey.

MARK PEACHEY: The municipal units are one of the various stakeholders that our local managers would meet with on an annual basis to review what their priorities might be in the same manner that the managers would go out and visit with the local MLAs. Municipal units may also go directly to the MLAs as well with their list of concerns. Then we'll take those back, put them in a list, provide those to the district directors, who then would bring them to Halifax for us to prioritize through the allotment that we have.

DAVE RITCEY: In addition - this question is for Mr. Pero, actually. The Capital Plan in 2022-23 will see a \$507.8-million investment to the Department of Public Works as part of the Five-Year Highway Improvement Plan. Could you expand on how the Gravel Road Capital Program funds are integrated within the broader five-year highway capital plan?

BRENT PERO: The Gravel Road Capital Program is incorporated into the plan beginning this year, of course, and out years as well. It's included in the overall number. I'm not sure what your question may mean. If you could maybe explain it further.

DAVE RITCEY: Just basically expanding on how the capital program funds are integrated within the broader five-year highway capital plan.

BRENT PERO: At this point, it is part of the plan. It's incorporated, yes.

DAVE RITCEY: This question is directed to Mr. Peachey. We all know that Spring brings with it the potential for road damage from the thawing. Can you share with us a bit about the current conditions of our rural roads and how this funding will help improve them following the freeze-thaw cycle this Spring?

MARK PEACHEY: As we all know, living in Nova Scotia is a unique environment, where we go through a vast number of freeze-thaw cycles in a very short period of time. It does create a lot of pain for our department in terms of potholes and poor drainage.

This additional funding will give us the opportunity to add gravel to the much-needed roads where there's lack of gravel. Also, to do drainage and change out culverts so that we can get the water away from the base and strengthen up our roads. Once those new gravels are in place, then we have a stronger, easier, maintainable road.

DAVE RITCEY: I'm going to pass it to my colleague, MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I happen to live where it's rural and it's urban, considering Hants East is a mixture of both. We have all roads, gravel, provincial, municipal, and of course the provincial.

We're all aware that well-maintained roads are vital. Important to the community and their development. They don't only provide access to health, education, social needs, but they're also crucial in encouraging more people and jobs to move to rural Nova Scotia.

Can you speak about the ways in which improvements to the transportation infrastructure will protect not only the province's economy, but also the people's finances and their ability to go to work? That would be for, I believe, the deputy minister.

PETER HACKETT: As I mentioned earlier, there are a lot of systems in the provincial highway network. There are 100-Series, trunks, routes, local roads, and gravel roads, and they all interconnect communities and side communities and connecting communities together.

[10:00 a.m.]

It's imperative that the infrastructure is kept in good shape. It's imperative not just that we do major capital work like twinning highways, which we need as capacity of highways continues to grow for both commercial and movement and safety, but we also need to maintain our existing infrastructure. If we don't continue to maintain it and put investment into that infrastructure, then roads become impassible, bridges come out of service, and then people end up having to find alternate routes to their communities and longer routes.

We found over the last number of years, and I think there might have been actually a bridge in your area - maybe two, at least one - that had to come out of service. With our bridge inspection program, we inspect the bridges every year, and we find that some of the bridges do have to come out of service. When they come out of service, or a road comes out of service, it makes for great difficulty for communities to get to their communities, in some cases - particularly if it's either the only way out or the alternate route is many kilometres in the distance.

That's just for the communities, for people to go back and forth between their community, but it's also a big thing for commercial. Any commercial enterprises that require trucking or movement of goods on roads, without proper infrastructure it does have an issue with either people maintaining their businesses and maintaining their community or people moving into those communities.

Any investment we can make with regard to capital work, or any new investment we can make with regard to maintenance work on our highway system, is crucial to keeping the communities of Nova Scotia alive, particularly, as you mentioned, in rural Nova Scotia.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: This question would be also to Deputy Minister Hackett. Could you talk about the economic impact that this program has on rural development, both as direct employment for Public Works in the province and also our private contractors?

PETER HACKETT: I think in the private work, we're somewhere between 5,000 and 7,000 direct jobs - maybe 5,000 or 6,000 direct jobs - with regard to the construction industry itself. Then we have 1,800 employees on the highway side, the operations side, who look after a lot of road maintenance that this money would go toward.

Obviously the more we keep our employees busy and employed with this work, it really helps with maintaining the road system. Between both, we're probably in the 7,000 or above 7,000 direct employments with this amount of money going into the system.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'd just like to comment on the Hydes Bridge. I happen to live in Lantz, so yes, they'll be happy when that's opened. My area manager, who is actually the same area manager as my colleague to the left, has been great to deal with and the OCC have had no complaints.

Mr. Chair, I will defer the rest of my time to MLA Boudreau.

THE CHAIR: MLA Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left?

THE CHAIR: You have approximately four minutes.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: Four minutes. Thank you.

Thank you for coming. Another rural MLA here, in rural Richmond County. Certainly, it's on the top of our list as well. I would like to give a shoutout to the area manager and district manager in that area. We've developed a relationship and are in constant contact. That's made my job quite a bit easier.

This question may be to Mark Peachey. It's kind of a little question about what are some of the common issues that department staff who are inspecting and evaluating existing roads are seeing. What are the things that we're seeing the most? What are we concerned about in terms of gravel roads going forward?

MARK PEACHEY: Specific to gravel roads, some of the common issues that we encounter are lack of gravel. As the deputy alluded to earlier, a number of our older roads have been around for a long time and a lot of the gravel has been pushed away. It's gone. It's in the ditches, which leads to washboarding and potholing quite easily. One of the common complaints we get is we'll go out and grade a road and it'll rain and then the potholes will be back. That's a function of not having a lot of gravel.

Other issues would be drainage - water standing in the ditches alongside the road, which gets into the sub-base of the road, making it softer and losing its strength. It becomes an issue during Spring weights, obviously. Culverts, cross culverts may be collapsed, damaged, or plugged. Brush cutting, clearing the brush away from the side of the road, is another issue we've encountered.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: It kind of leads to one of my other questions, which was that historically, gravel roads weren't built to a particular standard. It has led to roads often

becoming impassable due to neglect, lack of gravel, poor structure, and drainage - poor drainage - just like you talked about.

What changes have been made in the department in this area to better ensure a return on investment for Nova Scotia? Are there strategies you're doing differently than you may have done before? Is there anything you're thinking about now that will help in that manner?

MARK PEACHEY: When the gravel road program came in a few years ago, as you mentioned about the actual design of the roads, many were designed in old standards. There wasn't a lot of upgrading to those or any kind of new. As part of the process we developed a new cross-section, a new standard for the roads that we would follow to make sure that the road would be widened to a certain amount of width. There would be a certain amount of ditching and brush cutting and also a certain amount of drainage.

These are built to a fairly good standard now. If you've driven across any of the gravel roads we've done in the last number of years, they are in great shape. They only require a little bit of grading and chloride in the summertime if it's just a few years old. We have a whole new standard to rebuild these.

THE CHAIR: MLA Boudreau, you have one minute.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I'll probably start with this question; I'm not sure if it will get answered. We talked a little bit about the importance that gravel roads play for rural communities. Some of the examples that I've talked to with my area managers, some of the roads we're looking for gravel reconstruction are roads that would be - if there was an emergency on Route 4, these would be roads that would be detour roads, and certainly that's one way it plays an important role.

In terms of what a gravel road does for the local community, what are some of the important roles that it plays for the broader road network? You're talking about how it supports highways and routes.

PETER HACKETT: On the very small scale, every provincial road, I guess every government-owned road, goes into someone's property . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes the first round of questioning. Looking at the time, our second round of questioning will be approximately 13 minutes each for each caucus, beginning with the Liberals. MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: I have a question around financing and inflation and costs, so perhaps this is for Mr. Pero, I'm not sure.

The capital plan for the department is \$520-some-odd-million and I know that contingency is part of that, of course. We also know that inflation is running at the highest level in 30 years. The cost of materials, the cost of fuel, all of these things are going up at very high rates. Is there any concern within the department on that kind of cost pressure on delivering on the capital plan?

BRENT PERO: Cost pressures, of course, are always a concern. I think I'll defer the question likely to Don, thank you.

DON MAILLET: Thank you. To date this year, we've seen a fluctuation in pricing of work coming into the department. We've got some projects coming in under budget, we've got some other projects coming in significantly over budget, so it's a balance at this point. We're doing that well through our forecasting process.

We're not at the point where we are looking at cancelling projects or anything like that. We're still committed to the program and we'd probably reassess as the season progresses, to our forecasting tools and conversations with Finance and Treasury Board.

BRAEDON CLARK: Thank you very much. I also wanted to ask about the bridge rehabilitation and replacement funding. I know that's doubled now to \$60 million, which is really important because - I could be wrong on this, but in the back of my mind I remember 4,000-plus bridges across the province. As we know, many of them are quite old, so I'm just wondering: does the department do a regular audit accounting of these bridges - their condition, what work needs to be done - and is that available publicly in any place?

MARK PEACHEY: We have staff across the province who go out and inspect our bridges annually, each and every one of the 4,300 bridges. From there they'll put together a report and that will rate them, whether they're good, fair or poor. Based on their rating, a level 2 inspection may be required at some point.

BRANDON CLARK: Mr. Peachey, I'm putting you on the spot here a little bit. Do you have any idea what proportion of the bridges might be rated poor?

PETER HACKETT: Usually between fair and poor is around 10 per cent, so probably a little over 300 bridges would be in that rating. The rating can mean a lot of things. It doesn't mean the bridge is actually in the condition that it would be taken out of service, or anything like that.

It just means that there may be certain things, based on the rating system, that would require the bridge would be looked at quickly, or there's some issue with it that should be addressed. That could be a poor rating because of a railing, it could be a poor rating because there's a hole in the sidewalk or in the deck, or that sort of thing, or something wrong with the joints. It's vast, what that might look like.

To answer your question, it's usually around 10 per cent, where that number is sitting.

BRAEDON CLARK: Obviously, doubling the budget is a significant amount, but is it safe to say that you still realistically would need more to get the work done that you need to get done on bridges?

PETER HACKETT: In the sense of getting it beyond that 10 per cent, getting it up so we have less than 300, for sure. There are a couple of things about it.

Strategically, on the engineering side, this money will go towards replacements where they're required. It will also go towards rehabilitation and capital. Anything over \$250,000 spent on a bridge is considered to be part of increase to the asset.

We'll look at bridges that are required to come out of service and replace those. We'll also look at trying to stretch that money, too, to look at rehabilitation of bridges that we can get back into better service, to get them from a "fair" rating up to a "good" rating.

There's always more money, we always would look at more money for all kinds of different things in infrastructure, but with the additional money, we're going to be able to make some advancements on getting a good section of our structures - keep them in good service and putting some new ones in. The money's very welcome for us to get our bridges up in order.

BRAEDON CLARK: There are four significant highway twinning projects that are underway right now across the province. I wonder, deputy minister, if you could just give us a quick overview of the status of each of those.

PETER HACKETT: I'll defer that to Mr. Maillet.

DON MAILLET: Let's start with Highway 101. Highway 101 right now is going well. We are at the point where we are crossing the causeway. East and west coming into the causeway are pretty well all completed. We've got a couple of structures handy to the causeway that have been tendered and are at work under contract.

With regards to the causeway and the river, and that process with the aboiteau, we are currently still working with the regulators on an approval. That's going well. We're still working with the community through our CLC committees to work with them on that. We're very close on the technical submissions through that. I can anticipate probably in the next week or two. Highway 101 is going good other than that. Of course, there's been a little bit of setback with that.

Highway 103, of course the current contractor is going to continue their work as planned this summer. They're well underway with the subgrade between Ingramport and

Hubbards. We see no issues with having the subgrade completed by early Fall, and probably a paving contract to start later in the Fall, with a completion probably next Spring or early Summer.

Highway 104 is well underway through the P3 process. We are not seeing any issues with regard to delivering that project on time, and on schedule, and on budget.

Highway 107 is a big project. We have a lot of work under contract right now. We're anticipating to have a tender call for the paving for a portion of that. That's going to take us somewhere around Anderson Lake.

From that, we are still continuing with the work for the connection from Highway 107 to Highway 102 through the tendering process, which is going to probably be tendered in the next week or two. That's the high-speed connection - we're going to start that subgrade this Summer as well. So, anticipate that project to be on schedule probably in or around the latter part of 2023 spilling into 2024 with some of the smaller stuff.

BRAEDON CLARK: Mr. Chair, how much time do I have?

THE CHAIR: Five minutes.

BRAEDON CLARK: Okay, I will ask a quick question then and hopefully we will have time for my colleague from Clare.

As I said, I do not have very many provincial roads, but I do have Highway No. 102 in the Larry Uteck Interchange and I have talked to some of the witnesses about this before. There are roundabouts there of course, which I think are good from a traffic flow point of view, but there are pedestrian crossings too. To me it is a dangerous area. I used to live around there, I was around there all the time. As the area continues to grow, there are going to be more and more people. There is a grocery store over there, there's gas, so there are people walking more than there used to be.

There are new roundabouts on Larry Uteck itself further up that are municipal roundabouts, but those also will be very busy. Two new schools on that street, as well, so there is just going to be a lot of pedestrians moving through these roundabouts. I am just wondering what the department's view is on pedestrian safety at these roundabouts and if there is anything that can be done to improve the safety situation at those?

MARK PEACHEY: Thank you for the question. As we recently discussed, staff in our design group have been reviewing roundabouts with a lens on pedestrian safety, specifically to one in the Larry Uteck area, which I believe we will be doing some work on this construction season. That has been brought to the fore and it is at front of mind for staff.

BRAEDON CLARK: Thank you very much, and I will defer to my colleague from Clare.

THE CHAIR: MLA LeBlanc.

RONNIE LEBLANC: My question is concerning the unfinished section of Highway No. 101 from Digby to Weymouth. I know that project was scheduled to be done in three phases and one phase was completed a few years back. I'm wondering if you have any information on that project, if phase two is being considered? I do not know who would take that question.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Maillet.

DON MAILLET: Any 100-Series expansions are all through the planning stages now and, of course, based on funding, we do look at priorities around the province. At this point, Highway No. 101 is in the planning stages, but it is considered to be a future project. At this point, it is not in the five-year plan for an outer year, but it is certainly a consideration for a future project in the future.

RONNIE LEBLANC: Thank you for the answer. I just have maybe a comment. That section of the highway is extremely important to the economy of southwestern Nova Scotia - a lot of truck traffic there for the fisheries and the forestry sectors. I know there have been safety concerns and it's often raised, so I just want to make sure that you are aware that it is an important part of the highway and that there are a lot of safety concerns relating to residents living on the current road. It is not really a question, but I feel it's an important comment.

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: How much time do I have?

THE CHAIR: You have a little over a minute.

BRAEDON CLARK: Okay. I don't really have any further questions. I just wanted to say I was happy to hear - we talked about earlier the department is kind of moving in the direction of thinking - I don't want to say beyond roads and highways because that sounds dismissive, but expanding the options and opportunities for ways for people to get around because the city, in particular.

Of course, I pay attention to my area which is growing incredibly quickly and so getting people around safely and quickly and easily is very important for the economy, for social well-being, all of those sorts of things. I just wanted to say that.

Again, I spent some time in the department myself, so I know that you guys are doing great work across the board, rural and urban as well. So, I want to thank you guys for your time today.

THE CHAIR: MLA Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thank you. I feel like it is a little bit unfair that we have an MLA who worked in the department, but I will just let that go. (Laughter). I just want to quickly catch up on the question I was asking at the end - what's the emergency triage? The call centre gets 500 phone calls on a day, saying, this road has a pothole, this road has a pothole, this road needs trimming, there's a barrier on this road. How do you deploy the crews? How do you know who goes where?

PETER HACKETT: I'm going to start this, then I'm going to pass it over to Mr. Peachey. Many of the items that you mentioned, brush cutting, didn't mention low shoulders, but low shoulders, potholes, there's a list of priorities that we have, and we have an actual level of maintenance standards that we practice. Once certain things get to a certain level, they have to be repaired right away. There are timelines for a pothole, depth of pothole, shoulder, that sort of thing. I'll defer to Mark if he wants to share some more details on that.

MARK PEACHEY: As the deputy minister said, each one of these items does have a level of service associated with each of them. Some of the stuff you mentioned are minor in the greater scheme of things. It's a priority of worst first. For example, if there are potholes on Highway No. 111, over on the Circumferential Highway, those are probably a little bit more important, based on traffic volume, than a pothole on a gravel road somewhere else. Do you know what I'm saying in that respect?

If you have 40,000 vehicles a day going over a pothole that is six inches deep and two feet long, that would take precedence over something where there'd be less traffic.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Since we're talking about potholes, I have to ask one question, specifically since you mentioned potholes on the Circumferential Highway, which are near and dear to my heart.

In the last few months, I've been to Cape Breton and to the Valley, and to the South Shore, so while I'm very aware of the potholes on the Circumferential Highway, I'm also aware of the potholes across the province. I know that when I met with the department earlier, there had been a conversation about how the early Winter weather this year had actually been somewhat different than the preceding years. It was more like an old Winter and created some early trouble, in terms of getting those roads passable to the appropriate level.

I'm assuming there are some statistics on the state of the roads now versus the last few years, because it does feel like we're playing a video game by driving our car down the 100-Series highways even. I wonder, is this pothole situation worse this year? Does that have something to do with weather, or it is just par for the course and it drives us crazy every year?

MARK PEACHEY: As you noted, in our conversation back in February, we did have a warm spell where the temperatures went significantly above zero. I think it was 13, and the next day it went to 10 or 12 below zero. In between that temperature swing, obviously, water gets into the asphalt and into the cracks, freezes, and pops the asphalt up, and then the heavy traffic volume goes across them, pulverizes the aggregate, and create a pothole.

I would say anecdotally - I don't have any data on me today. This has been one of our more difficult Winters for potholes, and the pothole season, because it started much earlier. In the Winter months we have to use what's called cold mix, which we know is a temporary fix. We go out in certain areas and we're fixing the same potholes daily, sometimes a number of times a day. Whereas you get into this time of year, in HRM anyway, there's a hot mix asphalt plant that's opened up, and we've worked with the local contractors to start putting that hot mix out, plane out in the worst places, put the hot mix in, fix those now.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: You anticipated my question. I was actually going to ask you about cold mix and hot mix, but I don't get to display my knowledge anymore. You'll just have to take my word for it. Just to confirm: that hot mix is out now, it's warm enough now to be doing that, that plant's up and running, and doing those type of repairs?

MARK PEACHEY: Yes. We have to wait for the local contactors to open up their asphalt plant, and it was opened a couple weeks ago here around the municipality, so we are out in full force with our forces and local contractors under tender doing hot mix asphalt.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Great, thank you. I want to go back to the Joint Regional Transportation Agency. I think I heard the deputy minister say he was really excited about it, which is great. We obviously were concerned when the legislation came through the House and we expressed that concern. Part of that was because the mandate, or the legislation anyway, didn't explicitly include transit, accessibility, climate, equity - things that we felt like are important to take into account when we're thinking about how we move.

So I'm wondering if you can tell us anything about the progress of that agency - this is probably for Mr. Hackett - and whether any of the ideas that I enumerated are part of the mix or part of the conversation?

PETER HACKETT: The agency has sort of begun; it's up and running. We don't get our funding until April 1st or when the budget gets through, I guess. Whenever that happens, if it goes through.

We are getting our start. We've appointed our Executive Director of Operations and Maintenance. Guy Deveau will be our interim CEO who is just really going to help us get things off the ground, and then we'll find a more permanent CEO after that. He's actively working.

We've set up our advisory committee with representatives from HRM, the port, the Bridge Commission, and the airport - people who have large-scale transportation plans - and tried to bring those groups together. We've started to do that.

It's quite interesting because I think there's a lot of discussion around the table that mutually we look at future of the city. I think we're in a good spot because the city's not Toronto, but we're going to grow someday. We're in a good spot to start making that planning, particularly when it comes to things like mass transit and moving people a little differently than we currently do on roads.

As far as reaching out to communities, yes, it's part of our plan to reach out to the communities and agencies like Bicycle Nova Scotia and try to get some community involvement and some community thought into this process as well. Obviously, it's going to affect the communities - it's part of their world.

We don't want to look at it entirely like mass transit if you're looking at ferries and buses. We also want to look at other ways that we can interconnect those things together so that you get off a bus, but then you can take your bike to the ferry or to downtown. We want to make sure that we interconnect all those things together. We'll be looking at that as we go forward.

We're just in the beginning phases right now. Our plan into this year is to begin the planning process. We're bringing a lot of people around the table for those discussions and a lot of input. Hopefully 2023 into 2024, we'll have a good plan together - at least a start, that we can work from.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I guess I would just follow up on that to really encourage, whether it's Bicycle Nova Scotia or other active transit advocates and folks, to get those people at the table - also people like Clean Foundation who are actively working on electrifying transit really closely with the province. I think there is an opportunity with this agency.

I was moved by your words, deputy, that you felt like you've been around a really long time and that this is a real opportunity. Given that, I think it's really important that we

don't miss what that whole opportunity is. The reality is, we're in a climate crisis and the way we move people has to shift a bit.

[10:30 a.m.]

It's a real opportunity because we always look at you guys as the "Department of Highways". In many ways, of course, you are because of the budget and the need and the work. This is really an opportunity to rethink.

I'll leave that, but following along on that issue, I will say that until last Summer your department very briefly had "active transit" in its name. It isn't anymore, obviously. I'm wondering, given the recent EGCCRA legislation that includes a commitment to create an active transit strategy, moving away a little bit from the agency, but just kind of back into government at large - does the active transit file still live in the Department of Public Works? If not, does it live somewhere else? I know early on in the mandate of this government, that didn't seem to be clear, and I'm wondering if there's clarity on that now.

PETER HACKETT: For the most part, on active transportation, when it comes to things like Blue Route, bicycles, support grants, those sorts of things, there's a fair bit that does still come through Public Works, and it is still part of our overall work that we do. Then there are also the trails with DNR&R and the work that they do. So, when you're looking at - not the mandate, but it's sort of like what's under the department, we're still following through on our process.

We did about, I think, I forget how many kilometres we did last year of Blue Route, and then we did so many last year. We have so many - I think 31 or something - this year, is that about, right? So, we're continuing to add to the Blue Route system.

We're trying to branch a little bit away from that, too, and working with municipalities, which we do. There are grants, there's ICIP funding - things like that for transportation. We're working with municipalities on those programs, but we're also trying to look at the better way of connectivity, too.

We have a sort of a plan that the Blue Route is trails and roads, and then we get to municipalities, and what happens with municipalities and trying to work with them and trying to make it all interactive. We are starting to reach out a bit more with them and what those municipalities want to do and how it works into our system.

In some cases, there are breaks in the road that we can't get a trail, or we can't get something on the road, so how do we manage to get that connectivity together? We're looking at those things too which were something that we weren't doing before. We were just sort of connecting the trails and the roads, but if there's some things that we're missing in the gaps, how can we get through that to make the connectivity better?

To answer your question, yes, it's still in our department, it's still quite busy. We're going forward with more work this year, and planning, with more Blue Route and more active transportation routes.

THE CHAIR: MLA Chender, you have a little under a minute.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'll just say, apparently, we're going to get thousands of new units in Dartmouth South, so that connectivity working with the municipality, especially to get to downtown Halifax as there are so many commuters, is more important than ever for us. We got a lot of it done there around Prince Albert, but certainly more needing to happen.

Can you just clarify, the Active Transportation strategy that is specified in ECRA, is that happening in the Department of Public Works, or is that happening in the Department of Environment and Climate Change?

PETER HACKETT: That I'd have to get full clarity on. We have a portion of that, but I'm not sure if the whole thing is with us. I'd have to find that out for you.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: If you could just let us know when that's clarified, that would be really helpful. Thank you so much for your answers to our questions today.

THE CHAIR: Order, that will conclude the questioning from the NDP. Moving on to the PC caucus, your time is 10:33 a.m. MLA Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I just want to go back to that one question that I had at the end of last discussion for PC caucus, and then I'll move over to one of my colleagues. It was about explaining the important role that gravel roads play in the connecting of residents in rural communities to the broader networks. So, talking about the importance of gravel roads with rural routes and highways. I don't know if there's ...

PETER HACKETT: As I started off, as I said, all provincial roads are public roads connecting to someone's property, to start with. Those properties may not have anybody living on them, but they're still someone's property that they have access to. Just to start off, that's important to somebody, and it's important to the public that they get access to their property.

After that, like I said, a lot of gravel roads, they go into people's properties who are living there, they go into communities, but they also provide a network for commercial work - forestry, agriculture, fishing. That is really the link, sometimes, between maybe the ocean or maybe the farmland or maybe to agriculture or to forestry land. From those links, they get into the local road or minor highway system, onto the major highway system. The gravel roads are maybe the last road, but they might be the first road that a lot of these

commercial folks see, and a lot of residential folks see, as well. It's a very important part of the link of the system, the overall network.

As you mentioned earlier about when there's an accident on a road, or a road gets closed, or a bridge goes out, they also act as secondary roads for us quite a bit, as well. Having that duplication or redundancy is always very helpful but if you do have it, as you mentioned, you've got to make sure the roads are kept in good shape. Otherwise you can't put trucks or heavy vehicles through those roads.

We've done that before. We've had situations where roads have been washed out or bridges have been lost and we've had to put people on secondary roads which aren't in great shape. If we can maintain and keep our highway system well-maintained - all of it - then it also allows us to use those roads for other purposes, such as putting heavy traffic on it.

As I mentioned earlier, I don't know if people really recognize the importance of the gravel road network in the province and, like I said, it's welcome capital funding for us.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: Thank you for that answer. At this time, I'll pass my time over to Mr. Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: I, too, have had a real good relationship with my group in Bible Hill. Just to let you know, they've been fantastic communication-wise. Like my friend here with the operations line, I've had great success with that, to be honest with you. I've found it very useful and helpful to my constituents.

This leads me to a question to the deputy minister. In the past, funding has fluctuated throughout construction. Can you expand on the importance of a stable source of funding for gravel roads and how this is factored in for long-term planning?

PETER HACKETT: In the particular case we have for gravel roads, it's a set amount of money, so the \$40 million is in our envelope funding, it's set in there. We don't really tap into that to do anything else with, so it's dedicated money for gravel roads.

If you have a program where you have that, you know that's a dedicated fund and if it goes on indefinitely, as I mentioned earlier, you can basically plan for the next 20 years and say these are the roads we're going to do over the next 20 years because you know you're going to continuously get the funding.

That rotation is very important to know, that your road is going to make it through and in 15 years, in 17 years, it will be done again. If you don't have that rotation and you do it and then in six or seven years or eight years down the road it starts going through

some pretty bad damage and it needs maintenance and then you start asking, when is this going to be done again?

It is important for the communities to know that their road has been done and it's important for them to know there's money available to have their roads done every so many years or will be done every so many years. It's important to our staff to know that because it builds into their budgets, so they know that if these roads are going to be done over the next couple of years, they don't have to put their maintenance money on that and they can put their maintenance money on potholes and brush clearing and other things really of need.

That whole cycle of giving dedicated funding allows our department to plan better for the future and it allows our department to plan better internally so they know they can use their well-sought-after maintenance funding to use it elsewhere.

These programs are very good for us for today and for planning on both sides, basically, the public side and the department side.

DAVE RITCEY: Thank you, deputy minister, for that answer. I'm going to ask another question - it's actually to Mr. Maillet. We know that some of the money in this program is earmarked for the purchase of equipment. Could you expand on that point, and how does new equipment help with ongoing efforts to maintain these gravel roads?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Peachey.

MARK PEACHEY: Thank you for the question. Further to the deputy's comment about having this dedicated funding to be able to plan for the future and the network that we're going to have in place, not using the resources out of our local maintenance budget. If we know that we're going to have an improved, solid, road network it's advantageous for us to have new equipment.

In the last number of years we have purchased a number of graders that are used primarily for gravel roads, which is very welcome for our department because the age of our fleet - specific to graders - has crept up on us quite a bit. Having new equipment to be able to go out and maintain these roads in a proper fashion is instrumental for this department.

DAVE RITCEY: Mr. Chair, how much time is left?

THE CHAIR: Six minutes.

DAVE RITCEY: I'd like to pass my remaining questions to MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: It's not totally on the topic but kind of what we touched on earlier when you brought up the K-class roads and upgrading them and what does happen. We're seeing a big influx of people moving to our areas, especially in rural communities. Some of these K-class roads haven't been used or maintained for 10 years, and all of a sudden, the house on it sells.

What kind of plan, and how are we going to address some of these not-maintained provincial roads that fall under the K-class category?

MARK PEACHEY: Typically, we don't spend a lot of time, effort, or funding on K-class. With respect to home ownership or a cottage or that type of thing, typically you have to issue a permit to be able to do that, which is something that we typically do not do.

All that being said, there is provision where if folks do want to have a K-class road upgraded to a suitable standard - which is typically the adjacent road standard - we do have a policy and a process for it. That can be done. That's done through the local area manager at the local level.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I missed the tail end of that. You said through the local manager, through her local funding? It doesn't fall under a separate pool of funds separate from what she would get for general maintenance.

MARK PEACHEY: I might have misspoken there in terms of funding provided for that. There is a process where an applicant could apply to the department for a small amount of funding - I think it's up to \$5,000 toward the upgrade of a K-class road, which is done through the local area manager.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Thank you for that. I can't believe I'm running out of questions on this. You guys are pretty precise and to the point.

I am pleased with the improvements and the investments. I can envision how much better our gravel roads, which are very important in rural Nova Scotia - we're a very rural caucus, so we all feel the pain at this time of year with you guys.

Thank you for coming in today. I'll probably finish up my line of questioning, if any of my colleagues have anything else, but again, thanks for coming in and answering our questions today.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Thank you. Just quickly on the gravel road program, how is it divvied up amongst the province geographically?

MARK PEACHEY: The funding is distributed across the province on a prorated basis. Essentially what we do is we look at - our department is broken up into four districts. Each district has x-number of kilometres of gravel road, and we would prorate a dollar amount to each of those, if that makes sense.

For example, Northern District has 25 per cent of the gravel roads in the province, so they would get approximately 25 per cent of the budget. Eastern has 35 per cent so they would get approximately 35 per cent on that basis. That's per district, and then it goes down to the areas within each of those districts. So, in the Northern District, there's Cumberland, Colchester, Pictou. They would get it distributed based on how many kilometres of road are in their local area.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I think Hants County is listed with HRM, so it would be whatever per cent Hants County would have for gravel roads, and it's completely based on the number and length of gravel roads, is what I'm hearing.

MARK PEACHEY: Correct. Focusing on the Central District, Hants County would get the proportion of gravel roads within the district funding for that.

THE CHAIR: Any others? No. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for appearing today. This really was quite informative.

I would offer time now for any closing remarks you may have.

PETER HACKETT: No, I just want to say thank you to all the members for having us in today and talking about highways and gravel roads and our program going forward. I appreciate the comments that you have good relationships with our staff and work closely with them. We like to hear that our staff is out there working closely with you, because you do represent the people and the public and we want to make sure that we service the public the best that we can.

I also just want to say thank you to all of our staff, who have worked pretty hard over the last couple of years in COVID-19 and now getting back to some normalcy, I think. They're one of the groups that had to endure a lot of work, stay at work and make sure that the roads were cleared and looked after safely over the last two years.

I just want to say thanks to them for their hard work and dedication over the last little while, and to keep it up going forward. We know that they're a great bunch and they're well skilled and they're dedicated to their job. Thank you for having us today.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. You're free to leave. (Laughter)

Moving on to committee business. Seeing no committee business . . .

AN HON. MEMBER: Aww.

THE CHAIR: It's a bit different, but it's a good thing, I think. Our next meeting will be April 6, 2022. It's going to be an in camera session with the Office of the Auditor General regarding our training session.

Is there any further business? Seeing none, this meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:45 a.m.]