



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Electoral Boundaries Commission
Public Hearings

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Electoral Boundaries Commission

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Electoral Boundaries Commission Public Hearings – Fort McMurray

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Byron Kessler
Rene Wells

12:57 p.m.

Monday, June 16, 2025

[Justice Miller in the chair]

The Chair: Well, good afternoon, everyone. We're going to start right on time. Welcome to the Fort McMurray edition of the Electoral Boundaries Commission public hearing. First, I want to thank all of you who have come today. It looks like all the presenters may be present already.

By way of introduction my name is Justice Dallas Miller. I'm the chairman of the commission, and I also serve as a justice of the Court of King's Bench in southern Alberta.

The other commissioners at the table with me are, first of all, Susan Samson, a long-time resident of Sylvan Lake, Alberta, and an experienced municipal politician who has served several terms as a councillor and as a mayor. Susan was named citizen of the year and received the Queen Elizabeth II diamond jubilee medal in 2012 for her extensive volunteer activity in the community.

Next to Susan is Mr. John Evans, KC, a lawyer with a firm known as Stringam which is centred in Lethbridge, Alberta. That's where he does much of his work, but he conducts trials across the province. John's legal ability has been recognized by being awarded King's Counsel, or KC. John also volunteers as a member of the Alberta Judicial Nominating Committee.

To my right is Dr. Julian Martin. Dr. Martin is a retired history professor from the University of Alberta with advanced degrees from Cambridge University. Julian has volunteered on many committees in the Edmonton and Sherwood Park areas and serves on provincial quasi-judicial tribunals.

At the far end of the table is Mr. Greg Clark, an entrepreneur and consultant focusing on information and knowledge management. Greg has the experience of serving one term as a member of the Legislature of Alberta for Calgary-Elbow. He, too, is a recipient of the Queen Elizabeth II platinum jubilee medal. Currently Greg serves as the chairman of the Balancing Pool of Alberta and advises and consults organizations relative to proper board governance.

We are your Electoral Boundaries Commission, and we have been travelling the province for the last three weeks. This is our week for northern Alberta, and we're happy to be here. We had a great trip up here, and we look forward to hearing from those of you who are presenting.

I also want to just introduce to you Mr. Aaron Roth, who is in the front row. He can wave. If you have any written material that you're going to present, if you want to leave it with us, leave it with Aaron, and he'll make sure we get copies.

The Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission is an independent commission established by the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. We have the task, which is given to a commission every eight to 10 years, or every two election cycles, to look at the boundaries and see if there's to be any change. Well, there's no question that this time around there will be changes. Why? First of all, the Legislature has expanded the number of seats from 87 to 89, so we've got two additional seats to apportion in the province. By the next election there will be 89 new electoral divisions.

It's helpful to see what our timeline is like in order to give an idea of the process that we'll be going through. First of all, this commission was established by the Speaker of the Legislature in late March of this year. We were able to meet a couple of times as a commission in April to discuss process and schedule. Then we commenced our public hearings in late May in southern Alberta. We've worked through Pincher Creek, Lethbridge, Drumheller, Medicine Hat, Brooks, Calgary, Wainwright. You can see all the places we visited on our website. We conclude our hearings next week. After we've concluded all of our public hearings, we will

deliberate and review the presentations that we've heard, review the population statistics, and start working on our report.

The timeline requires that we provide an interim report to the Speaker of the Legislature by late October of this year. That report will be made public. It'll be published in the *Alberta Gazette*. It'll be made public, and members of the public can respond to that report in the weeks and months after late October. We will then conduct a second round of public hearings, and by the end of March 2026 we are required to submit our final report to the Speaker of the Legislature. At that time the government will enact enabling legislation based on our report. That will be enacted, and of course the public will be notified of the new boundaries.

You are aware, no doubt, that each member of the Legislature is elected by only voters in that person's constituency. I will use the terms "electoral division," "electoral district," "constituency," "riding," all meaning the same thing.

Again, for clarity it is helpful to compare what has happened in the past in respect to electoral boundaries. In 2017 the previous Electoral Boundaries Commission issued its report and submitted it to the Speaker based on only 87 constituencies. That commission dealt with a population of Alberta of just over 4 million people. The formula that they used is, as you can see, a formula based on a 4,062,609 population divided by 87, and the mean average number is 46,697. In Alberta and in Canada we do not operate on the one person, one vote principle. We operate more on what has come to be known as effective representation. The courts and the legislation have said that effective representation is achieved as long as the targeted population is in that range of minus 25 to plus 25 of the mean average. You can see those population figures on the screen. So anywhere from 35,023 to 58,371 was the permitted number to be allowed in each electoral division as a result of the 2017 electoral boundaries. The important number to recognize is the population figure, as I said, just over 4 million people in 2017.

This year the formula is before you, and our population is 4,888,723. The mean average is obtained by dividing it by the number of constituencies, which will be 89. You see the target population range of 41,197 to 68,661. That's the targeted range that we are dealing with as a commission. The population number that we've arrived at is based on what the legislation says we must refer to and supplemental information from the Alberta government.

1:05

First of all, the legislation requires us to look at the most recent decennial census for Canada, which was 2021. In population terms a lot has changed over the last four years in Alberta, so we're not solely relying on the 2021 figure. What most people don't realize is Statistics Canada does update their census figures on a regular basis, and added to that the Alberta government, through the Alberta Treasury Board Office of Statistics and Information, regularly updates and validates the population of Alberta.

The number we're using is the number that you see on the screen. That is a verified and validated population figure as of July 2024, so that's the figure we'll be using. That's the cut-off date, and that's the data that we'll be relying on. I know that there have been public reports of the population of Alberta actually being 5 million. Well, that may very well be correct, but the most validated and verified figure is the one that's before you, and that's what we'll be using. The challenge for us as a commission is that the growth has not been evenly distributed across the province. It's been focused mainly on the two large cities, Calgary and Edmonton.

Our task as a commission is to come up with a recommendation of the boundaries providing for the term "effective representation." Again, it's not one person, one vote; it's effective representation. That can be arrived at using a number of factors. Most of these

factors are actually spelled out in the legislation. First of all, we look at the relative sparsity and density of the population throughout the province. We also look at factors such as common community interests and organizations, and that may very well come into play in our hearing today. Geographic features feature prominently in the areas outside the cities but, to some extent, even within the cities. We will be looking at geographic features like rivers and roads, major thoroughfares. Communication and transportation lines across the province will also be a factor.

Our goal as a commission is to provide a report that provides understandable and clear boundaries to Albertans. The legislation allows us to take into consideration other unique and appropriate factors that will come to our attention through the public hearings, largely. Now as part of the public hearing process we want to hear from Albertans. We want to hear from you as to what you'd like to see in your particular part of the province.

To commence our hearings, we have a list of three formal presenters, and because we have some time, if there's anyone else that would like to present, we'll allow those individuals to present after we've gone through the list.

Our first presenter is Mr. Byron Kessler. Just have a seat at the table here. By the way, all these microphones do mean something. The hearing is being recorded, and the audiofeed will be on the website in a couple of days. It's also going to be transcribed, so *Hansard* will provide a written transcription that will be on the website as well.

Mr. Kessler, please identify yourself, tell us where you live, and proceed with your presentation.

Mr. Kessler: I'm Byron Kessler. I currently live in the little town of Gregoire Lake Estates out by Anzac and was born and raised in Peace River. I worked in Robb, Edson, Peace River, Manning, Whitecourt, Grande Prairie, Dawson Creek, Rainbow Lake, Fort McMurray. I have a NAIT forestry diploma, a U of A forestry degree, and a ITABC red seal journeyman electrician. I was the owner and operator of a now defunct forestry firefighting consulting company. So I'm not educated to the extent of all of this, but I do have some understanding of it.

The Chair: You know the north by the looks of it.

Mr. Kessler: Yes.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Kessler: I used to be a forest officer. I worked in the firefighting side of everything with the Alberta government.

I'd like to thank you for giving the opportunity for the electorate to speak their minds. I have a simple question. Do you believe we need a referendum on separation? I don't want you to answer that, but are we truthfully seeking the answer to that? That's why I put that in there. Are we truthfully seeking the answer to that?

With that, I'd like to bring your attention to WCC. I don't know if you guys know of that, back in the 1980s. This isn't a new thing. The basis of this whole premise and all of this stuff is equity, equality, fairness. Not everyone gets a blue ribbon in life. Some of us don't even get first, second, or third-place trophies. It's what it is. Life is not fair.

I beg to differ on that, the trophies and first places. Life is based on ROI; it's our return on our investment. You know, I might be a thousandth place, but am I happy with my return on my investment? And by return on investment I mean labour invested by me, my family, my neighbours, my community, my town, my city, my province, my country, my kingdom. Think of all this labour invested: for what purpose? I added kingdom because we're still

under the Westminster Commonwealth; some of the awards or whatever point that out.

All of this labour versus each of these entities taxing said labour: labour meaning time away from the ones we love and the things that make us happy. I would hazard a guess that most of that happiness and the ones we love are what we would say makes us prosperous. They say you increase your wages to your employees. It doesn't make them happier, but if you give them more time with their grandkids or something, it does, right?

So it's labour and return on investment of said labour. If the entities above decide to invest a large portion of labour, banking on obtaining prosperity, and one of the entities to which it's bound, of all of those that I had mentioned, from kingdom down to self, decides they want to take a substantial portion of that, what is our labour? In doing so, taking the benefit from the whole takes away from you. It has always been implied that if you work hard, you would get ahead.

I tried putting something together here because I'm passionate about this. The British Commonwealth is 2,000,418,000 people. I pulled that up on the web. I might be wrong. I'm just throwing numbers out, but I'm confident that that's close. Canada is 40,000 people, 1.6 per cent . . .

The Chair: Forty thousand or 40 million?

Mr. Kessler: Forty million, sorry. Roughly, again, 1.6 per cent of the Commonwealth.

We basically did away with the Commonwealth because they were taking from us a while back. We said that we wanted to be our own, right? Our current situation we're in: Canada is at 40 million; Alberta is 4.88. We have the same situation. A lot of people think that central is taking from the north and the west.

In saying all of this, I'm trying to put – and people are asking for this referendum, but what are people really asking for? They don't think it's fair. They're taking us. It's your labour. How do we get benefit? We work hard. I get a big house. I try and make people happy in my community, in my town. If it gets taken away, how does population – the Ottawa-Toronto corridor there. The election is over, right? How do we get equal representation? They say the whole west doesn't even equate to the east, let alone one of the big provinces. That's what I'm getting down to.

1:15

I'm not saying that it shouldn't be population, but I didn't know the formula you had. From what I've seen, I would urge you to go to that lower level, the negative 25 per cent, and those extra seats that are there, the areas that – I know people aren't going to like this, but if I work hard, I strive. That was sort of the dream. I work hard, and I can provide for my family. I work hard, and I can get ahead, yet it doesn't seem like that. The last few years I worked 80 hours a week. A week. Double. In 2019 when everybody was saying they didn't want to go to work, my income was \$185,000. I said I would go. I didn't get ahead and felt underrepresented. It was all just taken away. There's no point in my labour. I should have just sat on my butt. This area works hard. We try to provide for the province. If there's no benefit to that, why do it? If there's no representation, right?

So the real issue is the lack of meaningful influence on our labour. This facilitates a political advantage-taking, undermining the dignity and potential contributions of other underrepresented regions that care about the investment in the province, right? Representation by population does not work. We can see that in Canada alone, the population of Quebec and Ontario versus everywhere else. It's essential we redraw the MLA seats to include

population. I do understand: Edmonton with a million, Calgary with a million point three people. You can't say: yeah, you get one hospital in Fort McMurray. You get one hospital. I mean that population has to be in there somewhere to provide, but when you work your arse off and you get nothing, it's frustrating.

What I would like to see is: create a positive feedback loop where, yes, it might not be fair, but we know life isn't fair. But if we work hard, maybe we get more representation. I don't know how that works within your formulas. I don't know the whole scope of how all your formulas work, but that is basically what I'm saying. I agree that population is a big factor, but it should be that if we invest, if we – you know, that was the American or the Albertan dream. You work hard. We're go-getters. You know, I started a company. Yeah, it didn't work, but we give 'er. We put out.

I guess my final statement: is it better to reward less labour investment? I put it down as labour because if I just said dollars – but it's actual labour. This is time people have. You know, I chose to labour, and I didn't get to go and see this with my niece or nephew or my kids or my mom. I missed out. Our investment in the labour we do, our sacrifices: should we not be rewarded for that? That is what I'm trying to say.

I mean, I pulled up tons of numbers and, you know, if you look at the GDP of Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, they don't give it to you, but they'll tell you that it's like a trillion over the next 11 years. Well, that's \$90 billion every year, and with the lower population, now, that's a fallacy as well. The people producing that \$90 billion: there are guys out here that fly in every week, still not company paid. They'll pay it themselves from Ontario and stuff, right? They see the Alberta advantage, but their family is all there. Their parents are there. Their nieces and nephews are there, so they still do that. They still do that.

It was like \$800,000 GDP per capita compared to, like, the \$70,000 and \$80,000 of Edmonton and Calgary. One seat. Like I said, I understand population, but there comes a point where this little area getting split up 75 times doesn't equate to equality or fairness when this area gets one. I mean, from your formula there I would urge you to go to the low end of that. I just did a quick calculation. That comes out to 118 seats. Do not give those out as definite: you always get this. The producers, whether it's Banff that makes tons of money because of the Japanese tourism – I don't have the numbers. I don't have the figures, but a bunch of our province's productivity comes from there. They should have an extra say. They should have the ability to say: "No. We need to reinvest in this. We need to reinvest in this instead of it all coming – you know, I want the Yellowhead done."

I know I didn't have a fancy presentation like they taught us to do in school. This is all just from my heart, and I hope I came across. If you have any questions of what I'm thinking, I'd hope that you understand where my head is at.

The Chair: Mr. Kessler, thank you very much. We are going to probably have some questions to answer, but just for clarification, you said you live in Gregoire Lake?

Mr. Kessler: Yes.

The Chair: That's south of the city here, and that's in Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche?

Mr. Kessler: Yes.

The Chair: Is that where you operate your businesses as well?

Mr. Kessler: No. I am a journeyman electrician right now. I work for companies within town.

The Chair: Okay. Just for context, the population – and we're going to probably press you for some information that you could provide to us as a commission. The riding that you live in, Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche, in 2016 had a population of 44,166. The population for 2024 is 44,916. About an 800 increase, very slight compared to the rest of the province. But it's helpful to just look at your northern riding as well. Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo in 2016 was 41,420. The 2024 number is 45,917. Those numbers are on the lower end, obviously, as you recognized in the formula. So your point is: look, there are not a lot of people in these ridings, but we shouldn't expand the ridings to make that number go higher, closer to the mean average. Is that what you're saying?

Mr. Kessler: Yes.

The Chair: Because it's difficult to get representation in Edmonton.

Mr. Kessler: Well, I don't believe that it should be just population. Like, if that's our range, why not have it at the low end? That's our equal representation. Then what we have left, you get economists together and you say: "Okay, Rainbow Lake produces this. Cypress Hills produces this."

I:25

Like, have a look at it and say: okay; hey, you know what? Edmonton and Calgary actually have pretty good GDPs or whatever. We'll throw one in the whole and maybe not split these ones we have up. Maybe we say: no; you can overlap. Why can't the next ridings overlap? You vote for two people in your riding, your steady one and then one that could change. I know people aren't going to like it, but if your area doesn't prosper in effort to labour gone for the whole province, you may lose that guy next time around.

The Chair: Okay. Just to assure you, we're limited to only 89 ridings. We're not suggesting any more, just an increase of two.

Mr. Kessler: Okay. That's fine. I'm just saying that that is how I think.

The Chair: Okay.

I don't want to monopolize the questioning, so I'm going to ask the other commissioners if they have any questions. Susan, do you want to start?

Mrs. Samson: Thank you, and thank you for coming out. I have been looking at these ridings in preparation of coming up here, and it's extremely difficult. The ridings are massive and, as you say, huge economic drivers. I mean, this province is run on gas and oil and the labour that comes out of here, and I hear you loud and clear. But the parameters that we're given is that this riding that you live in is 10,000 people short of just the average. Am I right that you're suggesting that we take the lower half – like, we can go plus or minus 25 per cent – and you're saying: go as low as you can? Thanks for that clarity.

The other thing, too, I just wanted to mention is that we use population to start the calculations, to start where we're going to make the boundaries or change them, but, you know, one of the parameters is communities of interest, geographical features, communication – the chair went through it – and any other factors. I think you brought up some factors that bear consideration, but I guess the bottom line is that given the parameters that we have to work with, this riding will only get one MLA.

Mr. Kessler: And that's what I mean, but me coming here and saying this – I mean, I guess I represent 40-some thousand people.

Mrs. Samson: You do. You do. I know that.

Mr. Kessler: You know, getting it out – like, I don't expect just, "Oh, he said that; it's going to happen," but it has to be said.

Mrs. Samson: You know, I agree, and I think we have to hear it. I feel compelled to acknowledge your case because it's valid, but the tools that we've been given can't help us solve the point you're coming from.

Mr. Kessler: Yeah.

Mrs. Samson: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Evans.

Mr. Evans: Good afternoon. Appreciate your presentation. I appreciate that it comes from the heart. I think that's important.

As I've said to many people that have presented, now that you're seated there, I'm going to mine you for some information. My colleague Susan brought up a point that I think is very helpful, and it comes from the legislation that we're governed by. Sort of in section 14 of the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act there's a catch-all, and Susan referenced it: "any other factors the Commission considers appropriate." Susan touched on it briefly with you, but I'm interested if you could help me understand the economic factors that you were alluding to. If you were going to provide some parameters to that or some delineating factors, what would they be? How would we assess the positives and negatives of the economic drivers?

Mr. Kessler: In my mind I was saying, like, you can't just go gross economy. I mean, if Suncor and Syncrude and these guys decide, "We're going to take this writeoff, this writeoff, this writeoff, this writeoff," and they actually don't put anything back to taxes or the province, then that's a loss for that area. It would have to be net benefit to the province, what goes into your coffers.

Mr. Evans: Well, looking at it on a municipal basis, would that be a way to look at it in terms of the municipality being in the black or being in the red?

Mr. Kessler: Yeah. And I am not sure if the RMWB is or not. I mean, I do know that, like, the town of Grande Cache actually went backwards and went to the MD of Greenview, you know, because they were in the red. So then that area now is represented by that whole of the MD of Greenview type of thing, right?

And I guess Fort McMurray did the same thing because they couldn't get upgrades because their tax base was just the town. There is no town of Fort McMurray per se; it is the hamlet or whatever of Fort McMurray within the RMWB of Alberta, right?

Mr. Evans: What are your thoughts about the size of this particular electoral district and the fact that Fort McMurray is kind of divided? We have a northern part and a southern part, one represented by one MLA and the other represented by the other.

Mr. Kessler: I mean, there has to be a dividing line. Most people commonly understand that. We've always in our fishing regs, everything – it's been the rivers. It's been roads, things like that; provincial boundaries, basically, right? Whether that line is correct or not, I have no idea.

Mr. Evans: I think you're answering my questions. I appreciate that very much.

The Chair: I'll go across to my colleague to my right, but I just have a quick question. Gregoire Lake Estates: how many people live there? And how many people live in Anzac?

Mr. Kessler: Gregoire Lake Estates is 200; Anzac, maybe 400 or 500.

The Chair: I grew up in a town of less than 400. Okay. Thank you. Dr. Martin.

Dr. Martin: Thank you. Thank you for coming, and thank you for going to the emotional trouble of sorting out all the backstory on how labour is built into the provincial economy. I respect that work.

I wanted to touch, though, on one feature that I'm not – well, you did mention that a lot of workers still fly in, so obviously I want to talk about the old story of the ghost workers, as it were. In your experience – it sounds like you've got lots of it – there are still a lot of people living in company-controlled campsites or flying in for spot work and the like. Would you characterize the working population of this area as higher than the official census population?

Mr. Kessler: Yes, definitely.

Dr. Martin: And do you feel that – and, again, this is impressionistic. You know, 10 or 15 years ago we were sort of in the boom of construction-type work here. Do you feel that the current situation of those extra workers compared to the situation back then is comparable? Slightly less? The same? What do you think?

Mr. Kessler: I would say that, to the Fort McMurray area, it's probably comparable. A lot of people now drive. That's why we got a twinned highway for 40,000 people.

Dr. Martin: Yes. Good point.

Mr. Kessler: This area has, like – the last job I was on was a maintenance job. We just worked at this one facility, maintenance-wise, sat in tables like this, about this big. I think there were 14 of us. Three of us were from Fort McMurray.

1:35

Dr. Martin: Right.

Mr. Kessler: The others: Kamloops, Rocky Mountain House, Edmonton. I know we have said that there can be no hindrance to the person to crossing borders for employment. To some degree – I mean, this is off topic, maybe. I don't know if it is. In my mind if John's company has 85 per cent out-of-province workers, that's fine. He's allowed to do that. The workers are allowed to do that. But then shouldn't Alberta encourage John to maybe try to get some permanent housing? Like, this has been continually going on year after year after year.

Dr. Martin: Well, I entirely agree with that consequence of workers coming in and not being grounded, as it were, in the municipal district. If you're not paying taxes, then you're getting some level of expensive services for free. I think that's always been the problem up here. How to service all the community properly when only some portion of the population is paying into it. Well, that's a classic problem, isn't it? I think to some extent, the fact is that Fort McMurray has generated so much money so fast that sometimes people forget that is a problem. I'm just probing to find out whether it explains why the numbers, the official numbers,

remain relatively flat. You think that that's because the cycle of outside workers continues as a significant feature of the economy?

Mr. Kessler: Yes, definitely.

Dr. Martin: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Clark.

Mr. Clark: Thank you very much.

Yeah. I guess I'll build on a couple of the points that my colleagues have made, and then I have some geography questions, given that it sounds like you've worked and lived all over the north. That's very, very helpful for us.

Just in terms of, again, maybe giving us another slice on the population, I think Justice Miller talked about how Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche and Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo were sort of 44,000 or 45,000. Just as a reference point, we've got that plus or minus 25 per cent. In 2016 when they were established, they were around 10 or 11 per cent under the average at the time. We're now 18 and 16 per cent under. So we're still within the 25 per cent, but we're already kind of getting – as you know, the rest of the province has grown incredibly. I mean, kind of a good news, bad news, right? We've had 800,000 people move to Alberta, and they generally are moving to Calgary and Edmonton and surrounding areas. It's not that Fort McMurray isn't growing, it's just not growing as fast as other parts of the rest of the province. Just one example of that is when I do a quick little bit of math. You add the two Fort McMurrays together; it comes up to just under 91,000: 90,833. There's one constituency, Calgary-North East, that is 85,000.

That's part of the challenge that we've got. How do we balance all this out, right? I think you said it yourself. You got to accommodate for the vast geography up here. There are just not a lot of people. But there are lots of other considerations. The folks in Calgary-North East or Edmonton-South would say: "Yeah. We also have needs, too." People always wish us luck as we go through this because we've got to balance all of it. Again, as Justice Miller said, the nice thing about the Canadian model is that we can do that. We can say: "You know what? There's a good reason that there's a sparser population." We have the tools, I guess. It's just a question of how.

When I look at a map, I'm looking here at sort of the north, and I'm kind of going over towards, like, Slave Lake area. I'm just wanting to get a sense of kind of what the natural connections are here, north and south, east and west. Like, is Slave Lake at all connected in this sort of – it seems like you have to go all the down south to Athabasca and back up again.

Mr. Kessler: Everybody talks that, like, after the fire and maybe a little bit before the fire, they were going to do a highway to Calling Lake, Red Earth area or whatever. It never did transpire. From my understanding the Saskatchewan government has built a paved highway to the Alberta-Saskatchewan border, out past Anzac, and Alberta has left that as a mud trail, where they freeze the rivers in the wintertime. So there are no east-west corridors anywhere here. It is literally north-south and to the north to Fort Chip.

As a forest officer I understand some of the mentality up there. They don't necessarily want the highway going there because some of the people that live in Chip feel that we're heathens or that we pollute their culture, which, to some degree, I have to admit that we do. The money, the things, the vices that come with it, right?

To the north of Fort McMurray there's the ice road in the wintertime, but there isn't a permanent highway there either. So it's basically an hour north and south of Fort McMurray.

Mr. Clark: The previous boundaries had an east-west divide in this region, and in 2017 they changed it to more of a north-south orientation. In your opinion, that makes sense?

Mr. Kessler: Yes. It is the corridors of what we have for travelling.

Mr. Clark: That's perfect. That's what I need to know. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Kessler, I failed to mention that we normally have the presenters stick to a seven-minute time limit and then three minutes for questions. This has been very, very interesting and very helpful, sir. As I said, the list isn't that close, so we can be much more flexible. We've heard from you and we've grilled you for 35 minutes, so thank you so much for coming. You're excused. Please stay if you can because sometimes we engage in more fulsome conversation after all the presenters. So if you can stay, please do so. Thank you again for coming.

Mr. Kessler: Thank you again for letting us speak.

The Chair: Our next presenter is Janice Bailey. Janice Bailey? No. Okay.

Vaughn Jessome.

Mr. Jessome: Good afternoon to the commission. Thank you very much for giving us the opportunity to speak today. I'd first like to welcome you to Fort McMurray, home of the oil sands, the epicentre of the economic corridors, the energy superpower that our current Liberal government professes.

For the record my name is Vaughn Jessome. I'm a 45-year resident of Fort McMurray. For the first 30 years I owned a restaurant and operated that, and for the last 15 years I've been running constituency offices in Fort McMurray. I started with the late hon. Guy Boutilier, from 2008 to 2012. Subsequently I became the constituency manager for Tany Yao, the MLA for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, and Brian Jean, the MLA for Fort McMurray-Conklin at the time, the leader of the Official Opposition Wildrose Party. For Minister Jean it was from 2015 to 2017. He took a break to take care of his family. He came back in 2022 to the present. He is now, as everybody knows, the hon. Minister of Energy and Minerals.

Just so you understand that this is not the first time that I've made a presentation to the commission. I was here the last time, and we still have the same debates going on today as we did back then. Government really should be more proactive in addressing the calculations, the parameters that they put you under. Understanding, I think, that you have exemptions, right? You have one or two or three exemptions with regard to the population?

The Chair: Up to four, under section . . .

Mr. Jessome: Up to four. Okay. Yeah.

I'm here today to emphasize the need and the desire to have a balance between a rural and urban area, especially in northeastern Alberta. We have two strong ridings that represent probably about 10 to 12 First Nations, two Métis settlements, approximately eight Métis Nations/OMG/Métis Nation of Alberta. The balance of the rural-urban really works well with regard to especially the First Nations, who really are one of the bigger users of our constituencies and stuff we have there.

1:45

Before I get into some information which may be helpful to you in the future, one request is that the commission, well, first off, not go with one MLA. I've been through that before. It was during the

peak times, and it was not a fun time to be working in the constituency office. The other thing is that the last time that they were here with the boundaries commission, we recommended an Athabasca River split. North of the bridge there's a population which involves mostly Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo; however, they carved a little piece of it and gave it to Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche, probably to add some population to it or whatever. However, from a voter perspective and constituent's perspective it's really confusing to them. For 10,000 years they voted in the same place, the whole nine yards, and for some reason they split it up.

If you can imagine Terwillegar Drive or somewhere there, any population in Edmonton, wherever, where on the right-hand side your MLA – I mean, you have that anyway. But here in the area on the right-hand side is Tany Yao, on the left-hand side is Brian Jean. Again, something that the last commission chose to do, which, really – like I said, I also run election campaigns, and it gets really confusing. People go to a lineup where they go all the time to vote. They wait a half hour, 45 minutes to vote. Then they say: no, you have to go over across the street. What that ends up doing is frustrating a lot of people, who may end up not having that opportunity to go ahead and vote.

Again, consideration. I know that you guys have your parameters. The whole idea about the north, especially northeast, northwest – I mean, you look at Central Peace-Notley, you look at Fort McMurray, you look at the geographical area that we have to cover. We're talking Smith's Landing, Fort Fitzgerald all the way down to Fort McMurray for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo. Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche is all the way from Fort McMurray down to Whitefish (Goodfish) Lake First Nation, which is just past Kikino. That's, like, almost 350 kilometres. When you talk about effective representation, to go with one to try to cover, even if it's just Fort McMurray north, is a tall task to ask. It really is. Fort McMurray-Conklin at the time was underutilized. However, when they went to Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche – I mean, Lac La Biche is a growing community just like Fort McMurray is. When you're looking at a commission, I mean, unfortunately, you look at today's numbers and stuff out there.

We look at some of the stuff that you covered with Mr. Kessler, and I can sort of help you understand it. There are some elements to consider when you talk about future growth. First off, inventory. We talked about real estate. We talked about houses. You know, they will tell you that they built four houses last year somewhere out there. Nowadays, however, you know, for the last two years inventory has been stable and dropped down as far as when it comes to real estate. Real estate is now so low. I won't say the quality but the needs of the person that's buying it are not there. What they are actually doing is door cost calculation. Anybody that's in construction understands that they look at whether it may be worth their while to actually build a house rather than buy one because they can't meet the needs.

In the boom of the time, back in the mid-2000s or, you know, after 1995, after Chrétien made his announcement with the royalty regime changes, we were building houses left, right, and centre. What ended up happening – it's all about supply and demand – is our community was stuck inside of a little cycle if you will. The government owned the land outside of it, the Crown land, and they did not release land timely enough. What ended up happening was that people were paying anywhere from \$250,000 to \$350,000 just for a lot of land to build a house, and then when you add in your door costs, you know, you're looking at \$600,000 to \$700,000. Approximately 15 years ago we had our first million-dollar sale of a house. Now there's all kinds of them that are out there. I mentioned that as the past because nowadays the price of land, mostly, is from \$60,000 for a lot of land to \$90,000, \$120,000.

Did you fly in, or did you drive in? You drove in. Okay. When we looked at population growth back in the mid-2000s, we were going to 250,000 people. We expanded the area in the north of Fort McMurray, and we also did it to the south, so right now we have the capacity to hold another 60,000 to 80,000 people without having to release anymore land. A lot of it is service ready. Now, because the prices are affordable, we see the opportunity to build more houses. So those are indicators of what's to come.

Last week we attended the groundbreaking of Home Depot. Home Depot is going to build a new store in Fort McMurray. Corporations such as Home Depot don't build oil businesses in the middle of the Sahara Desert. The economic growth that's projected for Fort McMurray is exponential.

We also talk about Pathways Alliance. I don't know if you guys are familiar with Pathways Alliance. They are a conglomerate of the oil sands and major oil sands players who have come together to create the carbon capture and storage facility to help reduce their carbon footprint. That is at the table of the federal government, waiting to be released. Based on the direction that the current Prime Minister is giving, we see that as being a low-hanging fruit for them that will drive the Alberta economy in the short-term. It can be anywhere from \$20 billion to \$40 billion in investment. Some of it is in Cold Lake, but also here in Fort McMurray. They have to retrofit their units. There's basically six organizations that are involved in it. The investment in that would be something to keep Fort McMurray busy for the next five years alone.

The census right now is currently being done. The municipality has just finished the census. They don't have the final numbers yet; however, they see a significant increase in population in Fort McMurray. Those numbers should be released probably before you finish your commission, before your mandate is up, so it might be a good opportunity to reach out to the municipality. They may be able to give you some raw data that you can use for it.

The current census – you're right – was in 2021. Five years without a census is not very supportive of a community that's always looking for extra dollars from the federal, provincial dollars. As you know, a community is funded based on their population. We have 76,000 people in the region of this province – well, Wood Buffalo. We're not talking south, you know, in Lac La Biche and area, when it comes to Fort McMurray and Lac La Biche.

You asked about the camps. With the last numbers we have, there are about 30,000 people that live in the camps. To put it into perspective, in the mid-2000s, when we were at a peak, we had a population of 80,000 people and 80,000 in camp; it was 1 to 1 at that particular time. At that time then-Mayor Melissa Blake – when CNRL and Albion had put in for their oil sands development, the municipality had sought intervenor status – actually intervened in the applications through AER or whatever their name was at the time. What she had said at that particular time is that our community cannot handle any more population. That's because we were still landlocked because of the Crown land and stuff out there.

A beautiful drive from here to downtown right now is 10 minutes. At that particular time it could take you three hours. During the beginning of the morning shifts or the evening, you can look at two to three hours if there's no accidents. If there's an accident, it could be five to six. You visualize an ambulance as: pick somebody up on the highway, and they're sitting at the top, so trying to get them down through there. That's the situation we're in now.

1:55

Right now we're in a more favourable situation. When you talk about camps, there is a desire, especially with the government and with industry, to reduce the size of the camps. Camps were created because once every six months Syncrude or Suncor would have to

do a turnaround, and they would bring in 4,000 to 5,000 people if not more to do the turnaround. It was for, like, two months, and that was it. Camps were used for that because they didn't want to put the pressure on the community. The community still supports camps for that type of business. What we don't support is that industry has now used that there to create fly-in, fly-out. We're talking about people who were born and raised in Fort McMurray and were told they had to move to Calgary if they wanted to keep their jobs, having shift schedules like 14 on and 14 off.

They have hubs. Edmonton is a hub, and Calgary is a hub. You get yourself to either one of those, and they'll fly you from there right into camp. You don't stop at the airport. They have six aerodromes north of the city. We have more aerodromes north of the city than probably anywhere in Canada. At one time industry was flying their own 737, 747, a big Boeing, bringing them in. They owned their own planes. They brought them in. They eventually got out of the airplane business and gave the contract to WestJet. If you're ever in Edmonton, in Calgary and you're waiting for your plane and you look at the departures, have a look. At any given day you see 68 flights to not Fort McMurray – no – to Albion, you know, to the different oil sands sites. They fly over it.

There's a significant move now. Things have changed in that they are moving towards establishing the community in which they build. We're not just talking Fort McMurray. You know, the Minister of Energy and Minerals speaks on behalf of Cold Lake, Bonnyville, everywhere you've been, Medicine Hat, Lloydminster. I mean, they all have the same problem. They suffer. They suffer because industry has been addicted to these camps that allow them to house them there. If they didn't have them there, if they lived in-house, in the community, then they would end up – maybe they wouldn't make it to work the next day or somewhere out there. Kid is sick: well, no, you stay home. They have dedicated labour, and that's one of the big things they like. What they fail to look at are the psychological disadvantages that camps have, and that has everything to do with increase in divorces, mental health and addictions – you name it – sleep schedules. There are many studies that say that anything over eight hours or 10 hours is not productive, especially – I mean, it's one thing to do it five days a week. To do it 14 days a week?

Having said that, they are moving towards. Some industry partners have made it a priority that their contractors hire people from Fort McMurray or they have an address here. You know, it's an address or whatever, but at least we're getting them into the community. They don't get to camp. They have to commute back and forth. So it helps to that extent. This is what has driven down the availability of houses and stuff out there. The other thing that they're doing is that they're moving more people into town. Suncor is making a priority when they – not a priority. Basically, when they're hiring new people – engineers, labourers, you name it – they're hiring people from within Fort McMurray or you have to come to Fort McMurray. The job office says that you have to relocate, which is a total change in mentality, which is a good sign for the future of things to come. While we're not there yet with industry, we're moving that way, and that's just with regard to camps.

If you understand the government, they look at the price of oil, you know, from the financial side of it. They look to see where they create revenue streams.

If you look at 40 – never mind coming from Edmonton or Calgary or Red Deer; how about the people that come from B.C., the people that come from eastern Canada and stuff right out there? There's about 40 per cent of people that come in from there that work in the camps and pay absolutely no Alberta taxes. And when you look at opportunities for revenue streaming, those are the – people will

move to Kelowna. They'll buy a package, and they will fly to Calgary, and then they get on the jumbo, and then they're there, right? They're there. The labour is mostly from the east coast, but people still live back there. They fly out here for 14 days, and they go home for 14 days, right? The toll that it's having on people is evident now. You can see that they are looking to switch away from that, but it's still a big concern for them.

The other thing we look at is that you hear about data centres. Fort McMurray is primed for at least one if not three data centres. These data centres are the operators that really like the northern part of Alberta, number one, because it's colder. Forty per cent of their cost is cooling their data centres, so having it where the temperature is minus 40 significantly reduces that. They require a size of about 40 acres, and there's one – I mean, Minister Jean speaks of it often – that's on the cusp of signing that will have, you know, 1,000 jobs for construction, the operation of it. They're no different than the old towers that you had before laptops, and you'd go in and have to change your hard drive out all the time. The maintenance on those is very high.

To build a data centre, you're required to be off grid. You're not allowed to access power from the grid, so you have to be self-sufficient. This is an opportunity for organizations such as Suncor and others that have power. Suncor currently puts back onto the power grid about 860,000 kilowatt hours, so that's an opportunity. For here we have the water systems, access to water when it comes to generating power. We also have a dedicated labour force for these people that are in camp or the people in here. They're there as well.

Yeah. In the end, when we look at when the recently elected federal Liberal Party and the Prime Minister talks about creating that energy superpower, it starts in Alberta. It starts in Fort McMurray, and we are on the cusp of an increase in population. Minister Jean spoke at the local chamber of commerce, and he sees, you know, creating supercities within Alberta that can have anywhere from 200,000 to 250,000 people in them.

When you talk about the connectors, the government has for the last year been actively setting up the road from here to Peerless Lake. That's our 686. Fifteen years ago, when they did the overpass for North Parsons, they actually created an overpass that was for heavy load, so it's a wider turn and stuff right out there. It would go from here to Peerless Lake. Red Earth is what it is, and then you go north. So you will see about three hours' difference in the travel. And they are there. Like, they've already – Peerless Lake, the First Nation band and stuff there, were isolated. They now have paved roads. They're looking at actually going from Fort McKay, which will reduce it even more.

The other one is La Loche road. La Loche road has never been a priority. It was something that Ralph Klein announced during the centennial of Alberta that he committed to and nobody ever did. Alberta has committed to the La Loche road, and that is in the planning stage as well, as well as the minerals. Transportation and Economic Corridors: all the way from the Northwest Territories down to Edmonton the minister of transportation for Alberta signed a memorandum of understanding with the minister in the Northwest Territories to create an economic corridor to be able to move their minerals into Alberta to be able to process them for them.

2:05

Having said that, I'll wrap it up. I'd really, really look to see you use your opportunity to give us exemptions. We cannot go back to the one. When you talk about effective representation, you will not get effective representation. I worked with hon. Mr. Guy Boutilier during the time of the peak, and this was a three-hour drive from a 10-minute drive. Like, it was terrible. We cannot go to those.

The Chair: Okay. You said, sir, that you can't go back to one. You mean one electoral district?

Mr. Jessome: That's right. Up until 2012 we had Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, which came from Fort McKay down to, basically, just outside of town.

The Chair: Okay. I'm going to stop you there because I think the commissioners are chomping at the bit to ask you some questions.

We're going to start with Dr. Martin.

Dr. Martin: Oh, okay. Well, of course, I'm interested in the shadow population, particularly since you put a number to it. Now, how did you do that?

Mr. Jessome: Well, it is part of the census. The thing to remember is that we were very lucky. Mr. Clark, it's nice to see you. Thank you for your service. The mayor as well.

During the time with these three-hour drives and stuff we had there, Guy Boutilier was able to convince Treasury Board to put a dollar value to the 80,000 people that were in camp. They still went to our hospitals. They still used them. Like, the RCMP could have set up a station and stuff right out there. When we do a census in Fort McMurray, it includes the shadow population. Industry may be not always forthcoming with who comes, but they do have numbers that they give to the municipality in order to be able to complete the census because we are a unique community in which we get funding from the provincial government based on those people.

When Melissa Blake said that we can't handle it, they set up a community unto their own. They have hockey rinks. They have Tim Hortons. You name it. They have movie theatres. They have everything in those camps. You really help them, whether it's . . . [interjection] Pardon me?

The Chair: Can you give us some names to them?

Mr. Jessome: Yeah. Suncor camps, Syncrude, Albion. Albion was the first one that came in with the Tim Hortons and the movie theatres, the hockey rinks. You name it. Like, it's been so long that I can't even remember the stuff right in there, but you have everything that's there. I mean, full camp service. We were there in 2019 because we were looking at setting up, under the government of the day, the Kenney government, a detox centre out at the site because there are so many people that were looking for those kinds of services. Like, these are communities. They have their own doctors. They have their own nurses. They have their own medical facility. They were self-sufficient. That's what she asked for, and I don't blame her for that because at the time we really couldn't handle it.

But now the pendulum has swung back, and now thanks to the effort of Minister Jean and the government and the support – Premier Smith supports it as well – it's about building communities in which you work, profit. They look to see value to that. The more people that can work in Alberta, obviously, the more taxes you get.

Dr. Martin: I have a quite different question, I think. I want to talk about the Conklin Road. I want to talk about 881. A lot of people commute to work down there. You know, I see Mr. Kessler nodding. It's not surprising since you're in Gregoire Lake. I mean, that'd be a natural kind of thing to be working on sites all the way down that road. Is that quite common?

Mr. Jessome: A little bit. When 63 was not twinned and 881 was there, half the people took 881 halfway, right? So from commuting,

yes. We have Long Lake there. We have Cenovus. We have the other ones. But they drive in and they go into camp, and they're there for 14 days. You don't get too many people that live in, but most of them have camps. I mean, Mr. Kessler can – the discussion is about reducing those camps.

We talk about even whether it's Conklin. Conklin loves to stay as a very small, little, knit community. However, they have a \$50 million rec centre out there, right?

The thing at the time was that, when you talk about population growth, those are one of them. You do have Long Lake. You have MEG Energy. You have the other ones that are down on that 881 corridor. Yeah. There is some traffic on it from that perspective, but the traffic on 881 is very low right now.

The government must see things happen because they've earmarked \$100 million for 881 that includes passing lanes, staging areas. So they do see. Like, you hear it all the time now. The key factor with regard to economic growth is transportation and economic corridors. It's one of the main roads that they look at as a transportation corridor.

Dr. Martin: Thank you.

The Chair: The map is brought up there, sir. Am I correct in understanding that the camps are on the road on the way down to Conklin?

Mr. Jessome: And beyond that. Yeah.

The Chair: And beyond that. But that corridor is . . .

Mr. Jessome: That's one. No, no. There's still north.

The Chair: Okay. On this side . . .

Mr. Jessome: Yeah. Let's say that 20,000 are north; 10,000 are south.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Clark.

Mr. Clark: Thank you. Yeah. I'm really interested in a couple of things. Obviously, the 686 connecting over to Peerless First Nation and then from there on to Red Earth Creek: that's the plan. I was just looking this up. This is, like, present tense in Budget '25: that's happening.

Mr. Jessome: That's right. You're right.

Mr. Clark: Okay. That's going to help over time connect east and west, obviously, and also that escape road in sort of an emergency situation. That's fantastic news.

One of the things you mentioned – and we'd looked at this, or at least I looked at this earlier. I think we may have had a brief discussion about it just in preparation for this. Why is the constituency split where it is? You know, the river seems like a very natural place. Just to make sure I'm not putting words in your mouth: you're suggesting the river is a very natural place to break the constituency?

Mr. Jessome: Absolutely.

Mr. Clark: Part of the challenge we have is . . .

Mr. Jessome: Population.

Mr. Clark: Yeah, just where people live.

Mr. Jessome: Unfortunately, the government still – I understand the population. Like, 90,000 in Calgary-Elbow or somewhere out there is a significant number, right? But you have to take into consideration – like, I'm here to say that you can't go away from the rural-urban setting, especially when you're talking about First Nations, Métis, the rural communities that are there. I mean, when you're talking about UNDRIP, you know, the whole nine yards, you have to be able to service them.

When I worked with Minister Boutilier at the time in 2008, if you came into the office and you were First Nation, we automatically sent you over to the Member of Parliament because the provincial government had little or nothing to do with First Nations because they were on-reserve. They were funded by the federal government. Now there is a significant investment by the province of Alberta – I'm sure all the other provinces are – in ensuring that they have equal opportunity, opportunity for economic development, they have access to mental health, you know, all the services that us Albertans grow to love and appreciate, making sure that they are looked after as well.

Having one – like, it would be a nightmare. I worked with Mr. Boutilier prior to Minister Jean and Mr. Yao being elected. We actually have one office for the two of them. At that time, Minister Jean was the leader of the Wildrose, and he did a lot of travelling to try to build party and stuff out there. As a leader it's a lot harder – Greg, you know this – to be able to be in your home riding because you're always out meeting Albertans because you represent Albertans, not just your own riding. With my experience with Mr. Boutilier with five years, we were able to combine both offices and operate from there.

We did it for most of the 10 years, as long as Mr. Jean was there, because it gives you more. Number one, you have a bigger budget so you can staff more. You can meet the needs of people much easier, quicker, and have access. We have pride in the work that we do there, and it's only because we have the ability to have the two of them there and are able to do that.

Mr. Clark: Do you mind? I just want to ask sort of a detailed question. Your comments about the traffic jams – before my time in politics I spent a lot of time here. In fact, this is the very first hotel I ever stayed in.

Mr. Jessome: When it was Fogg N' Suds.

Mr. Clark: That's right. Yeah. It was a different time. It's actually nice to see that things will calm down a bit, and hopefully that growth is a bit more sustainable.

2:15

Just a couple of quick points. We probably are going to have a tough time using the river as the natural break point for the constituency. It would be about 57,000 north of the river and only 33,000 or so south of the river if we did that without any other changes, just sort of a like for like, so that doesn't quite fit within the plus or minus 25 per cent.

That leads, though, to my next question. You had talked about the growth and development, kind of reserves or targeted development. Can you tell me where that's happening? Is it in Timberlea, Thickwood, sort of north of the river, or is it south?

Mr. Jessome: It's Parsons. It's north, mostly north. The municipality just completed a deal with – what's his name? – Allard. His name is Allard. He's from Edmonton, a developer. He's creating a mini south commons in Fort McMurray.

The Chair: A mini what?

Mr. Jessome: South commons, so South Edmonton Common.

He has already anchored Walmart. Walmart is building a supercentre there. Canadian Tire is building – like, they don't build those without the expectation of delivery, okay? Adding to that – he has 54 acres there – the availability of land of the north is still there. Still another 30,000, 40,000 people can live there.

Same thing in the south. Right now in the south Minister Jean's riding is, other than the left-hand side of Thickwood, south of the bridge. I mean, obviously, he doesn't want to see the 54 acres suck out all the business, so the idea is to try to balance with both. The Fort McMurray Airport Authority, you know, is looking at Aurora Landing, where they're going to develop some big warehousing stuff out there to help off-set that balance of retail.

In the southern part by the airport there are another 20,000 or 30,000 people that can fit in there. There's a development there right beside a golf course. Their land was selling for \$250,000. They've sat on it for 15 years. They are now ready to sell it for \$60,000. We're talking in a very beautiful community and stuff out there. This is something I was told two days ago. There is development there.

The Chair: Anything further, Mr. Clark?

Mr. Clark: No. That's it for me.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Susan.

Mrs. Samson: Thank you. That's a very interesting presentation, and that fallout from the camps is going to be a hard one to change. I get the thing, but what I find interesting is that both MLAs share the same office at this time. Is that correct?

Mr. Jessome: That's right.

Mrs. Samson: That must be a benefit, having two voices in the Leg. to speak for the area.

Mr. Jessome: Hundred per cent. You know, back then, when Mr. Boutilier was the MLA – he was one – the government of the day, the PCs, had 20 MLAs in Edmonton, they had 20 MLAs in Calgary, and they all say: well, we have the same pressures. But for Fort McMurray it was, as Mr. Clark was saying, there was \$100 million put into Fort McMurray. Mr. Boutilier fought so hard that he ended up getting kicked out because they didn't want to listen to him anymore. In actual fact, when you talk about it, where was this wealth being created from? Fort McMurray. When you have 20 people in Calgary that are saying, "Oh, you know, I need whatever," when you look at what – you have to be in that traffic jam to really appreciate what we went through.

Having two voices, especially, you know, with Minister Jean being in cabinet, being in Treasury, is a huge benefit to our community, to the whole area. When he speaks, he speaks for all Alberta. Like I said, he really does. You know, he has Lac La Biche as his riding, but obviously as the minister of energy he meets with the people, CNRLs of Cold Lake and Bonnyville and Lloydminster and Medicine Hat and even Lethbridge and stuff way out there. The story is the same. You have to build more within the community because otherwise we just shut everything down and you have even less, right? You have fewer services.

Mrs. Samson: In your opinion, the existing boundaries, that are a north-south alignment, serve you better than the previous boundaries when they were more east-west aligned?

Mr. Jessome: I don't see how you would say east-west. Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo was Fort McMurray. There's no east-west. What happened was that Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo took on everywhere from downtown all the way to Fort Fitzgerald, Smith's Landing, so we were never east-west.

Mrs. Samson: It was always north-south.

Mr. Jessome: It's always been, like, north-south. Yeah.

Mrs. Samson: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Evans, any questions?

Mr. Evans: You gave us a population of 76,000 for Fort McMurray. I've got a population of 80,568 for Wood Buffalo. Do you agree with that?

Mr. Jessome: Sure. So the 76,000 is for Fort McMurray, and then you're talking the outer areas as well, right?

Mr. Evans: Yeah.

Mr. Jessome: When you compare them, when we're talking 15 years ago, when there was 80,000 . . .

Mr. Evans: Where's the improvement district No. 24 of Wood Buffalo?

Mr. Jessome: I don't know. If that's the park . . .

Mr. Evans: It's got 775 people, and Fort McKay has 669. Would you agree with that number?

Mr. Jessome: Sure.

Mr. Evans: Janvier is 194, is 376. Where's that?

Mr. Jessome: Janvier is south of town, so in between Anzac and Conklin. They have both a reserve there as well as a municipal setting.

Mr. Evans: And Gregoire Lake, 176 and 176A, is in Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche.

Mr. Jessome: That's right. That's a First Nation. That's 468. You bet.

Mr. Evans: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Jessome, this has been very educational for us. Much appreciated. If you have that in written form, please get a copy to Aaron at the front.

I'm going to make an unusual request. You know the community, and we're going to have to look at the city and the boundaries. Would you be able to do some research and get some economic growth projections from the city and the region?

Mr. Jessome: Sure.

The Chair: If we're looking at future growth, that's a factor we will consider. That's a big factor, and we have this much data on it right now. So we need something from you if you could do the research.

Mr. Jessome: I was on the phone with the mayor this morning to see if he had any updates on the population. The population will be an eye-opener for sure as well as the future economic growth.

The Chair: And let us know at the same time when the census results are projected. We'll watch that with interest as well.

Mr. Jessome: Sure. We have a very strong economic development department here that has a lot of good, strong numbers, especially for data.

The last thing I wanted to say is that when you talk about the population, you know, if Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo was to take all of north of the bridge, you'd still have areas in the south where you can have – for example, Smoky Lake belongs to MLA Glenn van Dijken, and he goes to Athabasca. Like, there are areas there where you can still stream from. Please do not take away our two. We need that for many different reasons.

The Chair: No promises, but we are asking you for homework.

Mr. Jessome: We will provide that for you for sure. No problem. We will make sure that our legislators start talking about adding stuff other than the population with regard to that. Thank you very much. I appreciate that. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll make another call for Janice Bailey. Is Janice present? No. Okay.

I believe someone else has come in, Rene Wells. Sir, you've noticed we very strictly enforced the seven-minute rule, so don't expect to be treated any differently.

Mr. Wells: I thank you very much for that. I want to thank you for allowing me the opportunity, Justice Miller and your committee, to allow me to speak today.

I apologize. I just jotted down some notes as I was hearing some of the other different presenters. I had only learned about your tour today at 6:04, when I received an e-mail from somebody saying: hey, this is going on today. I initially was reluctant to come down because of other conflicts that I had in my schedule, but this was important to me. I needed to come down and take it in. Then while I was down here, I was listening and I felt even more compelled to register and speak.

I know some of you drove and some of you had taken a flight up here, I think is what was said earlier.

2:25

The Chair: No, we all flew.

Mr. Wells: You all flew. Oh, well, I wish you'd driven, if for no other reason than just to experience the immense geography in this part of Alberta.

It is that theme, geography, that I want to focus on as part of my discussion today. Ours, as you know, is a specialized municipality. We're bigger than Nova Scotia. The amalgamation occurred in 1995, I believe, bringing the improvement district No. 17 and the city of Fort McMurray together.

Just a little bit about myself. I came to Alberta in 1980. I was a member of the RCMP, and I did three decades of policing across Alberta and the Northwest Territories. I started out in Gleichen, east of Calgary, and then I went to the opposite end of the scale in terms of population to St. Albert, where I engaged in city policing. The theme there was No Call Too Small, and it drove me crazy, but I digress. I then followed up with the federal drug enforcement in Edmonton, which took me to parts of northwestern Alberta. Then I put my name in. My wife is a teacher, and we wanted to explore another part of Canada. We went up to the arctic in the Northwest Territories and we spent five years up there; a huge, huge geography that we're talking about up there with a very, very small population.

We came back down to Alberta – we had no intention of ever leaving this province permanently – and went to Rimbey, cattle country and oil country, I guess; they have some energy industries down there, followed by a promotion opportunity in Lac La Biche, and then up to the Peace Country where initially I was a traffic commander. I had overseen the activities of members in Valleyview and Peace River. We were responsible for 13 detachment areas, providing traffic services, traffic enforcement, education awareness. Following that, I went into the Grimshaw detachment, headed that up, and then to Peace River for a brief time, and then down to Drumheller. I spent a few years there before I received my commission and moved up to Fort McMurray. I got off the RCMP train at that point after a couple of years here. I was with the RMWB as their director of emergency management, and then eventually moved into health and safety in the private sector.

I can fill in some of the gaps. You heard Mr. Jessome speaking earlier about the camps. From my time with the municipality, the RCMP, and also in health and safety, I got to know some of those camps.

What we lack in population, when I talk about the Peace Country, we have more than made up for in geography, with many communities dotting that part of northwestern Alberta; a lot of them small villages, fortunate to see the occasional police drive through. When you look at Fort McMurray, in this area federally, Fort McMurray-Cold Lake, we have one Member of Parliament serving 110,504 constituents. I just got that off the Internet. P.E.I.: we talked about this during the last federal election. It's smaller in area; we joke that in Alberta it would probably be a county. With a population of 179,280, it has four Members of Parliament and also four Senators. Good on them, I suppose.

If you look at it municipally, we have a council that is currently comprised of one mayor that serves the entire region. We're broken up into four wards: ward 1, six councillors here in the urban service area of Fort McMurray, and there are four in the rural areas. I think the number is about 5 per cent of the population in our rural areas, when you take in Conklin, Janvier – the gentleman who spoke earlier, where he was from – and then you look north. They enjoy four councillors, and good on them, I guess, too.

Our population may be on the lower threshold. You've heard earlier about the shadow population, the fly-in, fly-out. It was reported, I believe again by Mr. Jessome, that there are about 30,000, in all, workers who come here from all over Alberta and Canada to work in the energy sector and its ancillary industries. Many of these workers probably spend more time here plying their trades than they do at their homes.

I know I have a few former colleagues that had been moving back and forth between Fort McMurray and other parts of Canada. They spend a lot of time in the air. You heard about the aerodromes. So those are part of the pressures that we feel as a community, you know, whether it's the services that we provide municipally or other things, policing. Policing is a huge challenge.

One of the members of this committee asked a question about: can you name a couple of lodges? The one I would point to is Wapasu Creek Lodge. That services the needs of Exxon Mobil, up northeast of here. When I first got on here with the Wood Buffalo detachment, I believe that camp was somewhere in the neighbourhood of 2,000. Then Exxon came in and they wanted to expand their operations, and they came to what was then PTI. They said, "We need camp facilities," so they came to the municipality for a development permit, and they ended up expanding in stages. The plan was, you know, to go from that 2,000 to about 4,000 to about 8,000 to about 12,000 and then scale it back to about 10,000 now. I've been out of that game for a while. I don't know where they're at now, but I would joke that there are more people sitting

in that camp than there were in the town of Drumheller, or the area that I policed down in Drumheller.

You think about the simple amenities that we all take for granted. You know, if we have a problem, we call the police, or we call 911 if we have a fire. We came to them and told them that these things aren't possible when you look at the drive that we would have in order to get to them. I had driven that road a number of times; well over an hour to get there, one way. So they would create their own fire service, and that created a problem because they would need water now to properly service a call if there was a structural fire on their property. It mushroomed or snowballed into different problems.

There's also Suncor Fort Hills, Suncor Firebag, CNRL Horizon. They have a camp as well. It used to be Royal Dutch Shell and Albion, now taken over by CNRL. They have camp facilities there, and they also have aerodromes.

Now, earlier there were some questions that were asked about how the two constituencies are split here. I think Mr. Jessome had spoken about Thickwood Boulevard, runs east-west. If you live on the north side, you're in Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo. If you live on the south side, then you're in Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche. You know, there's always been that talk: hey, why don't we use the Athabasca River as the dividing line? It would present some challenges in terms of populations. And I get that, looking at your numbers there, the plus or minus 25 per cent. If it was ever to serve as that dividing line, perhaps a push south of Lac La Biche may be in order.

I know that there is considerable growth, or at least I've heard of that F-35 program that is going into CP Cold Lake plus the heavy oil industries that are down in that area. I once had to drive highway 28 on a number of occasions when I was posted at Lac La Biche. My wife and I recently have taken that drive because we have some recreational property down in the La Biche area, and we were overwhelmed by the volume of traffic coming in and out of Cold Lake and Edmonton along that highway. That may be a consideration for you to ponder and look at, you know, taking in some of that population that are in those counties and municipal districts down there.

2:35

I don't want to take up too much more of your time here. My hope today is that you carefully consider the challenge of effective representation – that phrase really stood out for me today – for the two constituencies that we have here in northeastern Alberta. They take in a number of diverse communities, industries, and employment sectors here. The time that our Member of Parliament and our two MLAs spend on the road to serve those communities is immense, you know, not only on them but also the support staff that they have in place.

We all know, too, that Fort Chipewyan is part of that. We heard also about Smith Landing, Fort Fitzgerald. It's along the Northwest Territories border. There are small populations there, but they are constituents. I know that where you're in a riding, you know, such as the many that are in Calgary and Edmonton, those MLAs, those MPs, those councillors don't have that far to go to service those needs.

Again, I just re-emphasize the fact that I sympathize with our elected officials here in this part of Alberta, having gone through that in northwestern Alberta, whether it was doing traffic enforcement or trying to service the issues of awareness and education when it came to those problems, you know, that we're killing or seriously injuring Albertans on our roadways.

The Chair: Mr. Wells, thank you. Thank you very much.

Pardon my ignorance. The last presenter, Mr. Jessome: I gave him some homework, and maybe I can just supplement that request. Is there such documentation that, when we look at Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche work, you can show us a map that shows camp A, about so many. You know, camp B. Can you get something like that to us?

Mr. Wells: I think that there are some sources out there. I know that I once had access to a map when I was the director of emergency management. You know, another resource would be ESRD, the Fort McMurray office. I was an industry liaison there.

Mr. Evans: ESRD?

Mr. Wells: Environment and sustainable resource development. Yeah. Forestry division.

The Chair: That's a provincial agency?

Mr. Wells: Yes, it is. They're responsible for wildfire control, I guess, and attacking wildfires when they do occur up here. As an industry liaison in 2014 my task that summer was to drive around the area, take some pictures, get some co-ordinates so that they could put that into a map, and they knew where that infrastructure was that may need protection.

The Chair: Okay. If you could – I mean, there are people I see in the audience nodding that that information is available. If you could put your heads together and get that material to Mr. Roth, that would be helpful.

Mr. Wells: Absolutely.

Mr. Jessome: Industry does not like to share their numbers.

The Chair: Susan, any questions for Mr. Wells?

Mrs. Samson: No. That was a most informative presentation, and I thank you for that.

The Chair: Yeah. Three really good sessions.
Mr. Evans.

Mr. Evans: No, nothing for me. Thank you.

The Chair: Dr. Martin.

Dr. Martin: No. Honestly, I'm very keen on the maps because the fact that some provincial agencies are generating maps for their own purposes means that the camps are real. The more real they are, the happier I'd feel about, you know, the population number squabble. So if you, any colleagues, anyone in this room can provide us with those kinds of resources, it will help us very much.

Mr. Clark: Yes, and thank you. I guess the one piece I wanted to pick up on is that you mentioned going down south to Fort McMurray, Lac La Biche, potentially into Smoky Lake and area. We were down in that part, at St. Paul, I can't remember how long ago. We've been on the road for a while, but we were definitely there.

The Chair: Stayed at Canalta. I remember that.

Mr. Clark: That's right. It was a Canalta. There's no question.

That was just interesting to me as we get dipping into the Lac La Biche kind of area. How far would you say that extends? I mean, we've got Smoky Lake somewhat to the west. Is that sort of the natural western boundary? Is there value, do you think, in places as

far south as St. Paul? Bonnyville is obviously its own thing, I would assume. I know there's a lot of similarity in terms of the heavy oil and sort of that transition zone there. I guess I'm just curious. If you could maybe just comment a little bit more on where the connections are on the southern end of the constituency.

Mr. Wells: Yeah. The one thing I would always want to be cautious about, too, you know, whether you're involved in operating a ship or a huge aircraft or deciding on electoral boundaries: these minor course corrections would be the rule of the day. You don't want to confuse the public. As we saw in Fort McMurray, we have people that, depending on what side of Thickwood they would be on, it would create confusion for them. Education was always a big part of that.

In answer to your question about those communities, I don't have a lot of knowledge when it comes to the size of these communities. Like, Vilna, some of those other villages that are north of St. Paul: I don't know who takes those in. I'd be hesitant to try to say anything more on those. But I just thought that as a consideration, you know, if you push south, that might solve your problem of whether or not there's enough representation for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche.

Mr. Clark: I mean, I just really appreciate that comment. I've written down the small changes versus major course correction. You know, part of the mandate is clear and understandable boundaries. These large remote areas, like you say – I think you used the words "vast geography," or someone did, if it wasn't yourself, which I also wrote down. That's why our laws are written the way they are, and that's the history and the Canadian heritage. So just rest assured that that's something we're going to, at least speaking for myself anyway, very much take into consideration because it's a lot of area and not a lot of people.

Mr. Wells: A lot of area, but the people who are here want to make the best of what we have here. I know generally speaking that people feel, you know, quite strongly about being heard down in Edmonton or in Ottawa and are very sensitive to the idea that we may see major changes, and I don't think that I'll be very happy with that.

Mr. Clark: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Wells and the previous presenters – when we saw it was, oh, only three presenters: okay; yeah, we have time for more. This has been very rich and very helpful to us.

If I can just supplement the homework that I've been assigning to the presenters. A presentation in written form from the municipality may be helpful as well in terms of potential industry. This data centre that just flashed up: I was intrigued by whoever talked about that. You know, the projection for growth of industry, which will bring related population: all that information is helpful.

Oh. It looks like we're – man, that artificial intelligence really works. I was just talking. The algorithms are following me.

Mr. Wells: Yeah. Well, the other thing that I point out, too, is that it's all about relationship building. You know, two of our MLAs are here. Our MP is based out of here. There is that opportunity for collaboration among the different levels of government that we have. I would be concerned if my representative would be in some far-flung part of northeastern Alberta. It's a five-hour drive from here to Cold Lake. Five and a half, maybe, I guess, if you take in bathroom breaks. It's just a huge, huge geography, vastness in the land that has never ceased to amaze me whether during my time in the RCMP or now here in northeastern Alberta.

2:45

The Chair: Yeah. It was former Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King who said that Canada is blessed with too much geography.

Mr. Wells: Absolutely.

The Chair: One more question from me. Really, your presentations have made me more curious.

Was it you, Mr. Jessome, that said something about the La Loche road or La Loche highway? Is that into La Loche, Saskatchewan? How far is that from here?

Mr. Jessome: From here, you mean?

The Chair: Yeah.

Mr. Jessome: It's just where Janvier is.

Mr. Wells: The La Loche road is just before Janvier. Right now the province of Saskatchewan has completed their road, so it brings us right up to the border of Alberta.

The Chair: Once it's open, how far of a drive would it be to La Loche?

Mr. Wells: It is 140 kilometres to Janvier, 160 kilometres to Conklin.

Mr. Jessome: How long from there to La Loche is maybe another couple of hours, another hour and a half. Three hours from here.

The thing about La Loche is that it opens up a lot of opportunity for employment, good for trade and stuff out there. Same thing as Peace River. The Red Earth opens up Grande Prairie. Grande Prairie really wants to have access to Fort McMurray.

The Chair: Okay. Well, thank you. Thank you very much.

Is there anyone else that would like to formally present while we're here?

We'll adjourn the public hearing. We'll stay for a little bit, and I'm sure we can engage in some more informal discussion. Thank you so much for coming this afternoon. Much appreciated.

[The hearing adjourned at 2:47 p.m.]

