



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Electoral Boundaries Commission
Public Hearings

Virtual

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Electoral Boundaries Commission

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Electoral Boundaries Commission Public Hearings – Virtual

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Tiffany Belesky

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Mike Evans, Executive Director, Lesser Slave Lake Indian Regional Council

Carolyn Kolebaba

Ken Matthews

Amanda McDonald, Reeve, County of Grande Prairie

Mary Meisner

Stacey Messner, Mayor, Town of Grimshaw

Nathan Steinke

Francesca Ward, Mayor, Town of Slave Lake

1:30 p.m.**Thursday, January 15, 2026**

[Justice Miller in the chair]

The Chair: Well, good afternoon everyone and welcome to the afternoon session of our fourth day of public hearings for the Alberta Electoral Boundary Commission. The commission members: if you have video, you'll see us and our names below us, and our biographies are on the website. I won't bother introducing everyone so you can check that information out on the website.

Our commission was established to take care of two issues relative to the Members of the Legislative Assembly. The first issue was to deal with the legislation expanding the Legislature from 87 seats or electoral divisions or ridings to 89. The government passed a law expanding it to 89 for the next provincial election, and we were tasked with providing for those two new seats. Of course, as everyone knows, voters in the electoral division actually elect the MLA for that electoral division.

The second aspect that we were tasked to deal with is the increased population that Alberta has faced over the last decade. Just to give you a sense of proportion, the population of Alberta when the previous Electoral Boundaries Commission reported in 2017 was just slightly over 4 million people. Since that time Alberta has increased by in excess of 800,000 people. So when we look at what the previous boundaries were based upon in terms of population, you can see from the slide that just over 4 million people divided by 87 electoral divisions resulted in an average population per electoral division of 46,697. Now that's the average. That's not the target; it's the average. The target population is a range for effective representation purposes, and it's a range of minus 25 to plus 25 of the average. That means the range was 35,000 to 58,000 in 2017.

Fast-forward to our commission, and we have got a population in excess of 4.8 million. Divided by 89 electoral divisions, that reveals an average population per electoral division of 54,929, or almost 55,000. Again, that's the average. That's not our necessary target. The target population zone per electoral division is anywhere from 25 per cent below that average to 25 per cent above. The numbers are noted for you on the screen: just over 41,000 population per riding to almost 69,000. That is the range that we must meet for each electoral division, subject to legislative exception, to meet the goal of what we call effective representation.

Sometimes we receive submissions dealing with the concept of one person, one vote. That is not a Canadian principle. That is not a Canadian target. Rather, our target is the concept of effective representation. One person, one vote is very much an American concept. Now, that doesn't mean population isn't important. It is a factor. It can be construed as one of the primary factors, but it is only one factor in determining the concept of effective representation. No provincial jurisdiction or federal jurisdiction in Canada's history has ever had the concept of one person, one vote. Rather, we have the concept of effective representation, and I'll talk about how we reach that goal in a few minutes.

This commission was established in early April of this past year, and the work that we have done since that time is outlined in the slide. First of all, we looked at the population figures and we came to a conclusion as to what the proper population base should be. The legislation requires us to take into consideration the last decennial census, which for Canada was 2021, so we took that figure. That figure is then updated by the province through its Office of Statistics and Information at the Treasury Board, and that updated work by OSI of the Treasury Board gave us the population figure that we could be quite certain of, as certain as you can be in terms of statistics, that as of July 2024 the population was 4.88

million people in Alberta. Now you may have heard people say it's pushing up to five. While we don't have the official statistics on that, we rely on the most recent data that is available to us.

We agreed on the population base for our calculation, and throughout the early part of our commission we received hundreds of written submissions as to how we should go about our work, where we should consider reallocating boundaries, and suggestions for the two new electoral divisions.

In addition, throughout late May and all of June, we as a commission travelled throughout the province. We were in places from Peace River down to Medicine Hat, and from Fort McMurray to Lethbridge and Pincher Creek, and back and forth, zigzagging across the province, and, of course, we spent several days each in Calgary and Edmonton. We heard a lot from the public in terms of how we should go about drafting our interim map.

After our public hearings, we then spent a considerable amount of time with the map people at Elections Alberta. They assisted us in drawing the maps and making sure that the appropriate population was within each proposed electoral division.

After that, in late October we prepared and tabled our interim report. That interim report was submitted to the Speaker of the Legislature and provided to each member of the Legislature, and then we were open to public feedback. In designing our report, we went through all the requirements that are outlined in the legislation in order to come up with our conclusion or our suggestions, in terms of effective representation of all 89 boundaries, and we sought to make sure that the boundaries were understandable and clear for the public. If you're presenting today, you will have no doubt reviewed our interim report, and you can make an assessment as to how well we did our job there.

When that report was released to the Speaker of the Legislature and became public, we then opened a portal for public submissions in response to our report, and we received many of them. From early November to December 19 we received in excess of 1,100 written submissions in response to our written report.

We are now at the stage of hearing from the public directly: comments, suggestions, criticisms, and commendations for our interim report. This week is the first week of public hearings. We spent two and a half days in Calgary receiving in-person presentations. Today and tomorrow we are conducting hearings online, which makes it accessible for people outside the major cities to participate. We're not travelling outside of Calgary and Edmonton because of the winter season, and then early next week we hear directly from people in Edmonton in terms of our report.

There are certain factors that were considered in this report. One of them is hybrid ridings. We are interested in hearing from presenters in relation to any specific hybrid ridings that we've suggested. It's important to remember that in the electoral boundary business what happened up until the release of our October 27 report was the regular season. We're now in the playoffs.

1:40

That means these two weeks of public hearings will result in giving us input so that we can prepare the final report, and that final report is due on March 27 of this year. We will present that to the Speaker at that time, and our task will be completed. It will be up to the Legislature to deal with our report to either adopt it, make some slight changes, tinkering or whatever the Legislature wishes to do. But we will have fulfilled our legislative mandate by the time we submit our final report.

With that background and context, I'm pleased to open the second half-day of the virtual hearings and hear from those people who have signed up and asked to present. The first person I have

lined up – and I'm not sure that person is in the room yet – is Tiffany Belesky. No? Okay.

Well, I did hear that there is someone by the name of Carolyn Kolebaba present, and if she is present, we're happy to have her move up in terms of priority and speak first if she's available.

Ms Kolebaba: Yes, I am, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Well, please identify yourself. Tell us where you live and what particular electoral divisions you're wanting to comment on.

Ms Kolebaba: I live in the Peace electoral division. My home residence is in Northern Sunrise county just east of Peace River.

The Chair: Okay. Please proceed.

Ms Kolebaba: Our geographic rural region is under threat by a population formula set up in favour of urban areas where the populations are in close proximity to their MLA whereas the formula even with the 25 per cent deviation is calculated to also support urban populations, so 80 per cent of this province has been reduced, or nonrepresentation in provincial or federal ridings will occur.

Our airport has no scheduled flights any longer out of Peace River. The chartered planes for MLAs are almost unheard of. In some of this riding already today the First Nations have problems with their road access and to some communities. We cannot go across the province above the 55th parallel east and west. For the MLA in our area it's eight hours to nine hours before he even gets home from the capital region. We ask that you do not take any more rurals or enlarged northern ridings, or we will have no representation at all.

Our recommendation is that if you need two more MLAs in Edmonton and Calgary, then add them, but leave our region the way it is and do not change it because representation right now will become unattainable for us.

I leave it at that. I just regurgitate what I told you probably in the last go-around earlier. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Carolyn. I've just got to tease out a little bit of something you said about eight to nine hours. Sorry, refresh my memory. Your MLA resides in La Crête. Is that correct?

Ms Kolebaba: La Crête. Yeah.

The Chair: Does it take that long to get there from Edmonton?

Ms Kolebaba: Yup. Well, it would be five hours to Peace River, and then he's another three after that, or depending on the weather it could be nine. Yeah.

The Chair: And it's your understanding that he goes by vehicle every trip to Edmonton. He does not and is unable to fly. Is that fair?

Ms Kolebaba: Well, they have passed legislation. There are regulations that they are not to use any planes whatsoever. He did charter once to get into a First Nation hamlet because that's the only way he could get in there. We don't have that service out of here anymore, and so he travels. Actually, if we want to see him, then we have to go to his office, and I just don't think that that's fair. Mill Woods is on a quarter section of land and there's – what? – 86,000 or so people living on that quarter of land. For us, I mean, it's 800 kilometres or whatever distance that we would have to cover. I just think that that's extreme. The north has to be exempted

to some of these formulas, and the formula has to change because 25 per cent is not solving our geographic problem. All it is is taking care of a population that – you know, a majority of the population could see their MLA in his office within an hour's drive. Well, that's not the case for 60 per cent of this province in Alberta.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much. I want to provide an opportunity for the commission members to ask you any questions, ma'am, if you don't mind.

Mr. Evans, anything you wish to discuss with this witness or presenter?

Mr. Evans: Well, a witness I would have lots of things to talk about, but as a presenter, thank you very much for your submissions both before and today and for participating in this. It's been helpful. Thank you.

The Chair: Mrs. Samson.

Mrs. Samson: Thank you.

Thank you, Carolyn, for being here today. I did read your submission from previous. I want you to know that you should be proud of your MLA. We saw MLA Williams in Calgary, and he did share with us that he recognizes the challenges and difficulties of the north as you have outlined today, but he also said he knew that that was the job and he's up for it, and he sounds like he really likes it. You've got yourself a great MLA up there.

Thank you.

Ms Kolebaba: Yes. I agree. Thank you very much. Again, the trading patterns are the ones that exist today, so please don't change it.

Mrs. Samson: Thank you.

The Chair: Okay.

Dr. Martin, any questions?

Dr. Martin: Yes. Thank you very much. I just wanted to comment on something you raised which we haven't heard before, but I think you're absolutely right. That is the formula, as you call it, for deriving the average or mean population that is, of course, heavily skewed to those inevitably urban areas that have had huge population spikes thereby driving the mean average higher, which makes life tough if you're in northern and sparsely settled areas.

I completely agree, and I'm alive to it. It's just as well that the legislation forces us to look at a whole range of factors, population being paramount among them but certainly not the only one of relevance: transportation and logistical issues, geography, roads even. It doesn't actually say ice roads. In your case, I mean, these things are significant parts of daily life, and we are obliged to take them seriously as we weigh up our boundaries. Again, I'm very glad that you have mentioned this, the rather unfortunate effect of this population formula, but rest assured that we're fully attentive to how we best weigh all the other factors that the act obliges us to be respectful of.

Thank you.

Ms Kolebaba: Thank you.

The Chair: Well, thank you very much, Ms Kolebaba. I appreciate your contributions, not only this presentation but your written work. Please stay. Please remain in to hear presentations from other citizens as well.

Our next presenter. Sorry. Is Tiffany Belesky . . .

Mr. Roth: She just came in.

The Chair: Okay. Ms Belesky, are you ready and able to present at this point?

Ms Belesky: Yes, I am. Can you hear me?

The Chair: We can. Yes.

Ms Belesky: Okay. Perfect.

Okay. Good afternoon, Chair and Commissioners. My name is Tiffany Belesky, and I'm here today as a resident of Jousard. Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I recognize the responsibility your commission carries in balancing population changes while ensuring fair and effective representation across Alberta.

My concern is that the interim proposal would weaken effective representation in my area by separating communities that function as one connected region. I live in Jousard. To give a quick picture of where that is, we are a small hamlet on highway 2 located between High Prairie and Slave Lake along the shores of Lesser Slave Lake. That location matters because it explains exactly how our region functions day to day.

I'm a teacher in High Prairie, and that is where I spend my weekdays and where many families in our region are connected through work and school. Slave Lake is where I do most of my shopping, errands, and medical appointments. That pattern is extremely common in this region. Many people who live in High Prairie work in Slave Lake, and many people who live in Slave Lake work in High Prairie. These communities are tied together by everyday life, not just geography.

1:50

Under the proposed changes those connections would be split in a way that does not reflect how our region actually operates. If I drive from High Prairie to Slave Lake, I would be travelling through three electoral boundaries to do what is for many of us a routine trip for work, shopping, or medical appointments. On paper that might look minor, but in practice it shows that the boundaries don't follow how people actually live and travel here. This matters because effective representation depends on practical realities, whether an MLA can understand and advocate for a region's shared needs and whether residents can realistically access their MLA. When one connected region is split across three electoral boundaries the issues that affect all of us – health care, roads, schools, emergency planning – become harder to advocate for in a co-ordinated way. Even simple concerns can turn into not-my-riding problems where responsibility is divided across offices instead of addressed as a shared regional issue.

I also want to speak directly about what this proposal likely means for Jousard. The new boundaries may place our community into proposed Mackenzie riding. If that happens, our MLA would most likely be based in High Level, and our closest MLA office would be up to five hours away. A five-hour distance matters. An MLA who lives and works that far from Jousard cannot reasonably provide the same level of attention, connection, or local understanding that we currently have within the Lesser Slave Lake region. Rural Albertans expect to travel, but representation still needs to be reachable. That distance makes it more difficult for residents to meet their MLA, attend community meetings, or raise urgent concerns in a timely way. It also makes it harder for an MLA to regularly be present in smaller communities like ours, especially in a riding that is extremely large and remote.

That brings me to another key concern. The proposed Mackenzie riding is so large that communities like Jousard could easily be overshadowed by larger northern centres with different needs and priorities. Concerns that matter deeply here – rural health care access, wildfire mitigation, support for economic development, and highway maintenance – could be competing for attention across a vast area. Even with a hard-working MLA, time and travel become limits and smaller edge communities can be unintentionally deprioritized.

At the same time our stronger ties are not north. Our community has strong practical ties to Slave Lake and High Prairie, yet under the proposed boundaries neither of these communities would be in our electoral division even though they are the ones we rely on the most. Our current placement within the Lesser Slave riding reflects how our region functions, and it works well for us.

I also want to emphasize the role of the lake region itself. Communities around the same lake should share the same MLA. The Lesser Slave Lake area is connected through the lake basin, the regional highway system, shared school systems, Indigenous partnerships, and economic networks that cross multiple boundaries. These connections are real, and they're strong. Moving Jousard north into Mackenzie would weaken those connections and split a region that already operates as a unit.

My request to the commission is specific. Please revise the proposed boundaries so that Jousard remains aligned with the Lesser Slave Lake region so that the communities that rely on one another – Jousard, High Prairie, and Slave Lake – are not divided in a way that fractures representation and complicates everyday advocacy. Keeping the lake communities together under one MLA would better reflect how this region actually lives, works, travels, and responds to challenges.

Thank you for your time, and thank you for listening to the lived reality of rural Albertans as you finalize these boundaries.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Belesky.

Dr. Martin, any questions?

Dr. Martin: Yes. I'm very sympathetic to the issues of the north around transportation and, you know, the huge, huge footprint. No matter how you slice and dice it, the size of the land remains the same. It's huge.

I was particularly taken by your remarks about what you call the lake communities, which is not a concept that we've heard at the commission before, but it seems entirely reasonable that all the communities around the lake would have lots of linkages: social, economic, cultural, and the like. From High Prairie and right through the town of Slave Lake, I mean, is a very strong corridor for people in this region. Is that the thrust of your remark on that point?

Ms Belesky: Yeah. Like, you know, there are companies that have their base in High Prairie and Slave Lake. We have industries, the logging industry, those kind of things. As a First Nations person – I am Métis – we have lots of Indigenous land here. That is something that I hope is taken into consideration. Sorry, did I answer? I'm a little nervous.

Dr. Martin: No. Don't be nervous. I'm sometimes a little circular in my questions, but I'm just interested in the dynamic relationships between one end of the lake and the other. I think you've answered it reasonably well, but it really just hadn't occurred to me before that that is a significant factor in this area, so thank you for that.

The Chair: Mrs. Samson.

Mrs. Samson: Thank you, and thank you for coming out today and speaking with us. I want you to know that, if you missed our earlier remarks, we had over 1,100 submissions, and I wouldn't say you were number one but you were darn close to being number one with concerns raised about the changes we made in the north. I want you to rest assured that we're having a good hard look at it, and thank you again for the points you brought up today.

Ms Belesky: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Evans.

Mr. Evans: So you were speaking very fast and my wife accuses me of being, you know, hard of hearing. I thought it was only as it related to her, but it might expand beyond that. There might be some merit there. You teach where?

Ms Belesky: I teach in High Prairie, which is about 25 to 30 minutes away from Jousard.

Mr. Evans: And then you also go to Slave Lake, and that's how far from Jousard?

Ms Belesky: Forty-five minutes.

Mr. Evans: Okay.

Ms Belesky: So that's where, you know, like tomorrow I have a medical appointment. I'm probably in Slave Lake and High Prairie once a week. A lot of teachers from Jousard teach either in Slave Lake or High Prairie. If you look at the boundaries proposed we're kind of this little chunk of highway 2 that just doesn't feel like it belongs where – I think we're probably going to be the most unrepresented area. Keeping just even that highway 2: that whole chunk of area is really important for us community-wise.

Mr. Evans: Okay. Thank you. I appreciate your comments.

Ms Belesky: Thank you.

The Chair: One of the neat things about this job is that we learn about Alberta. I'm just trying to locate Jousard. Are you just south of the lake?

Ms Belesky: Yeah. We're right on the lake.

The Chair: Okay, and how big is it?

Ms Belesky: It's a hamlet, so we're quite small. There are a few communities. We have Jousard, Faust, Kinuso – I'm not sure if you've heard of any of those – Widewater. Yeah.

The Chair: Okay. Well, thank you, and I echo my colleague Mrs. Samson's comments: we are hearing from the north, and it's because of people like you who have stepped up and said, "Look, you looked at what we proposed and it just doesn't seem right," and I thank you for coming out. You did very well.

Ms Belesky: Okay. Awesome. Thank you.

The Chair: But please remain to hear other presenters if you wish, if you have the time.

Ms Belesky: Okay. For sure. Thank you.

The Chair: Going through the list, I'm just going to see: is Dorothy Anderson present? No? Okay. Stacey Messner?

Ms Messner: Yes, I'm here. Sorry.

The Chair: Good afternoon.

Ms Messner: Good afternoon.

The Chair: Please tell us where you are from and what electoral divisions you wish to comment on.

Ms Messner: Sure. So my name is Stacey Messner. I'm the mayor for the town of Grimshaw, and we're located in the current Peace River electoral division.

The Chair: Okay. Please proceed.

Ms Messner: All right. So my speaking points today: the first one is the northern, rural, and remote representation.

Firstly, to maintain the votes and voices of the north and that the true rural and remote residents of the province are critical to effective representation. I realize that electoral boundaries are created firstly based on population and understand the rationale for it. However, putting it into practicality and since living in northern Alberta for 14 years now, I've come to understand a few things. The large geographical region that the north covers beyond larger urbans such as Grande Prairie and Edmonton is extremely vast. Citizens drive, drive, drive, and drive some more through all kinds of weather to get to where they need to be for work, services, health care, and activities. We are trying to do all the same things a resident of a larger urban does within a driving distance of just over 455 kilometres, or close to five hours of driving time according to Google Maps, on good driving condition days between the proposed boundary of Peace River-Notley, where the southernmost point is, I think, at Athabasca River, and northernmost point at Paddle Prairie Métis settlement. That's just my first speaking point.

2:00

The second is attracting MLA representation. I guess I'm looking at the geographical vastness of our northern boundaries. What challenges does this present to attract and retain an MLA to run in a district where it is so large? You know, does it encourage individuals to run or, quite frankly, not at all?

My third point is regarding economic development. In the Peace region we are currently being considered for a large scale nuclear development, so we could see a lot of change in our population in the next five to 10 years for sure. I guess my question would be: at what point will the boundary be reviewed and changed to accommodate any large scale economic projects that are going to boost our population?

Then my last speaking point is the boundary that splits a municipality. I bring this matter forward not for feedback regarding the electoral district that Grimshaw currently is in but in hopes it might bring perspective to the challenges felt by our neighbours in Big Lakes county. Although in our other municipalities and in larger urbans with more population an electoral boundary may split an urban centre and this may not be seen as an issue due to a high population, however, when a boundary splits the municipality with low population and large geographical reach, this is an issue related to effective representation that needs to be considered by the commission.

I'll use an example that Grimshaw currently is experiencing from a school board perspective, actually. We have a school division, the Peace River school division, where the highway that runs right through Grimshaw, highway 2, is the boundary between two school districts in our community of 2,600 people. The east side residents have a trustee, and the west side have a different trustee. What this

does in rural municipalities, when there is an actual boundary split, is create confusion and in some ways, our council thinks, deters residents from, firstly, knowing who their trustee is and, secondly: will they even come out to vote? We saw a huge decrease in voting turnout in October 2025 for the school trustee election. I can honestly say that I saw on social media how many residents were questioning which ward they belonged to and where they were to vote. I just thought I would use that as an example.

Those are all of my speaking points. Thank you for listening.

The Chair: Thank you very much. The boundaries that are proposed in our report for Peace River-Notley don't cut through a municipality, do they?

Ms Messner: I guess I'm looking at the corner where Big Lakes county is.

The Chair: Yeah.

Ms Messner: Yeah. I think I'm speaking more for them because I know of the concerns that it may present. Yeah. I don't know if I'm answering your question.

The Chair: Okay. So just to be clear, Grimshaw or Peace River itself isn't carved up.

Ms Messner: No, it's not. I think what I'm trying to do is trying to speak up in a situation we're currently experiencing in our community and how that could translate to something in Big Lakes county and what they may be experiencing with the proposed boundary changes.

The Chair: Are you content with the existing boundaries? In other words, you don't like what we've proposed for your corner of the north, but you could live with the existing boundary you had before. Is that right?

Ms Messner: Yes. We could live with that.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you for submitting from Grimshaw.

Ms Messner: You're welcome.

The Chair: Dr. Martin, any questions?

Dr. Martin: Yeah. Thank you.

Mayor Messner, I wanted to thank you for your presentation. Rest assured that some of the themes – we need to preserve and strengthen the northern voice is something we've heard a very great deal of. I will share with you the fact that of the 1,100-odd letters we've received in the last three months, more than 100 came from the north. You should take some pride in the fact that at least 100 people are actually prepared to do something quite old fashioned, namely write a letter to us, on this point.

I wanted to press you in your role as a mayor to ask you about growth prospects. You mentioned the high likelihood of a nuclear project in its development, but could you characterize the local economy in other terms? I mean, are you largely agricultural? Is it oil and gas? What's the mix?

Ms Messner: Largely agriculture. I would say forestry is also something that Grimshaw sees the benefits of. I mean, to the north of us, of Manning, and north of Peace River: that's where you're going to see more logging and mill industry. And then some oil and gas. I mean, oil and gas has kind of been on the down-low for some time. I would say primarily agriculture.

Dr. Martin: Thank you.

Ms Messner: You're welcome.

Mrs. Samson: Thanks for coming on today. I appreciate your comments. I just wanted to answer your question about boundary reviews. It occurs every eight to 10 years. It's actually two election cycles on average. So when we are finished and hand in the report in March, our job is done and whatever is done would not be looked at again by a commission for another eight to 10 years. We're hoping to get it right, so thanks for your comments.

The other thing that I had not considered: you mentioned attraction and retention of MLAs. Is that common, that people would not have interest at that level in the political office in your area?

Ms Messner: I'm not exactly sure, but I would say that for anyone who potentially wants to run in the future, they're going to have a bigger job to do than before if that boundary is expanded or changes. It's a lot of work for an MLA to do their job in a district that's over 500 kilometres north-south long. I totally appreciate their commitment. It takes a special someone to say: I'm going to do that. I just thought I might raise it as a point.

Mrs. Samson: You know, just in closing on that point, I can tell you this. Out of the 10 electoral districts that the MLAs of the north hold, I doubt that there is a single one that doesn't love their job. I don't know, like, how they got to love it, that they would want to spend their days living in their vehicles driving, but they do, and they do it enthusiastically. That to me was an eye-opener.

Thank you for your comments today. I appreciate them.

Ms Messner: Thank you for your time.

The Chair: Mr. Evans, any questions or dialogue with Mayor Messner?

Ms Messner: Sorry. I thought we were done.

The Chair: No. We don't let you go that easy.

Mr. Evans: I don't think I have any questions for you. Thank you for your submissions.

The Chair: Okay. We do let you go that easy.

Ms Messner: All right, then.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you for coming in and presenting. Please stay, if you can, to hear the other presenters.

Our next presenter is Mary Meisner.

Mrs. Meisner: Hello.

The Chair: Yes. Hello. Mrs. Meisner?

Mrs. Meisner: Hi. Yes.

The Chair: Okay. Please identify yourself, tell us what riding you live in, what community, and which electoral divisions you wish to comment on.

Mrs. Meisner: All right. Good afternoon, Chairman and members of the commission. My name is Mrs. Mary Meisner. I am a retired community health nurse and resident of Spruce Grove, Alberta, so I'll be discussing the Spruce Grove-Stony Plain voting district. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the proposed changes to our electoral district. I have revisited my original submission of December 9, '25, and I further reviewed

data, geography, and the commission's recommendation. I feel that the commission's proposed boundary change has more merit than mine based on the following.

2:10

Even though Stony Plain and Spruce Grove are very much closely connected communities in the areas of services, economies, recreation, travel, and voting patterns, Spruce Grove will continue to grow in population. The commission's recommendation to establish Spruce Grove as a separate electoral district makes sense. This allows for population and physical growth without having to encroach on Edmonton city limits or having to split the city of Spruce Grove in half. The commission's boundary to the east and north steers clear of other major urban populations such as St. Albert or Edmonton. This avoids siphoning off votes from areas that are not similar to Spruce Grove.

One of my main considerations in making my submission was to ensure the risk or impression of political gerrymandering was avoided. This risk could be presented by diluting votes from an included slice of Edmonton's city boundary within Spruce Grove's voting district. I did read some of the submissions on our voting district, and I was quite concerned to view one particular one that appeared weighed down with a bit of observable gerrymandering. When I carefully studied the revised borders put forward by the commission, I see that there is room for Edmonton's city boundary to expand further west without having to merge into a rural district or change an outlying electoral district.

The commission proposes that Stony Plain will merge into the Drayton Valley-Devon electoral district. This amalgamation will still provide Stony Plain with fair representation as Drayton Valley-Devon's past history of voting is compatible and comparable with Stony Plain's voting trends.

Therefore, in closing, I would like to thank the commission for their common-sense and well-researched recommendation. I fully support the commission's proposal for Spruce Grove to become a separate electoral district and Stony Plain to be combined with the Drayton Valley-Devon electoral district. I would also like to commend the good work of Aaron Roth, EBC administrator. He returns e-mails promptly and is most helpful in explaining procedures in a respectful manner and showing patience. If I need to amend my original proposal, I would certainly be happy to do so.

The Chair: Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Meisner. You just put a smile on the face of somebody I'm just looking at over the screen. Yes, he does tremendous work for us and for the province. And thank you for your comments relative to the proposal. We're never a hundred per cent sure what type of reaction we're going to get when we create these new scenarios, so hearing from a long-time resident of the community is very helpful and beneficial to us.

I want to let the commission have some dialogue and question and answer with you. Dr. Martin, anything you wish to raise with Mrs. Meisner?

Dr. Martin: Well, I'd just like to say, you know, that you're totally right that the interim was probably, on balance, the right thing to do. The growth of the area between Edmonton and Spruce Grove along both 16 and 16X has been tremendous and in some ways very exciting, and I fully expect it's going to continue.

I'm interested in your thoughts about the area that immediately surrounds Spruce Grove on its north side and then its south side as our interim included a fairly big chunk of hinterland, so to speak. Perhaps we overdid it. What are your thoughts on that?

Mrs. Meisner: I don't think you had much of a choice, because you have to allow for expansion. I don't know exactly if a lot of those

people own acreages and work in Edmonton and do business in Spruce Grove. Yeah. That's actually a typical question to answer, but I think you're allowing room for growth. I just get a sense that a lot of those folks aren't big farmers. There are a few. Like, there's a big dairy farm in the area, but I'm thinking they're more – how do you say it? – suburbanites of Spruce Grove.

Dr. Martin: Yeah. That's exactly what I would call it. I mean, you know, we often talk about urban versus rural, but that's a little crude because there is a gradation. You're right that it is sort of suburban. They're not baling hay; they're going to the golf course.

Mrs. Meisner: Right. Yes. A lovely thing to do.

Dr. Martin: Thank you.

Mrs. Samson: Thank you for your presentation. I appreciate your thoughts particularly because when we were in person we heard a lot about keeping Stony Plain and Spruce Grove together. So I suspected that we were going to get some push-back in this area, but surprisingly we have not, so you have reinforced that this is inevitable, that Spruce Grove will stand on its own. I'm happy that you're pleased. Like my colleague said, it is the right way to move forward. Thank you again.

The Chair: Mr. Evans, any questions or comments?

Mr. Evans: I just want to know if you're related to Aaron Roth.

Mrs. Meisner: No. Actually, I grew up in Manitoba and lived many years there and worked many years in the interlake region.

Mr. Evans: I just wanted to make sure that it was a genuine and a nice comment. It's both. Aaron is phenomenal. Yeah. He's helped us greatly, and we appreciate him.

Thank you for your submissions.

Mrs. Meisner: Yes. Well, thank you for hearing me out.

The Chair: Thank you. Please feel free to stay to hear the rest of the submissions this afternoon.

We'll now move on to our next presenter, Francesca Ward. Please identify yourself and tell us where you're from and what electoral divisions you wish to comment on.

Ms Ward: No problem. Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am Mayor Ward and am presenting on behalf of the town of Slave Lake council regarding the proposed elimination of the Lesser Slave Lake provincial electoral district.

Our council strongly believes this proposal undermines effective representation, fragments a functioning regional hub, and further weakens northern Alberta's voice in the Legislative Assembly. This is not about preserving boundaries for convenience. It is about preserving representation that reflects how northern Alberta actually functions.

The Supreme Court of Canada made it clear in Carter versus Saskatchewan that the purpose of electoral boundaries is not strict mathematical parity but effective representation. The court explicitly recognized that geography, community history, minority representation, and accessibility must be weighed alongside population equality.

Alberta's own Electoral Boundaries Commission Act reflects this principle by allowing special low-population districts where vast geography, remoteness, and Indigenous populations justify deviations from the provincial average. The Lesser Slave Lake district meets every one of those criteria. It covers an immense

geographic area, including multiple First Nations and Métis communities, sits far from the Legislature, and contains no large urban centre. Removing this district prioritized numerical symmetry over meaningful access to representation, which is precisely what the Supreme Court cautioned against.

Beyond the legal framework the proposed map demonstrates a fundamental disconnect between provincial boundary design and real regional governance. This region is home to multiple First Nations and Métis communities whose cultural, economic, and service connections are anchored through Slave Lake. These relationships are built on trust, proximity, and long-standing collaboration. Fragmenting these communities across multiple ridings risks weakening their access to representation and their ability to engage meaningfully with government, which runs directly counter to the principle of effective representation and reconciliation.

Slave Lake functions as the primary service hub for the surrounding region. Residents from Kinuso, Driftpile, Wabasca, Smith, and rural Big Lakes county rely on Slave Lake for health services, education, housing co-ordination, justice services, retail access, emergency response, and tourism infrastructure. These relationships are not theoretical. They are operational and daily. The province itself governs this region as a co-ordinated unit. By ministerial order the town of Slave Lake has been directed to collaborate with the municipal district of Opportunity and of Lesser Slave River on housing authority governance. Yet under the proposed boundaries, these mandated partners would be represented by different MLAs, directly contradicting the province's own administrative structure.

2:20

Educational governance tells the exact same story. The High Prairie school division operates as one integrated education system across Slave Lake, Kinuso, Joussard, High Prairie, and surrounding rural communities. Dividing this unified school system across multiple electoral districts complicates advocacy for capital funding, student supports, transportation planning, and staffing stability.

Health governance also recognizes this region as a single functional unit. Alberta health region advisory council 4 encompasses the Slave Lake-High Prairie-Wabasca corridor, and it was developed within this provincial term. The proposed boundaries fracture this health region politically, creating fragmented accountability for emergency coverage, physician recruitment, hospital capacity, and seniors care planning.

Tourism further reinforces the hub reality. Slave Lake serves as the gateway to provincial parks, lakeshore recreation, seasonal events, accommodations, and visitor services for the broader Lesser Slave Lake region. Tourism drives seasonal population surges that place measurable pressure on emergency services, policing, transportation corridors, health capacity, and workforce housing. Fragmenting this tourism region across ridings weakens co-ordinated advocacy for infrastructure investment, public safety, resourcing, and long-term economic diversification. In practical terms, visitors and seasonal workers experience this region as one system; only the political map would treat it as disconnected.

Perhaps most concerning, this redistribution reduces northern representation at a time when the Legislature itself is expanding. While Alberta increases from 87 to 89 seats, northern Alberta loses one MLA. Northern Alberta continues to generate a disproportionate share of Alberta's GDP through energy, forestry, agriculture, and transportation corridors. Yet under this proposal the north loses representation while the Legislature itself grows. The economic engine of the province should not simultaneously

experience a reduction in political voice. This continues a long-term trend of political influence shifting southward despite the north's vast land mass, significant Indigenous population, and disproportionate contribution to provincial resource revenues.

Furthermore, council is not asking for special treatment. We are asking for the commission to apply its own legislative mandate and constitutional guidance consistently. Effective representation requires that elected boundaries reflect how communities live, access services, and participate in governance. The Lesser Slave Lake district exists because the region exists. The map should follow reality and not erase it. Population formulas do not deliver emergency services, educate our children, or keep our communities connected; people and geography do, and electoral boundaries must recognize that. You can balance a population spreadsheet in Edmonton and Calgary, but you cannot govern northern Alberta from a calculator.

Thank you for your consideration. I welcome any questions and commentary from the commission.

The Chair: Well, Mayor Ward, thank you very much for your presentation. It is very punchy and very well-laid-out and comprehensive. Thank you so much. That's the type of information we need. I'll turn it over to the rest of the commission. I'm sure there are going to be some questions.

Dr. Martin, any questions of Mayor Ward?

Dr. Martin: Mayor Ward, we have heard from you as well as from others who have presented and over 100 people who wrote letters in the last couple of months about the need to preserve the northern voice. Message received. But with every speaker we learn some more granular information, so it's always extremely valuable to have people like yourself come and speak, because you're in a position of having to balance budgets, oversee planning arrangements, co-ordinating with other communities. It's fascinating to see how those linkages are maintained and how they may be damaged, as you suggest, by the interim boundaries that have been proposed.

I must say that I'm very curious about your relationships and your working arrangements with Peerless Lake and the MD of Opportunity No. 17. I just didn't think that there was that much connectivity, but clearly there is. Could you speak to that?

Ms Ward: I would love to. There is a substantial amount of connectivity between those regions. An interesting thing regarding our community is that there are 14 First Nations and settlements within an hour, an hour and a half driving distance of Slave Lake, the majority of which are represented by our current electoral district boundaries; not the one that is newly proposed. We have a multitude of organizations, including Alberta North Central Alliance, which has representatives from those communities, as well as our housing authority, the Lesser Slave Lake Regional Housing Authority. One of the ministerial orders is a partnership with the MD of Opportunity.

These long-standing relationships are going to be divided, and I understand that not living here, you may not be able to – a map doesn't describe how we live. A map doesn't show how we live, and that's what I was hoping to bring to you today. Access and services of both work and recreation are central around Slave Lake, honestly. We are the hub, and I wanted to convey for our community and our neighbours that this is how we live. By parting us off into those districts, that's not going to reflect who we are.

Dr. Martin: Thank you.

The Chair: By the way, did you submit what you just presented to the commission in writing?

Ms Ward: There is a 29-page report that was submitted. Yes.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.
Mrs. Samson.

Mrs. Samson: Thank you for your presentation today. I appreciate the time that it takes to put it together and be here to deliver it. I don't think that any of the presenters from the north have not given us more information that we find valuable. I appreciate that. We've got some things to talk about and some reasons to change because you're absolutely right. What we're doing and what your lived reality is every day are quite a bit different. Thank you again for your time and information.

Ms Ward: I appreciate the commentary there. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Evans.

Mr. Evans: Yeah. Thank you for your submissions. I just had a question. You mentioned that the breaking up or, you know, our division and creation of electoral districts that didn't include some Indian bands as opposed to others impacted reconciliation. Can you just help me understand what you meant there and how that would impact or detract from reconciliation?

Ms Ward: Reconciliation would be taking a look, in my opinion – the reality is that we are all going to work and exist together, and part of reconciliation would be to facilitate that, to work as communities. Changing of boundaries is just going to make it harder. Changing of boundaries is going to make it harder to advocate for the needs of First Nations.

Again, I'm representative of the town of Slave Lake, but our Indigenous population in our current electoral riding is approximately 25 per cent, self-reported. The percentage is the same within the town of Slave Lake, so we have a significant Indigenous population whose First Nations, which they may not live on, obviously, if they're living in the town, are now disconnected. So we're relying on our MLA to communicate to the province the needs of our First Nations populations, and now they're segregated from each other. I believe the Indian regional council will be presenting in a bit with Alberta North Central Alliance, and I believe the chief would likely be able to better speak to the connections there, because that is going to be disconnected.

Everything about how we live and work, respectfully, is blown up by the way the proposal is. We will continue to exist and work the way we do. It is just going to make the lives of every one of us harder, including your elected officials, including your MLA. We will do what we do, like we always do in the north; we figure it out. But, respectfully, this is strong opposition to this.

Mr. Evans: Can you give me the bands that you referenced again, just quickly?

Ms Ward: Well, there are 14 different First Nations. We have Driftpile, Swan River, Peerless Trout, Sawridge First Nation, Whitefish, Loon River – I'm going to forget some; there are 14.

Mr. Evans: I'll look at your submissions.

2:30

Ms Ward: Yeah. In my submission we have the map there. Sawridge First Nation borders our community. We share a border with that. Within 45 minutes there's Swan River, Driftpile, and then

going the other way you have, obviously, Bigstone, Peerless Trout, Loon, and then continuing more, Sucker Creek as well. I know I'm leaving someone out, so that's not an all-encompassing list. There are also Métis settlements. There's Gift Lake. Mostly referred to as the back lakes up here, just speaking casually. We have so many that access services.

If you take a look when Whitefish First Nation had fires, where were they evacuated to? Slave Lake. We took 700 people in with four hours notice on my first year after the by-election. So when I speak to how we will rally together, how we will continue to exist the way we will regardless of electoral boundaries, we will, but it is going to make advocacy for the north – we can't deliver a baby in our hospital. I lose a person on highway 88 at least every month. Yeah. Can't deliver babies, and our ER closes.

Now, the communities all around us have the exact same issues. Does Westlock have this issue? No. They actually have knee surgery rooms there. So now, by joining Slave Lake to Westlock, we're just added on. I looked at Westlock town council's priorities, and one of them is being a commuter hub to Edmonton. That is nowhere near the priorities of our region. Still completely valid for their community, but I'm unsure how an MLA is going to effectively represent the region when you have such competing issues and such disparity even between health care services.

The Chair: Well, Mayor Ward, thank you again. Just so you know, your own MLA will be presenting next week on a time slot designated. I'm not sure; you may be the third or fourth northern mayor that has presented so far today, and I have no doubt that the municipal governance of the north is absolutely superb based on all these presentations. Thank you for giving us a gentle corrective on our interim report.

Ms Ward: I appreciate that it's complicated work that you do. You're looking at the whole province and not the north, and I would be doing a disservice to our community and our region if we didn't speak up when we felt something wasn't right.

The Chair: Yeah. Thank you so much.

Ms Ward: Thank you.

The Chair: You're more than welcome to remain to hear the rest of the presentations. Thank you.

Our next presenter before our break is Peter MacKay from Grande Prairie.

Mrs. Samson: He's a no-show.

The Chair: No? He didn't show? Okay.

Well, maybe we should have our break now. Let's break for . . .

Mrs. Samson: Ten minutes.

The Chair: Yeah. Ten to. Let's come back at 2:50 p.m. for sure, and then we'll have plenty of time.

Mrs. Samson: In case he comes. Yeah.

[The hearing adjourned from 2:34 p.m. to 2:49 p.m.]

The Chair: Good afternoon again, everyone. We're reconvening after our mid-afternoon break for the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission. I'm wondering: is Peter MacKay, who is scheduled to present at 2:50, in the virtual room? No. Okay.

Are there representatives from the Alberta North Central Alliance? Jennifer Churchill, are you present? Can you hear me?

Ms Churchill: Hi. I am present. But if we could, I'm waiting – a representative from Lesser Slave Lake Indian Regional Council is going to join us, so if somebody could go before us. I can let them know that we're ready to go, if that makes sense.

The Chair: Sure. Very well. Thanks for that deferral.

We'll ask if Ken Matthews is present. Is he ready to present?

Mr. Matthews: Yes, I'm here.

The Chair: Oh, good afternoon. Are you ready to go a little early?

Mr. Matthews: Yeah, I can go any time.

The Chair: Please proceed. Identify yourself, and tell us what riding you live in and what electoral divisions you wish to comment on.

Mr. Matthews: Okay. Well, I live in Big Lakes county, of course, which is within the Lesser Slave Lake constituency.

Just a little history. I'm going to give a little history of myself and then on with some of the history of the Lesser Slave Lake constituency. In 1971 I moved here from southern Ontario. I kept bees for about 15 years commercially. I worked for the Alberta government at northern and remote housing for about 13 years. I managed a retail lumber and hardware store in High Prairie for 14 years. Upon retiring, I entered into the local municipal government here, initially with the MD of Big Lakes, that turned into Big Lakes county, and served 15 years as a councillor and a reeve. I've been on the steering committee for the new High Prairie hospital. I spent 10 years on the first health advisory council in the north here.

The Lesser Slave Lake constituency – and I'm sure you people are aware of this – was originally started back in 1971, and it has been a major contributor in the provincial scene ever since. Changes have been made to the boundaries in the past, and some should be noted. In 1993 the boundaries were pushed north all the way to the territories. In '03 it was changed back because of, of course, the distance to travel and the impossibility of an MLA being able to represent that large an area. In 2010 the boundaries were again adjusted to reflect the boundaries of residents, councils, and MLAs dealing with the same map.

The current recommendation that has been put forward would have Big Lakes county residents and council dealing with four – four – elected MLAs. If that wouldn't add confusion, I don't know what would, but that's what the recommended boundaries show now.

There were minor changes again in 2017, but very minor. I think Calling Lake was added to the north. Back in 2017 I was involved at that time, when the review took place, as a representative from Big Lakes county. Again, the concern that has been brought up here time and time again is that there has to be some sort of adjustments made to the criteria for the boundaries. Population cannot be the only factor. I think, as Ms Kolebaba before me said, that you can cover a whole constituency in the city of Edmonton by travelling maybe an hour and a half in any one direction whereas in the north that's impossible. It's an hour and a half from here to Slave Lake on a good day, and we've had some days lately where you weren't travelling to Slave Lake in an hour and a half.

I would recommend strongly that the future recommendation be that boundaries remain as they are currently, with the exception that the southern boundary be moved south to include all of Big Lakes county, which it doesn't and hasn't for a while, including the town of Swan Hills. Being involved in local politics, I know that the town of Swan Hills would far sooner be in this constituency as it is now than where they are. You people are not likely aware of it, but Big Lakes county heavily subsidizes Swan Hills. In fact, Swan Hills

may not exist today if it wasn't for the funds that Big Lakes county put in there. If they were to dissolve, or make that move to decide to dissolve, they would have to be taken over by Big Lakes county because that's the constituency that they're within.

2:55

That said, we also noted that there's at least one, possibly two Hutterite colonies being established southwest of High Prairie or in Big Lakes county, and they usually average between 80 and a hundred people. Right now the one is already in the process of being established. They already have their camp there. They've already put up some buildings. There's a very good chance there's going to be a second one down there.

I just also might add that Lesser Slave Lake since its existence has been the home of two MLAs, one being the first Muslim MLA in the province, Mr. Larry Shaben, and the other is the longest serving Indigenous MLA, Pearl Calahasen. They've served the majority of the time since the inception of the constituency.

If I could just take another minute here. I agree totally with most of the comments that have been made by previous ones, especially some of the ones that Carolyn Kolebaba made and the mayor from Slave Lake, although I would not agree that they're the hub of the north. Of course, that's been an ongoing dispute between the two communities for a number of years.

The boundaries that have been taken out actually split Big Lakes county kind of in half. It takes out three Métis settlements, three of eight in the province, and at least six First Nations that are within the boundaries of Big Lakes county. It separates them. As the mayor has turned out, the trading centres for all those communities are Slave Lake and High Prairie. Again, going back to having four MLAs representing one municipality, I just don't see that as a workable situation at all.

Again, thanks for your time.

This area of Big Lakes county and that area: we incorporate or facilitate all the major industries in the province. We have forestry. We have West Fraser's big plant in High Prairie. We have Tolko here, who's the strandboard plant. We have different energy companies. I wouldn't even guess at the number of energy companies, especially in the Swan Hills area.

Tourism is another thing that's growing. A point that should be made is that the Joussard area and across the lake from it is Hilliard's Bay Estates, two huge communities that in the summertime likely would house at least 4,000 more people than what they would in the wintertime. Shaw's Point Resort: I know for a fact that on a holiday weekend a couple of years ago they had 10,000 people at that resort. Those are all factors, of course, that affect our health care systems and all that, but I guess the other point is that there are times of the year here when we have a lot more than what the provincial requirement is for population as well.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Matthews. Appreciate your presentation. I've got a couple of questions. I'm a little unclear. You said that Big Lakes county under our proposal would be divided into four electoral divisions having four MLAs. Just recite the ridings you're talking about.

Mr. Matthews: Well, you've got the one to the – I haven't got them in front of me, but the Peace River one that Todd Loewen currently represents: that would come right up to take in High Prairie.

The Chair: Okay. Mackenzie?

Mr. Matthews: Mackenzie would go, of course, to – well, I don't know how he's possibly going to manage that being the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

The Chair: I'm just trying to identify the ridings right now.

Mr. Matthews: Well, Mackenzie.

The Chair: Yeah.

Mr. Matthews: And the one that Slave Lake goes into, is that Lac La Biche, that area?

The Chair: Okay.

Mrs. Samson: Athabasca.

Mr. Matthews: And then the one immediately south of Swan Hills, Whitecourt.

The Chair: Okay. Yeah. So that was the only clarification I wanted to make, and thank you for the history lesson. I'm old enough to remember Larry Shaben, actually, and I didn't realize he represented that riding, but let me have some of the commission members dialogue with you.

Mr. Evans, any questions or points you want to raise with this presenter?

Mr. Evans: I just wanted the same clarification you wanted on the four MLAs, and it looks like, yeah, that's correct. I don't think we had realized that. The other was that I just want to make sure that – you said specifically that Swan Hills wanted to be part of the existing Lesser Slave Lake constituency.

Mr. Matthews: Yeah, or certainly part of Big Lakes county, but, again, with the boundaries – that's another thing I want to indicate. The boundaries shown on the maps that you put out, these new maps – the boundaries of Big Lakes county are not accurate at all. I don't know who did the map, but they don't even show Swan Hills being part of Big Lakes county, and Swan Hills is well within Big Lakes county's boundaries. Our boundary to the east of Swan Hills is likely, oh, I would say, eight miles to the east at least, and to the south of Swan Hills it's another eight or 10 miles.

Mr. Evans: I don't think it shows the south boundary of Big Lakes county, but it shows the west boundary.

Mr. Matthews: And that is not accurate. I'll guarantee you it's not accurate, unless you've got different maps than I've looked at.

Mr. Evans: Okay.

The Chair: Well, we'll make a note of that, sir.

Mr. Evans: But, again, my point, before we got sidetracked with that, not that it's not valuable for certain – but Swan Hills: that town, you're saying, would like to be part of what is currently the constituency of Lesser Slave Lake.

Mr. Matthews: Well, yes, because – well, actually, they're not in there now.

Mr. Evans: No. They're not there now.

Mr. Matthews: For some reason, though they're well within Big Lakes county's boundaries, the electoral boundaries down there – I don't know exactly where they cut off, but they cut off north of

Swan Hills. Right now they're part of Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock.

Mr. Evans: Right. But you're saying they should be added to Lesser Slave Lake.

Mr. Matthews: Well, like I say, we worked closely with them over the years. Of course, respectively, that's where a lot of the revenue for Big Lakes county comes from: in the Swan Hills area. But they've always had a different MLA than we did, so, you know, if they wanted something municipally, they'd come to Big Lakes county. If they needed to go to the province, then they'd go exactly the opposite direction. I understood that they already put in a written submission asking that they be included within our boundaries, but I don't know. That's just what I've heard.

The Chair: Others have made that request as well, sir, so you know.

Mr. Matthews: Yeah.

The Chair: Anything else, John?

Mr. Evans: No. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Okay.

Mrs. Samson.

3:05

Mrs. Samson: Thank you for your time this afternoon. I appreciate the information you gave us, but I'll just share with you that before your call we had Mayor Francesca Ward on the line, and she has assured us that Slave Lake is the hub. So thank you.

Mr. Matthews: That debate has gone on for a long time.

Mrs. Samson: I like it.

Mr. Matthews: We've been on the new zone 4 health advisory council together now, so we'll maybe get it straightened out somehow.

Ms. Ward: Yeah. It's the new Edmonton-Calgary divide or the Edmonton-Calgary divide of the north.

Mrs. Samson: Okay. Sounds good.

The Chair: Yeah. We can solve a few of the problems. We can't solve all your problems, I can assure you.

Ms Churchill: Listen, as the Alberta North Central Alliance, it's my job to tell High Prairie and Slave Lake, you guys just need to get along. It's about us.

The Chair: Okay. Anything more, Susan?

Mrs. Samson: No. I'm good, thank you.

The Chair: Dr. Martin.

Dr. Martin: I'm just confused. I mean, we had MLA van Dijken this morning telling us that the centre of Alberta geographically is near Barrhead. It's very difficult to keep up with all these competing claims.

No. I wanted to thank Mr. Matthews for his presentation. It reinforces a lot of the themes that we've heard in the letters and in the submissions that we have heard today. Thank you, sir.

Mr. Matthews: Thank you.

The Chair: Yes. Thank you very much.

Mr. Matthews: The centre is closer to Swan Hills, again, than it is Barrhead.

Dr. Martin: We need a commission on this I think.

Mr. Matthews: That's a fact.

The Chair: Okay. That brings us back now to Jennifer Churchill and – sorry – someone else.

Ms Churchill: Mike Evans.

The Chair: Okay. Jennifer, I'll let you speak and introduce whoever's assisting you.

Ms Churchill: Perfect. You guys can see my slide show?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms Churchill: Perfect. It's been updated since the one I had sent earlier.

Thank you very much for having us today. My name is Jennifer Churchill. I'm here with Alberta North Central Alliance, and I also have here Mike. He is the executive director of the Lesser Slave Lake Indian Regional Council.

Mike, cut me off any time.

Who does ANCA and, within that, the Lesser Slave Lake Indian Regional Council represent? We have five First Nations and five municipalities, which basically make up the Lesser Slave Lake riding. Our boundaries are quite similar. We are working together to co-ordinate and to collaborate, to communicate, share information but also to advocate to bring supports and services to this region. Within the Alberta North Central Alliance is the MD of Opportunity, Bigstone Cree Nation, the town of Slave Lake, the MD of Lesser Slave River, Sawridge First Nation, Swan River First Nation, Driftpile First Nation, Sucker Creek First Nation and the town of High Prairie. The Lesser Slave Lake Indian Regional Council represents four of those nations.

Mike, I don't know if you want to add in there a little bit.

Mr. Mike Evans: Not now. Thanks.

Ms Churchill: Okay. Our area is over 55,000 kilometres of north-central Alberta, which is about 8, almost 9 per cent of the province of Alberta's land mass. Our MLA represents our entire region as we define it, which is almost 9 per cent of the province of Alberta. Within our region we have integrated rural, remote, and Indigenous communities within that piece.

When this all came to be and the conversation is to remove our one riding that represents all of those communities, your report is recommending that we split it into three. One end of the lakeshore, the northern piece, would go in with Peace River. One would go into the Mackenzie riding that's being recommended. Then the Slave Lake, Sawridge First Nation portion would go towards Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock. MD of Opportunity, that northern part, also would join Mackenzie riding. That particular riding recommendation would increase the region from 8 per cent, where we're at now, 8 to almost 9 per cent, to – some of my rough math said 22 per cent of the province of Alberta's land mass would be represented in that Mackenzie riding.

We also were a little bit surprised when we read the report. You know, we're talking about removing our riding, but we had one local session with two people that represented. There was kind of,

when we were talking about representation and those feedback pieces – you've had lots of representation today, too, from my region. The conversations about, you know, the idea of a lakeshore and some of those history pieces didn't hit the report because there was very little representation. It reduces regional input, so we appreciate that we have the opportunity today.

The report identifies that our population is 50 per cent below the provincial average. We're not confident that number is accurately represented. The town of Slave Lake almost has 10,000 people. The MD of Opportunity, which encompasses several nations, Métis settlements, et cetera: they're sitting at approximately 10,000. Bigstone Cree Nation has a large population, so I'm a little bit – as a region we've had conversations about: how accurate is that data? How accurate is the count from all of the Indigenous communities on the area? But also: where's the reflection and the including of how many oil and gas workers we have in the region at any given time? You've heard already today, but we have some communities in the summertime triple in size based on, you know, where they live in the winter and where they stay in the summer. I understand that the math matters, but in this sense the way that people are counted, if that's so essential, we're not convinced that is necessarily an accurate representation.

Also – it's been mentioned before, and here it comes again – you know, population does not reflect our representation needs as a region. We are a little bit surprised that we had a statistic where we have the smallest riding in terms of population according to your report. We were a little bit surprised that we on paper look like we have such a statistical advantage in terms of representation because we don't feel like that increase in representation has meant increase in services or increase in supports into our region. Alberta North Central Alliance and Lesser Slave Lake Indian Regional Council are two examples of communities coming together to work together to bring supports and services because there is a little bit of a shortage.

In the past we've been granted section 15(2) protection. We have some questions about why that is not now continuing. We know that there were three ridings in the province that get that exemption. We had it. Where is that going? Also, our geographical scale and service challenges have remained the same in those pieces.

It's interesting to me that you guys mentioned earlier that the province of Alberta is growing with increased population, and rightfully so, but we're not seeing that in the north. Your report even suggests that there's a case of the north shrinking in population, so maybe there's a bigger understanding of what's going on that a province is growing, but 60 per cent of it is struggling. Is it a lack of resources or investment, or how does that look? [A timer sounded] Sorry, I'll go faster.

With your report you're going to split groups like ANCA that were collaborating together and working together, too, to bring supports and services to the region and just an awareness of what it's like to live in north-central Alberta. Lesser Slave Lake Indian Regional Council has existed for quite a bit longer than ANCA, and Mike can speak to that. They signed Treaty 8 together and, in fact, were one band in 1899 under the Kinoyayo band. Your proposal will split Sawridge from the rest of the nations in Lesser Slave Lake Indian Regional Council.

As Mayor Ward and as Ken Matthews have mentioned earlier, we have health care overlaps, education, labour transportation systems between the whole entire north and south of the lakeshore up through Wabasca, Red Earth, down through Slave Lake across over to the other pieces. The boundary fragmentation really makes it difficult to advocate for a region, and we're already having significant issues with that. Also, you know, for an MLA to be able to have the ability to travel and something that large – especially

Mackenzie, when you're looking at 22 per cent, where I live, Zama City would be in the same riding as me, and they're six hours away, if there was a road that directly connects us. Boundaries should reflect how communities function. Yes, I understand that it is numbers. Yes, I understand that a lot of it is: how do you make things equitable? But fair is not always equal, right?

Go ahead, Mike. You're muted, Mike.

3:15

Mr. Mike Evans: Sorry. That's better. Thank you, Jennifer.

I just wanted to add a little bit more historical information that I think is worthy of consideration here. Jennifer had mentioned that Treaty 8 was signed on the south shores of Lesser Slave Lake in 1899, that the Indigenous communities in this region were the original signatories, the first signatories of that treaty. So the region has a historical significance in that context.

The other thing that she was saying about how the constituencies should reflect a certain regionality in terms of the way that they work together: there's an enormous amount of existing co-operation within this region already between the mainstream communities, the Métis settlements, and the First Nations. Those services have grown up naturally to reflect a unity that now is being divided through the proposal that has been made. I think, you know, we have to acknowledge that the boundaries to some extent are arbitrary. You have criteria that you're trying to meet in terms of the proposal that's in front of the commission, that will be going to the Legislature, but it is missing I think some of these other considerations about why the region is as significant as it is.

The other thing we've got now to this slide – I just wanted to mention that I'd forgotten that Larry Shaben had been the MLA up there for a number of years, but that this constituency, the Slave Lake constituency, has for 28 of the last 36 years been represented by an Indigenous MLA. There isn't another constituency in Alberta that has anywhere near that kind of consistent representation from the Indigenous community. There's little enough Indigenous representation in caucus, in government that is being satisfied, if you will, that a certain perspective is being brought to the table out of the north consistently for the last three decades. That hasn't been true anywhere else. There's a very real concern in the Indigenous community that if the constituency is split as proposed, there won't be an Indigenous representative in any of them because the place where the strength of unity and action is most present will have been divided. That's a real concern to these communities who have endeavoured as well to, you know, represent interests even beyond themselves.

Jennifer had mentioned that regional council has existed for a long time. It was the first tribal council that was incorporated in Canada back in 1971. For a long time its leadership included Senator and Chief Walter Twin out of Sawridge. Originally the regional council was also very large. It had 11 member nations. Over time, due to geography and, again, existing service areas, regional council has become smaller. Three of its members that are farther to the west have formed their own tribal council and are within the Grande Prairie constituencies. There are some others that are farther north that have created a new tribal council, the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council. But this body here in this region has remained strong for 50 years, and the proposal really risks taking that apart.

Those are some specifically Indigenous considerations that I wanted to bring to your attention. Happy to answer any questions you might have. Before I go, I'm certain that there are over 200 Mike Evans in Alberta, but, Dr. Martin, yes, it's me.

The Chair: Okay. Actually, I was just going to ask you to state your name again, sir. Thank you for this tag team presentation.

I have to confess that I was distracted at the beginning, Jennifer, and your first slide I couldn't read clearly. Could you just recap? Yeah. Could you just give us another recap of geographically and representatively who your members are? I think it'll give me a much better context.

Then I'm going to open it up to the commission.

Ms Churchill: Mike mentioned that regional council was the first in Canada of their type. Alberta North Central Alliance is the first regional group in Canada of our type, where we have municipalities and Nations sitting together at a table to have a conversation about what our region needs, because we have that many needs. So within that is the MD of Opportunity, Big Stone Cree Nation, the MD of Lesser Slave River, town of Slave Lake, Sawridge First Nation, Big Lakes county, Swan River First Nation, Driftpile First Nation, Sucker Creek First Nation, and the town of High Prairie.

The Chair: There's one other Nation not captured on this map, which is the Kapawn'no First Nation, but they are not a member of regional council.

Ms Churchill: They are no longer a member of ANCA either. There are other communities within this region that we, you know, advocate for as well, but they have chosen not to collaborate at this given particular time. Actually, Big Lakes county, which you can see on that map, has the most Indigenous communities in all of Canada. They have more Nations and Métis settlements within their boundaries as opposed to any other municipal or government within Canada. The MD of Opportunity is something like 65 per cent Indigenous. They're the only municipality within Alberta that is actually primarily Indigenous.

The Chair: Now, am I correct in understanding that all those counties and municipalities that you just listed: they are all contained within the existing Lesser Slave Lake riding?

Ms Churchill: Yes, they are.

The Chair: Okay. So there's a bit of a real cohesion that exists with what is present, and we, in our interim report, have in a sense blown up that wonderful cohesion.

Ms Churchill: Yes, and if Mayor Ward wants to turn on her camera, the town of Slave Lake is part of ANCA. But we've had to collaborate together because, you know, as we mentioned before, we're a little bit surprised that we have a statistical advantage within that map that I'm showing you right now.

We have four hospitals, and you can't have a baby in any of those four hospitals. We have some of the highest levels of diabetics in all of Alberta in that whole region. Besides some of the Nations that are bringing in diabetic foot care, we have to travel to Edmonton or Grande Prairie for diabetic foot care. Within that region we have roads that are crumbling. All of them are one lane with very few turnouts.

Travel Alberta: if you go to Travel Alberta's website, you will see that on our region we have the Lesser Slave Lake, like, the actual lake. You're not going to see any of our communities highlighted on Travel Alberta's website, and that was something that we've been working on. We're working together because there's a need and a gap – right? – so I don't want to say it, but the fact that we exist is because we need to exist. We have to work together to do so.

Mr. Mike Evans: There's a ton of advocacy still that can be done that is independent, I guess, of whether there's one MLA or three or four, except that this is a region that has its own internal logic and coherence. It would be disrupted by the proposal that's been put on the table, and we'd be a lot happier if that didn't happen, you know? There's kind of an unprecedented collaboration between the mainstream community and the Indigenous communities. Of course, it can always get better, but there aren't many that are doing the kind of job of integration that's being done here.

The Chair: I have one more question before I unleash the rest of the commission on you, and Mr. Evans, it's about your comments. So Treaty 8 was signed in 1899 on the southern shore of Lesser Slave Lake. Is that right?

Mr. Mike Evans: Yeah, that's right. Chief Kinosayo and Chief Moostos were what they called headmen at the time, who led all of the communities on the southern shore of Lesser Slave Lake, and the actual place of signing, as far as we know, was on what is now part of the Sucker Creek reserve.

The Chair: Fortunately or unfortunately, I'm a bit of a historic nerd, and I know very well where Treaty 7 was signed. I believe it was in 1873. That's an important data point for me for report-writing purposes. Mr. Evans, can you send me something, if it's not already in a report, about the historic nature of this area?

3:25

Mr. Mike Evans: I'm not sure that Jennifer provided anything to you. I know that we did not, but I would be happy to share that with you.

The Chair: Your comments about the continuity over the last 36 years are very important. In my previous life I did know Ms Calahasen, and she ably represented your area. Yeah. Please send the commission some information along those lines.

Mr. Mike Evans: I'm happy to do so.

Mr. Sinclair is now who's the MLA, and I realize he's in a position of some difficulty with the government, but he also is an Indigenous representative who was elected up here.

The Chair: Right. He's presenting next week, I believe, so we'll hear all facets of that. Okay. Thank you.

I've occupied enough time here. I'm going to turn it over to the commission. Dr. Martin, any questions, comments?

Dr. Martin: Yeah. Several. It's good to hear your voice, Mike Evans. My first comment really is that it is the genius of sparsely populated areas and communities that they find ways to link up to discuss all the issues that preoccupy smaller towns about resource allocation, budgeting priorities, and services that can be shared and how to do workarounds, all of which is made much more difficult, of course, by the extreme distances and the sparse populations in the north. We've heard this point repeatedly and I think persuasively in the last couple of days.

I'm very interested to hear more. Perhaps, Jennifer, you could speak to this as well. I know Mike is very well versed in it. The whole planning process and the cohesion of all these groups in ANCA, five First Nations, five municipalities: it's quite a lot to juggle. You are inferring, and I'm persuaded by your remarks, that all these groups work well together, as the judge said, cohesively, to build out a planning portrait prioritizing the needs of these communities. This is quite impressive, I must say. I just invite you to add some further anecdotes if you will about shared planning and shared services.

Ms Churchill: It's a process that takes time, but I think lots of it is because when you look at even the reports that you're suggesting not only are you diluting our voices a bit as ANCA and as a region, but you're taking smaller communities and matching them with larger communities, so that rural Indigenous voice gets diluted by some of those bigger communities and other areas.

We have some needs and we have the same needs and we are all connected and we're all related and tied together. Are there times where Slave Lake and High Prairie have to be told: settle down a little bit; it's not always about you? As you can see, sometimes that's the case, right? But at the end of the day we have lots of the same issues. We're not going to agree on everything, but how do we communicate with each other? How do we share a healthy region and a healthy lakeshore, healthy communities? How do we tie some of those pieces in together to move the region forward? Is it a perfect system? No. Is it a slow system? But we're working at it.

If this was to go forward, do I know what the future of a group like us would look like? I'm not sure, to be completely and totally honest. Mayor Ward said it best, though, that we would figure it out because in the north we always do figure it out, and I agree with that. Right? But we're really starting to get some momentum and to bring some eyes on our region and some of the gaps that really exist. I'm sure if we had some support in terms of infrastructure and some investment in our region that we probably could grow like the rest of Alberta has been and that the next time that this commission happens we could be having a very different conversation, but we need some support and we need some growth and we need some investing in resources and our infrastructure to do so. By splitting us, it isn't doing that.

Mr. Mike Evans: I wanted to suggest something else as well. This map is actually really instructive because in a way it reflects the regionality that we've been talking about. There was an earlier conversation that there's some sort of dispute about the geographic centre of Alberta. Ken Matthews is correct. It's just south of Slave Lake. It's not that close to Barrhead. Regardless, if you look at this map, this reflects the regionality in the transportation corridor. If you were to connect all those dots, that's highway 2 on the south shore of Lesser Slave Lake, and that's part of the reason that these communities are linked the way they are. Then with the upgrades that have been done to 88 in the past 30 years, that's what connects the MD of Opportunity. That connects Big Stone, Red Earth. Shoot, now I'm forgetting the name of the other – I mean, a number of those communities up there.

It's been a while. I drove the highway from off number 2 through Swan Hills down to Barrhead for the first time in 30 years a couple of weeks ago. You know, that's another spur, but it comes off highway 2. It's no different than building a new road in the city and all of a sudden you've got new subdivisions. These communities work together the way that they do because they're linked by infrastructure, and what you're doing is splitting an existing – there's a potential here to divide an already highly functioning regional area that also has historical significance.

Dr. Martin: Thank you.

One last comment to Jennifer's earlier remark about underreporting of population. We agree, but all census makers would agree that it's extremely difficult to do accurate population counts in First Nations because they're not necessarily self-reporting, so they have some probabilistic estimates. I suspect you're absolutely right empirically, yet we have to work with the data sets that the Office of Statistics and Information in Treasury Board have worked out. That has the highest probability of being

accurate at the time for the date they are published. So it's a fair critique. We can't actually repair those data sets, but your point is well taken. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Martin.

Mr. Mike Evans: I don't mean to be presumptuous here, but if there is a willingness – and as I said, you know, on some level these boundaries are all arbitrary as it is. If you're concerned that the population of this constituency is too small, how difficult would it be to add some areas from neighbouring to change the population without necessarily affecting – I'm just putting that on the table, I guess. If the population is the driver but this particular region is unique for other reasons, maybe that can be addressed in a different way than dividing.

The Chair: Jennifer, I think, raised the point of 15(2). We've not used those tools in our tool box sufficiently either, so that's certainly on our mind. Thank you.

Ms Churchill: Some of my last comment is about the population counts. There's a history about why lots of times, sometimes in Indigenous communities they don't want to necessarily be counted on some of those pieces, but by diluting some of those voices and not necessarily, you know – like Mike had mentioned, we have in history had Indigenous population represented. We have a high level of it, so there are quite a few people who represent our MLA – right? – through Indigenous pieces. By moving it so that that doesn't happen as often doesn't necessarily make them feel more welcome to be counted. If that makes sense.

The Chair: Yeah. Sorry to correct you, Jennifer. It's not your last comment because the commission isn't finished yet.

Ms Churchill: Oh, okay.

The Chair: I'm going to turn it over to Mrs. Samson for any questions.

Mrs. Samson: I just wanted to make a comment. I note that there was concern raised by the group that there was not sufficient or appropriate notice given for the work that we are undertaking. If it gives you any peace of mind, we have received an enormous number of submissions based on the work we've done to date, 1,100. My colleague tells me that over 100 of them were based on a discontentment with the work we did on the north, so rest assured that we heard you.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Any questions, Mr. Evans?

Mr. Evans: Yeah. Mike Evans, my brother is named Mike Evans, and I have a second cousin Mike Evans, so we can account for three of you now.

The Chair: There are three of them.

Mr. Mike Evans: I said that there were 143 of us.

Mr. Evans: Who knew it was such a popular name?

3:35

Mr. Mike Evans: When I was with the department of English at the U of A, there were three of us on faculty with the same name.

Mr. Evans: That would have been confusing.

There was a reference to the band – it was a united band, or more or less united – that signed Treaty 8. But then it looks like it fractured into a number of separate bands. Can you tell me how that works?

Mr. Mike Evans: Well, yeah. I mean, in the 19th century when the treaty was executed, there was no such thing as bands. You know, that's a colonial settler notion. The farther north that you go, perhaps not in – well, no; in 1899 that would have been true. It's still true. It might not have been true in 1200. But the farther north you go, the more traditionally people live, and the nature of the ecosystem requires a different kind of community than you might have been able to maintain in the south, where buffalo was your principal hunting animal, where you could acquire a large amount of meat by driving animals over a buffalo jump. People tended to live in sort of extended family groupings in the bush, a seminomadic life, but they all knew one another. They would gather at important places a couple of times a year. The southern shores of Lesser Slave Lake were one of those places. Folks farther south talk about Edmonton as having been a gathering place for large numbers of Indigenous people of varying backgrounds.

When the treaty was signed, it was signed by folks who were nominated sort of as the leaders of a loosely associated group of Woodland Cree people. They were well known to one another, which is why Kinosayo and Moostos were sort of the lead representatives, if you will. Then when it got time to be making reserves – and I'll have to look that up myself. I'm afraid I can't tell you when the reserves started to be designated, but it would have been quite a long time after the signing of Treaty 8. Eventually, as people were encouraged to adopt an agricultural lifestyle, then, of course, the population tended to concentrate in specific areas, and the reserves sprang up around those communities.

Over time, in part due to Indian Act requirements of, you know, having a chief and council that you need to elect every two years, which meant they didn't make very much progress, there were things by the mainstream community that were imposed on these communities that wound up creating what are now, with Lesser Slave Lake, four distinct First Nations that are all allied through the regional council to do work together. They also provide services to their membership – specifically to their membership – independent of one another as well.

Does that answer the question?

Mr. Evans: It does. Yes. Thank you very much. I appreciate all your submissions.

The Chair: Okay. Well, this has been a very full afternoon, and we're not nearly finished all our presenters, but this has been very enriching for us in over a half hour.

Jennifer and Mike, thank you so much for your presentation, and I trust we'll have your PowerPoint. Anything further you can provide from the historic perspective, Mike, that would be helpful.

Ms Churchill: Some of that is in ANCA's submission, but I can get you some more.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Mike Evans: I'm happy to provide information as well. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you. You're free to stay to hear the rest of the presentations. There are two more presentations.

First of all, Nathan Steinke. Nathan, are you present and able to present?

Mr. Steinke: Hello. Can you hear me?

The Chair: Yes. Please proceed.

Mr. Steinke: Excellent. Fantastic. Yeah. My name is Nathan Steinke. I am here both as a constituent of the north, and also I work in a constituency office in the north for MLA Todd Loewen here in Valleyview. I have a bit of an insight into kind of the inner workings of representation in this part of the world and its difficulties.

I'll start by saying that, you know, I suppose I'm a little bit disappointed that we have to be having this by Zoom rather than in person. I note that there are in-person events in Edmonton and Calgary. I kind of start my presentation with this not as a shot at any of the members of this committee or an attack on them but just as an introduction point to highlight just how difficult it is to represent the north, as I'm sure the commission has learned.

I appreciate that the commission had some events in person prior, as it did the first draft prior to Christmas in 2025, but I'm sure as you discovered, it's very difficult to represent this area, travelling place to place and trying to find hubs locally, enough locations that you feel can geographically cover the people that live here. I'm sure you probably also found that it's difficult to find venues and get the word out properly because we have a very fractured media landscape up here. The death of the local papers is kind of an unfortunate development. It's difficult to get the word out on events. You do your best to have events wherever you can across the area, and then you discover that you have halls that aren't very full or people that didn't ever get the word for whatever reason. My point is only to say that there are some difficulties in this. It's not an easy job. The larger we get geographically, the more difficult it gets, exponentially I believe.

I'm concerned – and I'm glad to hear that the commission has heard this from other people as well and has acknowledged it – that this report seems to have, I believe, I guess what I would call an urban bias, which is that it attempts to equalize population without considering the difficulty factor that that adds. There's kind of a strange logic here in the report. The logic works against itself, unfortunately, where the more you try to equalize population, the more difficult you make it. You're actually getting further away from equal representation the closer you get to equal population.

What I mean is, essentially, that in an urban riding I can appreciate that if you had 20 seats to distribute within Calgary and about a million people, say, you could do that calculation pretty easily and you would do your best to keep those populations as close as possible. If you ever had any dramatic changes within a city, it would be fairly easy just to move that line a couple of city blocks over and restore some more equilibrium. However, in the north trying to meet that population target often results in moving the line hundreds of kilometres. At that point you are introducing not just distance but, in many cases, multiple municipalities. If you move a line 200 kilometres, 300 kilometres, you're probably into another municipal district or county; you probably incorporated more villages and towns and even school boards. You're adding a number of different elected officials now that the MLA has to represent and meet with regularly.

I believe that we kind of got a bit of a double whammy here in rural Alberta in that the legislation adds two seats, taking us from 87 to 89, both of which are added in urban Alberta, and then we lose two seats. So the net swing is actually a four-seat swing to urban Alberta. Not that those people don't deserve representation, but again, we talk about fair representation.

I believe that the act in section 15(2) – I'm just pulling up here to make sure I'm referencing the right thing – does allow us to create boundaries that are up to 50 per cent lower than the average, and I

don't believe that's a bad thing. I believe that to try and minimize those, to try and say to have none or only one – I believe there's only one in this report that is within that 50 per cent margin – is missing the mark in that it seems almost to think that these exceptions exist, and the misconception is that we should try to minimize these exceptions when, honestly, my preference would be: if you're allotted four that are allowed to be 50 per cent below the average, use those four. I honestly think you have to use those four.

Population being equal, it's much harder to represent a rural riding. My math would be that if it's 50 per cent below the population average, it's twice as hard to represent, so that difficulty multiplier basically brings you up to equilibrium anyway. A rural riding the size of ours, with 30,000 people, is twice as hard to represent as an urban riding with 60,000. I would make that case for sure.

3:45

What this report does is that it unfortunately shoots at population equalization, so the kind of strange result of that, again, the strange logic of this is that you end up having urban seats with 49,000, 50,000, 51,000 people, and you have rural seats with 46,000, 47,000, 48,000 people, and I question the equity in doing that and the fairness in doing that. You know, again, population trying to be equalized – there is no comparison between the difficulty in getting adequate representation here versus in a city.

So I'll leave you with that. Again, I've appreciated watching the submissions, and I appreciate the work of the committee. Thank you for allowing me to present.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Steinke.

Let's get in some dialogue. Mr. Evans, any questions or comments for this presenter?

Mr. Evans: If I understand the summary of your submissions, it's: use 15(2) as a tool to provide effective representation in the north; don't be afraid to use it.

Mr. Steinke: Absolutely. I say that, you know, again, my preference would be to use all four if possible. I mean, I don't think that there is a – how should I put this? – moral argument for using fewer rather than more. I think that just because it's an exception doesn't mean that we should shy away from using it. It's an exception that's put in there for a very good reason. In fact, it's the only way – again, the strange logic of the larger you try to make your riding to equalize the population, the harder you're making it to represent. It's a paradox, right? So the only way to square that circle is to allow these exceptions. There's, frankly, no other way.

I do appreciate that the two extra seats that are being added did go to urban Alberta. I mean, we probably don't have a way around that in terms of – they certainly, probably, do deserve more seats in those areas. That kind of seems to take care of that urban growth factor. I think that, on the rural side, leaving those seats in place as much as possible would be far preferable.

Mr. Evans: Thank you, Nathan. Appreciate that.

Mrs. Samson: Thank you again for your time today. Good descriptions and analogies for the north and the problems you're facing. I agree with my colleague. We have to have a hard look at 15(2) again, particularly in relation to your area, so I can tell you that we will do that. We will have a look at it. Thank you.

Mr. Steinke: Fantastic. Thank you.

The Chair: Yes.

Dr. Martin, any questions?

Dr. Martin: Yeah. Thank you.

Thank you for your presentation. I think you're spot on about some of the difficulties and indeed the paradoxes, as you referred to them. You know, I will say in our own defence that when we first began, we knew this would be a long game. That's why we had an interim report, and it was even titled that. We have been rewarded with a deluge of submissions, many of which were very useful and very detailed, the accumulated effect of which is to bring much more granular information to our attention than we had when we began.

It's always been our intention to fully respect the features of the act, which is quite a juggling act to do. The population side of it is probably the easiest of all the factors that we are enjoined to pay respect to. That's why we're having this second round, as it were. So your remarks are heard, and I'm thanking you for presenting them.

The Chair: Yes, thank you, Mr. Steinke. Maybe it was the time of the year, but we didn't have an overabundance of presenters when we were in the north in June, but we certainly got the north's attention by way of our interim report. So thank you. You've given us some punchy lines here, and your description of the paradox is bang on. We might just steal that and incorporate that in our report. Thank you so much, Mr. Steinke. By the way, were you here throughout the day listening to other submissions?

Mr. Steinke: I was watching on the YouTube link.

The Chair: Okay. Good. Well, thank you.

We have one more presenter scheduled today, Amanda McDonald.

Ms McDonald: Good afternoon, everybody. Yeah. I have a feeling I may just be the summary that you need because I probably am going to say a lot of similar things that you guys have heard today.

I'm the reeve for the county of Grande Prairie. We just wanted to recognize the commission's mandate and that you've been tasked with balancing population parity with effective representation. In Alberta, and especially in northern Alberta, some of those concepts are not necessarily the same thing. Numbers alone do not necessarily tell the full story of how residents access their MLAs or what it takes for an MLA to meaningfully serve a very large rural riding.

The Electoral Boundaries Commission Act requires consideration of more than just population. You guys referenced that already, but some of those highlight: sparsity, geography, transportation realities, communities of interest, and clarity of boundaries, which, again was brought up, you know, previous to me. These factors are especially important in the north, especially when distances are very long and travel conditions are difficult and communities are very widely spaced apart. Even though a boundary map may look balanced on paper, in practice it could reduce representation if the riding became too large for one MLA to serve it effectively. When residents can't access their MLA or when an MLA cannot reasonably cover the vast territory, representation becomes unequal regardless of the population.

This is why the county of Grande Prairie is concerned about the interim recommendation that reduces northern Alberta from seven to six. This is not simply a reshuffling of lines. It does represent a structural loss of representation in the north. A single MLA serving a riding that is large would face enormous geographic and logistic challenges. It stretches from remote communities to agricultural

regions and from Indigenous communities to regional service hubs. This reduction not just affects accessibility but the responsiveness and engagement that residents expect from an elected official. In many cases this would mean timely face-to-face interactions become nearly impossible. I think even that was brought up today in response to the Zoom versus in-person meetings.

At the same time, we also want to acknowledge that some things are working really well. I mean, in the Grande Prairie area, the existing Grande Prairie and Grande Prairie-Wapiti ridings reflect a natural community alignment, and they fit how people live and work in this area. It does allow the MLAs to remain present and engaged, so the county supports keeping those boundaries intact. They are functioning, effective, and require minimal disruption. So thank you for that.

We also want to highlight the realities of geography and workload in the rural northern ridings. A rural MLA covers thousands of square kilometres, often travelling long distances in challenging weather and roads. They engage with multiple municipalities, school boards, agricultural service boards, First Nations, industry groups, and regional organizations. Sometimes that workload isn't necessarily comparable to some urban ridings. Again, that doesn't reflect in population numbers all the time.

Growth in northern Alberta further supports the need to retain full representation. For example, the county of Grande Prairie has grown by nearly 12 per cent in the last three years. The Grande Prairie-Wapiti riding aligns closely with those provincial averages, and the city of Grande Prairie continues to grow as well. Meanwhile even though there are some smaller populations in other regions, these do still cover a vast area. Historically, the commission has retained rural northern ridings like this because of the unique geographic and representational demands, so eliminating one now would sort of ignore those long-standing principles and create a larger rural riding that's more difficult for one person to serve.

I also just want to highlight quickly that northern Alberta plays such a central role in the economy. Resource development, agricultural and transportation corridors, and infrastructure located in the north contribute directly to the province's overall prosperity. When we're looking at reducing representation, decision-making at the provincial level risks becoming disconnected from realities and opportunities in the north. Strong representation will ensure that issues like access to health care, transportation, infrastructure, policing, and education are understood with that northern context if we're losing those people.

3:55

Just to summarize, I think we want to continue to support that retaining seven electoral divisions in northwestern Alberta is important to people up in the north. That structure ensures that residents across the vast region continue to have meaningful access to their elected representatives. We want to continue to support current boundaries in the Grande Prairie and the Grande Prairie-Wapiti region as they are working well, and they align really well with the community realities that we face on a day-to-day basis.

I think I'll leave it there. Again, I think I haven't really given you anything new that you haven't heard already today, but we just want to make sure that you're kind of looking at the bigger picture and not just a desk top. Really, I hope you take the words that you've heard today and take that into strong consideration when you go to your final report.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms McDonald.

Dr. Martin, any questions or comments?

Dr. Martin: Well, again, I thank you, Reeve. I think it is important even though you have reiterated many of the points that we have heard today, to be sure, as you alluded to. I must also say that you should take pride in the fact that of the 1,100-odd submissions we received in November and December, there were well over 100, maybe 125, from residents in the north talking about the northern voice, if I may encapsulate it that way, as an important influencer in provincial politics. So the notion that we would rely exclusively on population is misplaced, and the letters help us understand at a granular level a lot of the particular issues and linkages that exist between communities large and small in the north.

I'm particularly interested in your remark that the county has grown 12 per cent in its population in the last three years. Are there particular industries that drive that?

Ms McDonald: In the county we actually have quite a few. I mean, we have mills, some forestry, oil and gas, agriculture, and tourism. We're pretty special in that regard. We don't kind of focus on one thing. I guess mining would be one of the ones we might have missing. All of that is driving population growth for sure. Oil and gas is probably our strongest growth right now, but they're all still very viable.

Dr. Martin: Thank you.

The Chair: Mrs. Samson.

Mrs. Samson: I don't have any questions. I just wanted to thank you for your presentation and taking time out today for us. I appreciate that. Thank you.

Ms McDonald: Thanks.

The Chair: Mr. Evans.

Mr. Evans: Yeah. Thank you for your presentation, Reeve McDonald. I do have a question. Earlier today we heard from the mayor of Grande Prairie, and she's happy with the proposed electoral districts in the interim report, but her preference, if she had her preference, would be to split Grande Prairie so that you had two hybrid ridings. Is that something that you would be interested in?

Ms McDonald: I mean, I think as of right now, like I did say, we are happy with how it has been divided so far. I don't really want to just posturize on what I think. I would want to sort of look at what you were asking for. If it's just a split down the middle, I'm not too sure what that achieves differently than what you already do have. Both MLAs do have a portion of urban and a portion of rural, so I'm not sure other than maybe just if there was a line that made more sense, then I'd be interested in looking at that. But like I said, specifically in our area, they share an office; they work together on a daily basis.

Again, switching that line at this point I'm not sure would change a huge amount for us in the county. I can't really speak to necessarily what the city sees in that regard. I mean, I would be interested to see what your thoughts were, but again, like I said,

they both have a portion urban; they both have a portion rural. So I don't know what we would gain.

Mr. Evans: Okay. Thank you. Appreciate that.

The Chair: Ms McDonald, I want to take this opportunity to just illustrate to you the challenge we have as a commission. Let me just reference an MLA who presented to us in Calgary earlier this week. He asserted that his electoral division was becoming unreasonably large, and by that he meant population. It was over 60,000 people. I then put to him: well, let's talk about unreasonably large. Now, it's been quoted to me – I'm not sure. I haven't verified it; our staff I'm not sure have verified it. But our proposed riding: the southern boundary is closer to the state of Montana than it is to the boundary of Northwest Territories. So I put that to him. That's the extremes we're dealing with. What's unreasonably large?

If I can maybe just give you a little recap of what happened. We didn't hear a lot of submissions from the north on our first time around. Having sat up there and been up there, I know why. Everybody was working hard, farming and fishing and doing everything else you do up there. But we've certainly got your attention in the north since our report. As Dr. Martin has said, we've heard from the north, we're hearing from the north, and that's the value of an interim report and moving to a final report. So thank you and so many of your colleagues from the north for your presentations and for so generously sharing your time and telling us where we need to go in the final report.

Thank you so much.

Ms McDonald: You bet.

The Chair: Okay. That, I believe . . .

Ms Kolebaba: If I may. Sorry. It's Carolyn Kolebaba.

In response to the MLA that spoke about his 60,000 people in urban Calgary, I would suggest to him that if he rented a large hall and notified his 60,000 people, he would probably get them there, and it wouldn't take any one of them very long to get there. If our MLA was to say, "We're having an open house in the north, and everybody, come," there would be probably 60 per cent of us that would have to stay overnight in a hotel in order to get there. So that is the difference.

Thank you.

The Chair: Yeah. Thank you.

Okay. Well, I think that's – unless I've missed someone. I'll just call it open for any people that are in the virtual room who had intended to present and we missed. Please come forth now and identify yourself. Otherwise, we will adjourn the proceedings.

We're going to be back here at 5:30 p.m. We're going to grab a bite to eat, and we'll be back here at 5:30 for this evening's sessions.

Thank you.

[The hearing adjourned at 4:03 p.m.]

