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DEBATES and PROCEEDINGS

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Bill No. 75 – The Northern Municipalities Amendment Act, 2012

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and engage in yet another of the same, as I was saying yesterday, one of the tools in the tool kit that the ministry responsible for municipal relations . . . Government Relations, but Municipal Affairs has put it forward. And it is an interesting piece of legislation. And I've reviewed his comments, and I will take some time to talk about what his comments were.

But I do want to make sure that I've also reviewed what our member from Athabasca was saying in response. And very thoughtful comments, because when we talk about the North, obviously there's unique challenges and specific concerns that they have that, by distance, often we don't appreciate. And I sure appreciate the comments that the member from Athabasca made because I think he was right on. He was spot-on in terms of the concerns. And I think these are the kind of things, when we talk about a growth strategy that this government is putting forward, was what does it mean for the residents, the residents of the North? Clearly the North is so important for our province and our provincial economy, particularly when it comes to forestry and to mining.

But the folks in the North, we have to think about their own local economy and how they connect. And whether it's through trapping or fishing, they have their special contributions that drive their local economy, but also drive and make significant contributions to our provincial economy. Not only . . . And I think about fishing was not only something for our province, but also for Canada. And the freshwater fish co-operation . . .

An Hon. Member: — Best walleye in Saskatchewan.

Mr. Forbes: — Yes, best walleye in Saskatchewan. And so I think that this is an important, important area that we focus on. And I know when this goes forward to committee, there will be lots of questions from our colleagues in the North in terms of

what it means.

But you know, it is very interesting, it is very interesting how out of touch a government can be. And as I go through this it will become apparent. And I think this is interesting. And when we talk about in light of the other tools that the government is talking about, whether it's growth around our cities, growth in specific RMs [rural municipality] and then what they talk about in the North . . . And he doesn't really talk about the same sort of things happening in the North, which I find a little alarming. I find it's unfortunate, because I think the North can be a strong contributor to our economy, and unfortunate this government hasn't done the kind of things that it said it would when there were promises made particularly around highways, and they haven't lived up to those promises.

And clearly in other important . . . the responsibilities of government, I think about housing. The housing in the North. I know our member from La Ronge has raised this continually. The member from Athabasca has raised this continually as a significant trouble spot for northerners where they see in many ways the Minister of Social Services, through Sask Housing, in many ways just abandoning or walking away from their responsibilities. And I think that's really alarming and we see that.

For example, when the minister speaks and he talks about the purposes of the amendments, first they'll support the government's competitive and growth strategy, and you know, talking about business licence, the overweight vehicle . . . [inaudible] . . . boundary alteration, municipal procurement, and that's a common theme through the whole set of pieces of legislation they have.

But what they talk about second, they provide northern councils with great ability to deal with inactive municipal development corporations, clarify provisions regarding northern hamlet incorporation, and northern settlement dissolution. And this is the one that really set my colleague off when he was talking about, what does it mean in terms of northern settlement dissolution and what's going to be happening there?

We see a concern that this government is taking a much stronger aggressive role when it comes to municipalities, and while they talk a line about co-operation, we are concerned that, what does this mean? And quite often we see in the North, their settlements may be, may be small. It's not something that necessarily is common in the South, but we have small communities and hamlets in our countryside here and we see that. It's the matter of a fact and it has worked well. There are challenges though. Clearly there are challenges, but particularly when it comes to providing services that we have come to expect, particularly around waste water and water, making sure we have adequate safe drinking water.

So there are challenges, but we find it interesting here that the government is focusing in on this. And I share with my colleague from Athabasca the concerns that he raises about how do we support northern growth, how do we support the development in the North in a smart, sustainable way that meets the needs of northerners, that has people coming back to live in the North or stay in the North. To stay in the North, I think this is an important

challenge we have.

And so we're not seeing the kind of attention to that. And I think what's happening is that, as my colleague talked about, there are many, many concerns. He's been raising daily the issue around cellphone coverage in the North, how important that is, and that doesn't seem to take any traction on the government side. They're not paying any attention to that, and yet it's so critical. It is absolutely critical that we have cellphone coverage in the North in areas that the member has been identifying. I think that's important.

Highways, highways are critical. Critical. Good, safe roads. You know, yesterday we heard unfortunately of about five young people who died in motor vehicle accidents at work . . . in fact actually there were 10, I understand. Five of the others would not be in the youth category. But this is significant. We have too many fatalities on our roads and way too many in the North. And it's way too many right across the province but particularly in northern Saskatchewan. So when my colleague stands and talks about this, this is a critical, critical issue.

And he talks about housing. I will keep coming back to that because that's very important. So . . .

(Interjection for introduction of guest)

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I too would join in welcoming Ms. Miller here to the legislature. Always great to have guests and visitors to our House.

But as I was saying, that as we look through this northern municipalities amendment Act and the idea, the intention of this is to prepare municipalities for growth. And we've seen one for the municipalities; we've seen a tool, the legislation for the cities. So we have a lot of questions about this one in terms of what does it mean for northern Saskatchewan in terms of meeting their needs.

And as I've said earlier, the member from Athabasca highlighted several concerns, whether they be roads or cell coverage or whether it be housing, and we can go on, whether health care and even recreation and that type of thing that we would see and the ability to do work that is indigenous to their communities. And we've seen a lack of support around fishing, commercial fishing or trapping and that type of thing. And so we have some real concerns about the backstory to this actually, and we have to talk more about that.

And so it talks about that whole issue, about dissolution and that type of thing, and then also about wording and administrative matters, and that's straightforward. But the other part that . . . And this is one that again we sure do rely heavily and we appreciate the guidance of our northern members. But when we talk about intermunicipal agreements and arrangements, and whether that be the New West Partnership or Agreement on Internal Trade, and what does this mean in terms of northern communities? And I think that, as he was saying, what is the impact on having to, when you have smaller

municipalities with smaller budgets, what's the impact of having to do these kind of procurement arrangements, where you have to offer either a Canadian or a Western Canadian tender, where you might just be able to be more effective to be doing it locally or in Prince Albert or Saskatoon?

And so there are some real concerns, real concerns about what does this really mean. And so I think that this is one that — as I said, we'll have lots of questions in committee — but it is one that we just have to make sure that we do the right thing here. And of course in all of these we have to do the right thing because clearly there are unique challenges, unique needs as we go through this growth process. And this is a good thing, good to be growing. We're all on board with that. But we've got to do it in an intelligent way. We have to have smart growth, sustainable growth, and particularly when we see in the North the challenges to uncontrolled growth if it's not done well.

There are challenges in the North that we have to make sure our regulations stay strong or even stronger. And I'm talking about in terms of forestry. Forestry in the North is incredible. We have the wonderful lakes, and we see the challenges in terms of new industry, particularly on the Alberta side. What's the impact on the Saskatchewan side? We have to be strong on that. And what do these agreements mean for that? What do the agreements mean for that? And so these are the kind of challenges. And I just think that when we have the opportunity to do the right thing, this is one of those things that actually I think do cross party lines. And I hope the government does rely on all advice and think about the implications and the unintended consequences if we don't think this all the way through and think about the long-term needs of our northern Saskatchewan residents and make sure that they're supported.

Resources are a challenge. Financial resources are a challenge because there is a bit of a line that you hit where it just costs the same. And so if you're going to involve auditors, if you're going to involve certain consultants, then it's a significant cost. So we have to make sure we do what we can to support northern communities. And we also have to appreciate the distance issues that they face, and make sure that when this province grows that everyone feels the benefit and everyone's coming along, and whether you're a child in a school in southern Saskatchewan or a child in a school in northern Saskatchewan, you are supported, that you are supported. And your unique challenges that you have are brought into consideration and your own special background. This is something that is very important.

And so I think that we need to think this through. This is very, very, important. I know that these members on our side will be watching this very closely, particularly the northern members from Cumberland and from Athabasca. And it's interesting because their ridings are so huge, and we know that in rural Saskatchewan ridings are huge. And as I have remarked in this House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I fortunately come from one of the, I think maybe the smallest riding in the province. I have a lot of appreciation for the folks who work in rural Saskatchewan, but particularly the North. When we think about the member from Athabasca and the time he takes to come down to Regina every week, it is a significant, significant drive. But it is for many people in this House. But I have to say I think that he gets to ride over more highway miles than anyone in this riding. So

when he talks about good highways, he certainly has some experience and he knows exactly what's going on.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think that when we talk about the growth, and we have . . . And I have interestingly over the last two or three days I think I've spoken on every one of bills that the Minister of Government Relations is bringing forward. And he has talked about the unique challenges. But perhaps this one is more important than the others only because there is more vulnerability in doing something not quite right and the fact that there is such a distance and the fact that some of these villages and hamlets and settlements are so small that we don't hear their voice. And they don't have the opportunity to come down and make a presentation or present a petition, that they do feel isolated.

And I think of the folks from Wollaston Lake who actually made the trip down here and made their case about their roads. That was not an easy thing. They're not driving in from Moose Jaw, or they're not driving in from Saskatoon. Clearly, clearly it's an issue and one if they could make that kind of commitment to bring their concerns to this House, then it's important. And I know that the member from Athabasca, when we do have delegations from the North, he makes a point of welcoming them in their own language but also saying, be clear, this is their House. This is their place. And while they may lack the finesse of others who come here so often to do lobbying, we need to hear their voices.

And so again in summary, that I want to reflect on what the member has said, that we think in a positive way towards the North, that we think about them in terms of growth and maybe a different type of growth. It may not be the kind of explosive residential growth that we see on the edge of our cities. But we need to plan for the kind of growth that's environmentally sustainable because they live in a place that really wears a lot of our environmental degradation, and it's in places that we don't get to see but they get to feel every day. And this is huge.

But they want to be part of that. They want to be part of the mining that's going on in the North. They want to be part of the forestry. They want to be part of the fishing, the trapping, the health care, the education, all of that. And they just want decent housing and they just want decent roads. They want decent schools, like we all want decent things.

So with that, Mr. Speaker, I think I'm ready. I think I'm ready to move on to the next step. And I'm waiting for . . . I think I'm ready for the next step, and so I'm waiting to move this to adjournment. Thank you very much.