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Chair: Mr. Peter Schiefke



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• (1530)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Schiefke (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Good afternoon, colleagues.

Welcome to meeting number 5 of the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application. I would like to take this opportunity to remind all participants of this meeting that screenshots or taking photos of your screen is not permitted.

Given the ongoing pandemic situation and in light of the recommendations from public health authorities as well as the directive of the Board of Internal Economy on January 28, 2022, to remain healthy and safe, the following is recommended for all those attending the meeting in person: Anyone with symptoms should participate by Zoom, and not attend the meeting in person. Everyone must maintain two-metre physical distancing, whether seated or standing. Everyone must wear a non-medical mask when circulating in the room. It is recommended in the strongest possible terms that members wear their masks at all times, including when seated. Nonmedical masks, which provide better clarity over cloth masks, are available in the room.

Everyone present must maintain proper hand hygiene by using the hand sanitizer at the room entrance. Committee rooms are cleaned before and after each meeting. To maintain this, everyone is encouraged to clean surfaces such as the desk, chair and microphone with the provided disinfectant wipes when vacating or taking a seat.

[*English*]

As the chair, I'll be enforcing these measures for the duration of the meeting. I thank members in advance for their co-operation.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, January 31, 2022, the committee is meeting to study the mandate letter of the Minister of Transport.

Appearing before us today, honourable colleagues, we have the Honourable Omar Alhabra, Minister of Transport, and Michael Keenan, deputy minister. From the Department of Transport, we have Arun Thangaraj, associate deputy minister; Aaron McCrorie,

associate assistant deputy minister of safety and security; and Serge Bijimine, assistant deputy minister of policy.

Minister, I know you have a hard stop today at 4:30, so without further ado, I'd like to turn the microphone over to you for your opening remarks. Thank you.

Hon. Omar Alhabra (Minister of Transport): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm really grateful for the invitation to come back to this committee. I want to congratulate you on your election as chair, and to extend a warm welcome to the new members of this committee. I think there are several new members.

[*Translation*]

I look forward to working with you.

[*English*]

I would like to begin by noting that I am joining you today from the traditional territory of the Algonquin and Anishinabe peoples.

I'm pleased to be joined by officials, as you mentioned, Mr. Chair. I want to take a moment to thank Transport Canada's officials for their incredible hard work over the last two years, and particularly over the last several weeks because of the current situation we're in. I'm delighted they are here offering support and are ready to answer members' questions.

It is an honour to speak today about the priorities outlined in my recent mandate letter from the Prime Minister, but first let me address the action our government has taken this week.

The illegal blockades across our country were and are putting Canadian jobs at risk.

[*Translation*]

The barricades are jeopardizing our economy.

[*English*]

The Ambassador Bridge blockade affected around \$400 million in trade each and every day. The Coutts blockade affected around \$50 million in trade each and every day. The Emerson crossing blockage affected around \$75 million in trade each day. A significant number of owners had to close their shops, and workers' shifts were cancelled.

Over the last few days I've heard from farmers, auto manufacturers, grocers, truckers and many small businesses—including, by the way, some Conservative MPs on behalf of their constituents—about the damage these illegal blockades have been causing.

This is not how we do things in Canada. People have a right to protest, and our government will always defend that right. However, people don't have a right to break the law and hold Canada and Canadians hostage. Our government is acting to enforce the law.

Our message to the occupiers is clear: Go home.

Mr. Chair, we have always said that we will adjust our border measures based on public health recommendations, so I want to talk to you a bit about our travel measures.

This is why, on Tuesday, we announced, as of February 28, that the ban on international flights at all airports that would normally receive international flights will be lifted. This is great news for communities like Windsor, London, Fort McMurray, Moncton and many more.

By receiving international flights we will support local tourism, create good jobs and grow our economy.

Travellers will now have the option of using a COVID-19 rapid antigen test result or a molecular test result to meet the predeparture requirement.

On-arrival testing will be eased for fully vaccinated travellers. Those selected for random testing will no longer have to quarantine while waiting for results, and children under 12 years old travelling with fully vaccinated adults will continue to be exempt from quarantine.

As I said, we have always made our decisions based on science, and this announcement was a reflection of the progress we have made against the current omicron variant. Canada's border measures will remain flexible and adaptable.

Now I will discuss my mandate letter. I'm committed to delivering on all of the priorities, but in the interest of time I'll focus on the work being done in a few key areas.

First, on vaccinations, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to significantly affect the transportation sector here in Canada and around the world. My highest priority as transport minister is an efficient and safe transportation system, and for that to happen we need to do everything possible to put the pandemic behind us. We know that vaccination is our best tool to end this pandemic.

• (1535)

In response, Transport Canada has introduced a multi-layered approach, which includes mandatory vaccination for all travellers on interprovincial trains, commercial flights, cruise ships and other federally regulated vessels. We have also mandated COVID-19 vaccination for federally regulated transportation sector workers. I want to thank all of our workers in the transportation sector who have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic, delivered for Canadians, and rolled up their sleeves to get vaccinated and keep our communities safe.

On supply chains, globally, they are under pressure on a number of fronts. This is not a uniquely Canadian challenge. It is a global one. It's a global health crisis. We know the supply chain is at top of mind for Canadians, and I can assure you that it is also at top of mind for our government.

All things considered, Canada has been relatively successful in keeping goods moving, but no system is perfect. Global supply and demand issues and labour shortages, compounded by recent extreme weather events, have affected us in Canada. That is why we are working to make our supply chain even stronger and to ensure that what Canadians need reaches their households as quickly as possible.

Just over two weeks ago, I hosted a national supply chain summit with ministers Bibeau, Ng, Champagne, Qualtrough and O'Regan. We met with industry, shippers and organizations that play a role in Canada's supply chain to address challenges, develop strategies and determine the next steps. Following that, I was pleased to announce that we will create a new supply chain task force to help provide additional advice to me and our government, as well as a new \$50-million call for proposals under the national trade corridors fund.

The conversations we had at the summit were not the end. The work will continue and follow-up sessions are being organized.

We are also in the final stages of our port modernization review, which I am committed to completing in due course. It will help us position Canada's ports to respond to supply chain pressures and contribute to economic growth.

Moving on to the air sector, it's clear that the pandemic has impacted the air sector particularly hard. The Government of Canada has made over \$11 billion available to support Canada's air sector. This includes infrastructure and operational funding at airports, rent relief, support for air carrier services to remote and northern communities, and financing for air carriers to help sustain financial viability and ensure refunds for Canadians and the restoration of regional services.

As we work towards the safe restart of a competitive and viable air sector, I am taking steps to rebuild public confidence in the sector. These include helping to ensure efficient and affordable travel options, strengthening air passenger rights and helping the air sector adopt new advanced technology.

On environmental measures, the Prime Minister has also asked me to support Canada's transition to net zero. We know reducing emissions in the transportation sector is key to reaching our climate goals. That is why we are offering incentives to make zero-emission vehicles more affordable and accessible to Canadians. By the end of this January, over 130,000 Canadians and Canadian businesses had benefited from the incentive for zero-emission vehicles. I also emphasized the need for ZEV adoption with our international partners at COP26.

• (1540)

Transport Canada is also developing a strategy to reduce road freight, air and marine emissions. This includes working with our Clydebank Declaration partners to establish green marine shipping corridors. I am thrilled to say that the Port of Montreal and the Port of Antwerp recently signed an agreement to create the first green shipping lane in the world.

Mr. Chair, the high-frequency rail project that I want to discuss with you now is going to transform passenger rail service between Quebec City and Toronto. It will allow Canadians to get to their families faster and better connect our businesses while reducing road congestion and providing a low-emissions travel alternative.

[*Translation*]

We are working to get the procurement process underway as quickly as possible.

[*English*]

In closing, Mr. Chair, the measures outlined in my mandate letter reflect the Government of Canada's commitment to delivering transportation policies and programs that promote safe, secure, efficient and environmentally responsible transportation.

As always, I'm grateful to the committee for its input on transportation issues, and I look forward to continuing our work together.

With that, Mr. Chair, I conclude, and I am ready for the honourable members' questions. I would be pleased to answer them.

• (1545)

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

[*English*]

To begin our first round of questioning, we have six minutes for Ms. Lantsman.

Ms. Lantsman, the floor is yours.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for joining us at committee. To all of the officials we'll get to speak to in the next hour, I know how much work it is, particularly when you are so busy. I know that a committee appearance puts a lot of people to work.

I'll get right into it on the question of mandates.

Minister, you talked about this at the very beginning, and I know that today Canadians learned—or at least I learned—that you granted some exemptions on the trucker mandate, and I commend you for that.

In your statements over the past months, you continue to claim that vaccine mandates, particularly the cross-border ones, are based in science and are being implemented to protect Canadians. I just wanted to know if you're able to provide the committee with any study or data that you're confidently basing these statements on.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To my colleague, I want to first congratulate her—I've done that privately, but I want to do it publicly—on her appointment as the transportation critic. I'm looking forward to continuing to work with her and her colleagues.

Mr. Chair, vaccines save lives. I wasn't honestly expecting to get a question about providing evidence for that, but I'd be more than happy to provide evidence that vaccines save lives.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Mr. Minister, I'm going to interrupt for one second.

The question is not about whether vaccines save lives. It's about what data you are using to implement the cross-border trucking mandate. We know that vaccines save lives.

I'll make this easier for you. What is the positivity rate before the mandate and maybe the positivity rate afterwards, so that we know whether it's working?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Great. I'm happy to answer that question.

If you agree with me that vaccines save lives, then I'm sure you'll agree with me that you want to save the lives of truckers and transportation workers. I'm sure you'll agree with me that you want to reduce hospitalization rates among truck drivers and other transportation workers. I'm sure you'll agree with me that lower infection rates, hospitalization rates and death rates among truckers and other transportation workers will be good for our supply chain and good for our economy.

Again, if the evidence is available and persuasive that vaccines save lives and reduce hospitalization, this is all the evidence that all of us need to support the fact that truckers should be vaccinated.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: I know that my time is limited. The department is making decisions based not on any studies but on general hospitalization rates.

Minister, you mentioned in the past that regulations were being created on a cross-country, interprovincial trucking mandate. Can you tell me what day those will be announced?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Again, vaccines save lives. What we have said is that we are studying a formulation of regulations for all federally regulated sectors, and right now, there are consultations ongoing with all sectors. I'm unable to give anybody a date yet because the consultations are ongoing.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Thank you. I understand that the pandemic is dynamic, but is there any scenario planning about when restrictions might be lifted or what the appropriate thresholds are? I just want to know whether these restrictions are actually being studied based on data or, frankly, the notion that vaccines save lives, which I think we all agree with, or is it public opinion?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, we've said from the beginning that our public health measures are derived based on science and data, and they are done to protect the health and safety of Canadians, but they're also done to protect our economy.

We've also said that these measures are temporary, and we have all the willingness to continue to adjust them as the public health situation changes. We've demonstrated that in the past and we have demonstrated that this week.

Yes, I can't wait for all of these measures to be lifted, but it is also responsible of me to tell Canadians that we don't know when these measures will be lifted. They will be lifted when the time is right and when our public health experts tell us that it's safe to do so.

• (1550)

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Thanks, Minister.

I actually just want to move to travel restrictions. What I'm trying to get at is I'm trying to see if the committee can access any of the data based on which you are making decisions or on which you are claiming to be making decisions. On the advice that you received on travel recommendations, my understanding is that the experts that your own government listens to.... In the last set of restrictions, the recommendation was a level 2 travel advisory, but you implemented a level 3 travel advisory. Is that true?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, let me remind Canadians and everyone else who is watching us that two months ago, or almost three months ago now, we were at the beginning of the omicron wave. We had just discovered it and scientists around the world were alerting us to this new variant that is highly transmissible. There was a lot of other information that was still missing about omicron and the impact it would have on public health.

I remember Conservative colleagues in the House of Commons demanding stricter border measures to manage the arrival of omicron to Canada, and what did we do then? We imposed additional strict measures not purely to protect the health and safety of Canadians and to slow down the importation of omicron, but to also advise Canadians about the risk associated with travelling internationally when this new variant was spreading everywhere and carrying a lot of unpredictability with it.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Lantsman. Thank you, Minister.

The next round of questions is for six minutes. We go to Mr. Badawey.

Mr. Badawey, the floor is yours.

Mr. Vance Badawey (Niagara Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Minister Alhabra, for being here with us today.

Minister, multimodal trade corridors are an important part of our supply chains. I am the member of Parliament for Niagara Centre. Can the minister comment on the importance of the Niagara region—a Great Lakes, multimodal trade corridor region that has the Welland Canal running right through the middle of it—and how it is an integral part to strengthening our nation's international trade performance?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, let me thank my honourable colleague from Niagara Centre for his work. He is the previous chair of this committee. He did a marvellous job of chairing the committee, and I'm glad that he continues to be a member of it.

I also want to echo what he said. He's absolutely right. He's been a vocal champion of implementing policies and investments that will help improve our supply chains, particularly of issues that touch upon his community and enhance the ability for his community to be a powerful economic engine in the region. He's absolutely right and I look forward to continuing to work with him on strengthening the supply chain, particularly for his region.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Thank you, Minister, and with that, the Great Lakes in particular are an economic engine. They move \$19.8 billion dollars in goods, support 238,000 jobs, and generate \$45 billion dollars in commerce annually, components that are critical to post-COVID-19 economic recovery efforts.

Minister, can you comment on how the Great Lakes can be leveraged to create fluidity, eliminating bottlenecks, being more environmentally friendly in the movement of trade and contributing to our country's post-COVID-19 economic recovery?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Look, we are all now talking about the challenges that our supply chains are facing and the stress they're enduring. In our discussions about how we can increase fluidity, redundancy and resilience in our supply chains, we need to look at other smart options for transporting goods. The Great Lakes offer an excellent means for products and goods to be transported in an environmentally safe way.

We will continue to look at options and utilize this option to ensure that we enhance the resilience of our supply chain.

• (1555)

Mr. Vance Badawey: Thank you, Minister.

I have to comment on some of the discussion you had with the member opposite, primarily having to do with multimodal trade corridors with road, rail, air and water.

Frankly, because of mandates, almost 90% of truckers are vaccinated. We also note that that mandate in other transport modes, like shipping, for example, led to very high rates of vaccination for workers. That's the evidence.

That said, it gave us the ability to ensure that our supply chains and the movement of trade, not only throughout the Great Lakes but globally, were secure. People were with people who were healthy, and not only healthy within their environments, vis-à-vis a ship or in a truck or with CBSA agents or people they were bringing supplies to, but also the broader population.

With that, Minister, can you comment on how important it is that that transpired and that it continues to transpire in terms of vaccinations, and, of course, for those modes of transportation that are healthy to then maintain healthier supply chains?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Let me start by saying thank you to our truckers. Canadian truckers have served and continue to serve Canadians with professionalism, with dedication and with pride. They delivered vaccines and other critical equipment—produce, manufactured equipment and parts—for our economy and for Canadians during a very challenging time. They also understood how important it was to get vaccinated, for themselves and for their loved ones and co-workers. That's why 90% of truckers are fully vaccinated. That's why truckers have distanced themselves from these illegal blockades and illegal occupations. Truckers are working, as we speak, delivering for Canadians.

I also want to thank all workers in the transportation sector. Our transportation sector is critical to our economy. It's critical to our security. If you speak to other sectors, they'll tell you that one of the most challenging issues today is absenteeism, because of infection rates or because of hospitalization or challenges caused by COVID. Workers in the transportation sector stepped up. They stepped up to protect themselves, their loved ones and their co-workers, but also to protect our supply chain.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Minister, I've heard great support from, for example, the Seafarers' International Union, representing all the workers on the Great Lakes, and the truckers' associations, who are all in support of the direction we took. What are you hearing out there?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: You're absolutely right. I've been meeting with all stakeholders, unions, employers. People understand the importance of vaccination.

You mentioned the seafarers' union. The Canadian Trucking Alliance and others, such as Teamsters, all were vocal in, first, recognizing the importance of vaccination and, second, condemning illegal blockades and illegal occupations, which do nothing to advance the priorities of truckers and other transportation workers.

I will continue to meet with all stakeholders—including, by the way, ones who disagree with us. This is how we do things in Canada. This is my job. This is our job as elected officials, to speak with all stakeholders, all of our workers, all of our industries, to hear directly from them about their priorities. Our government will always be there to support them.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. Thank you very much, Mr. Badawey.

[Translation]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I don't recall if, in your opening remarks, you mentioned the Lac-Mégantic bypass, but I know it's in your mandate letter. You have recently launched consultations on this, in conjunction with the Canadian Transportation Agency.

According to the operating plan submitted by Canadian Pacific, they intend to quadruple train speeds and double train lengths. Originally, the track relocation was to be done in an effort to reconcile with the public and ensure their safety.

Are you still committed to safety? Do you consider that increasing oil transport is a safety-related project?

• (1600)

[English]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: The Lac-Mégantic rail bypass project is a priority of mine. I have been working with my colleagues, with Minister Bibeau, the Conservative member who represents that area, and other MPs, including my Bloc critic, to ensure we do it right. The community has suffered because of the tragedy, and we need to be there to ensure not only that the bypass is built as quickly as possible, but also that it is done with the highest standard of safety and consideration for local communities.

I've been meeting with stakeholders. I've been talking to CP. We want to make sure that this bypass, first of all, is done with the consent of communities, that we have the support of the community, and that it's done safely.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you for the response, although it doesn't quite answer my question.

In fact, I would have liked to see you make commitments on safety and timelines.

Your government had committed to opening the bypass in 2023, but many voices were raised to question that deadline. Even today, we see that the expropriation and acquisition of land has not been completed, the authorization by the Transportation Agency has not yet been given, and the plans have not been approved. In my view, groundbreaking will not happen soon, let alone commissioning.

Do you consider that the 2023 deadline for the commissioning of the bypass is still realistic?

[English]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Let me repeat, to be very clear: We are committed to building this bypass safely and as quickly as possible.

To your question, it's true that the process continues to require consultations and discussions, particularly with landowners where the bypass will have to pass. I'm relieved and delighted that all landowners who are impacted have received offers from the Government of Canada.

There are ongoing negotiations now on the acquisition of that land, the pieces of land that are required. We are committed to starting to build this bypass as quickly as possible. We're aiming to start this spring, late spring or early summer, and we want to complete it as quickly as possible.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you for your reply.

If I had a message for you, it would be to say that people don't necessarily care about the deadline or the 2023 commissioning. But they do want to know what's going on and that the project is moving forward. I think that's the most important thing.

With that in mind, it would be interesting and important for the government to be transparent. If the 2023 deadline cannot be met, we would like you to say so and say when it will be finished. That would give people a lot more incentive and encouragement. This would avoid feeding cynicism and bitterness about the project. We also want guarantees that all safety measures will be put in place. When we see an oil project that appears to be more of a safety-related project, it can make us ask more questions.

It will probably not surprise you, but I would like to ask you about another project related to the rail sector. I'd like to talk about the Via Rail project, which your government launched with great fanfare last summer, just before the election. A call for tenders was to be issued last fall. According to several journalists and columnists, what is most frequent is not the train, but the announcements concerning this project. I think the formula is excellent.

I find it difficult to understand the direction your government is taking. You promised that there would be a tender in the fall. And yet fall has been over for several months.

What's going on?

[English]

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I first want to thank my colleague for his thoughtful comment on how we need to proceed with Lac-Mégantic. I agree with him totally.

On the high-frequency rail, our government, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, remains solidly committed and behind it. Very soon you're going to see an announcement for phase two in the procurement process. Canadians will get to see what we are doing next, so stay tuned.

I understand that Canadians are anxious to see this happen. This is going to be the largest infrastructure project in modern Canada's history. It needs to be done right, and we need to make sure we do our homework, but I can assure you and everyone who is watching that we remain solidly committed. Stay tuned for good news in the near term.

• (1605)

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I am happy to hear it, and hopeful that this will come to fruition, but you will understand our skepticism.

I have one last question for you that concerns the Transportation Agency—

The Chair: Unfortunately, your time is up, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

The next round of questions goes to Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, you have six minutes. The floor is yours.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing today. It's good to see you again.

I'd like to begin my questions in northwest British Columbia. It's been almost exactly one year since the tugboat, the *Ingenika*, sank in rough weather just south of Kitimat, taking the lives of Charley Cragg and Troy Pearson. In that year, there have been no answers for the families of these two men. There have been no answers about what happened to their loved ones. There have been no answers about what this government is doing to ensure the safety of mariners who go to work every single day on our seas.

In your answer to this question, I'd like you to address Judy Carlick-Pearson and Genevieve Cragg, the wife and the mother of the two men who died in this tragic accident. Can you tell them when they are going to get answers as to what happened and what you are doing to ensure the safety of mariners on our coast?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: This is an extremely difficult situation. Let me start off by offering my condolences to the families. I can't even imagine how challenging and how difficult and painful this has been for the families. I'm grateful that they remain committed to not only getting answers but also to ensuring that others don't go through what their family member went through.

First of all, let me assure you that the investigation remains ongoing. Fisheries and Oceans and the Coast Guard are the lead on this. I'm looking forward as well to the findings of that investigation. On Transport Canada's side, we have been working hard to strengthen the safety of our tugboat regulations. We've been consulting, and we have been contacting all small tug owners directly to inform them about the new compliance program that we've implemented.

Mr. Chair, I want to assure you and my honourable colleague that we are very much committed to the safety of tugboat operators and to ensuring that everyone is following the highest level of safety.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Minister, Genevieve Cragg, the mother of Charley Cragg, has reached out to you on multiple occasions and asked to meet with you—not about the investigation into the incident but to share her thoughts on what can be done to improve the safety of the industry that her son worked in. Have you responded to Ms. Cragg, and have you accepted her invitation to meet?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: I am always open to meeting with Canadians. There's an ongoing investigation right now, but I am very much open to receiving ideas and input and feedback about how we can, under Transport Canada, continue to strengthen our regulations and our rules to improve safety for tugboat operators.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Minister, your government still has contracts with Wainwright Marine, the company that these two men were working for when they died. In fact, that same company was involved in another incident just a few months later, when one of their ships ran aground.

Have you reviewed the contracts with Wainwright? I note that the International Transport Workers' Federation has asked your government to suspend its contracts with Wainwright until it is satisfied that safety standards are being upheld. Will you heed their calls, and have you reviewed the contract?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: As I said, I'm looking forward to the investigation and the findings of that investigation. I think it's really important that it's done. I can assure you I am extremely sensitive to safety and to ensuring that tugboat operators are operating with the highest level of safety.

• (1610)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Minister, shifting to a different topic, when your predecessor Mr. Garneau appeared before the committee over a year ago, he assured us several times that the Canadian Transportation Agency was an independent body that operated at arm's length from the government. Yet we just recently received redacted emails that show that on March 18, 2020, an email from Colin Stacey—this is one of your department officials—indicated that “Air Transat are telling us they're getting pressure from creditors who are pushing on the airlines for cash. They will request that we officially let them provide vouchers to passengers instead of providing them cash because they literally do not have enough cash to give refunds.” This is a department official essentially lobbying the CTA and doing the bidding of Canada's big airlines.

Then, on March 23—this is someone from your own office—the then transport minister's chief of staff took part in a call with the CTA and Transport Canada's deputy minister to discuss vouchers.

Section 39 of the CTA's code of conduct states that “Members shall not communicate with political actors or officials of other federal departments and agencies...regarding a matter that is, was, or could be before the Agency.” Just days later, the CTA released its statement on vouchers.

Did Transport Canada breach the code?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, first let me correct myself. I said the investigation is being managed by the Coast Guard. It is headed by the Transportation Safety Board.

Second, to your question, look, organizations that operate at arm's length make their decisions independently, but it is common

for the Government of Canada to express its priorities to them and to have discussions and consultations with them. It happens with ports. It happens with airports. In fact, I remember the NDP asking me to overrule Nav Canada on decisions it has made.

It's not uncommon, for the public good, that Transport Canada has conversations with independent agencies—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Minister, if I may, the code says—

The Chair: Mr. Bachrach, I'm sorry, the time is over.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: For the second round of questioning, we will begin with five minutes for Monsieur Luc Berthold.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Berthold, you have the floor.

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I also thank my colleagues for allowing me to be with them today to ask questions.

I am the member of Parliament for Mégantic—L'Érable and I therefore represent the town of Lac-Mégantic, where this terrible tragedy that cost the lives of so many of our fellow citizens took place. Several years have passed.

Minister, thank you very much for your co-operation. We do not agree on everything, especially these days, for example, on the mandatory vaccination for truckers. Since my constituency borders the United States, this has caused a lot of problems. However, there is one thing we seem to agree on, and that is the priority to be given to the Lac-Mégantic bypass.

Minister, in a few words, could you give us an update on the situation?

What exactly is the status of the bypass construction project and the discussions with the owners? Are the compensation levels acceptable?

Also, will homeowners have sufficient time and assistance to consider the offers that have been made by Transport Canada?

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: One disadvantage of attending virtually is that it's hard for me to see who's in the room. It's nice to see that you're here.

I also want to thank you for making sure that you're a vocal voice on behalf of your constituents to ensure that the bypass is built as quickly as possible and very safely, and that the input of community members is taken into account.

I've been personally involved in this since being appointed Minister of Transport last year. I visited Lac-Mégantic last summer. I've held several meetings with the mayor and neighbouring communities' mayors. I'm glad to report that all landowners who are impacted by the bypass have received offers for their properties. We will do whatever we can to reach settlements with all of the landowners.

Also, we are committed to starting the construction as quickly as possible, by this spring or early summer, to make sure the residents of Lac-Mégantic see how serious our government is about building this bypass.

• (1615)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you very much for your reply.

I must stress, indeed, that there is collaboration between all the elected officials, who want this project to be done in the right way and as soon as possible. We are all aware that the 2023 deadline may be difficult to meet if we wish to reach an agreement with each of the owners.

Minister, do you plan to speak with your cabinet colleagues to ensure that the collateral or psychological damage that will be caused by the construction of the bypass is taken into consideration?

I remind you that the people who will be affected by the passage of this bypass are collateral victims of the 2013 tragedy. From the beginning, we have been asking that these people be treated fairly, that is, as collateral victims of that tragedy as well.

I know there is a need to be concerned about the landowners, but there is also a need to be concerned about the psychological damage, because many of these people have lost loved ones, family members or friends in this tragedy.

Are you planning to talk to your colleagues and also look into the possibility of this form of compensation?

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Again, I'm extremely sensitive to the reality and the impact that the tragedy has had on the community and on the building of the bypass, but also the impact it may have on neighbouring communities.

I will continue to work with the honourable member and other members of Parliament, including members of this committee and including my colleagues. As I mentioned earlier, Minister Bibeau has been providing exceptional support and ongoing conversations with local community members and with landowners. My departmental staff will continue to listen and be sensitive to the needs and concerns of the community, and will take them into account as we are building this bypass.

I want to say this: I think there's unanimity in these two aspects. First is that we need to take local communities' input into account. Second is that we need to build this bypass as quickly as possible.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Minister, if members permit, I really need the support of all the members of Parliament to support the community of Lac-Mégantic. This was a big tragedy. I praise everyone who supported us in this project. This is very important for us to be

able to go another step, so thank you so much to everyone who supported us.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Berthold.

[*English*]

The next round goes to Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Rogers, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Berthold, I can assure you that you have my support. Lac-Mégantic has my support.

Minister, welcome once again to our transport committee. I've served on this committee for some time, and it's always good to see you. You're always very open to attending the transport committee.

The last couple of years have been extremely rough on the air sector. We know the airlines, airports and travellers to small regional airports like the one I fly into, Gander, Newfoundland, have been severely impacted by COVID over the past couple of years. I know we've done some great things for these airports to try to keep them viable, so that they can still be there after COVID.

Minister, can you summarize for us some of the work that is being done by Transport Canada and by this government to help support and restart the air sector, particularly in rural Canada and for regional airports?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank my colleague for his service on the committee. He's a returning member. He's a veteran of this committee, and I've always appreciated his input and his feedback.

As you all know, the transportation sector, or I should say, the aviation sector in particular has been one of the hardest-hit sectors in Canada's economy. Because of COVID-19, there have been public health restrictions. There has been reluctance to travel on the part of the public and there have been a lot of reductions in volume that have severely impacted the financial viability of airports, airlines and those who work in those sectors.

Our government has been there from day one. As I said in my opening remarks, we have made a total of \$11 billion available to the aviation sector. That consisted of a variety of programs. Some of them were investments in our airports for their infrastructure or for their biosecurity infrastructure. Some of the programs came in rent relief or wage subsidy. We've also offered relief and support to airlines. We've offered support to travellers who needed refunds because of cancelled flights or their own cancellations as they were responding to public health advice. We are talking about a total of \$11 billion.

Now, obviously, the air sector continues to feel the impact of the omicron wave, and I shouldn't forget that we have created a working group with the airline sector, including airports, airline operators and unions, to talk about how we can together safely restart aviation and travel. I was really delighted to be part of the announcement we made on Tuesday that brought terrific news for those who work in the sector, for those who work in tourism and for those who want to travel.

• (1620)

Mr. Churence Rogers: Thank you, Minister. I was delighted too, because the tourism sector and the travelling public have had many challenges.

Later this session, the committee is planning to study labour shortages in the transportation sector. What have you heard about this particular issue, in consultation with industry people, labour groups and some of your officials?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Indeed we are facing an acute labour shortage across our economy, and it is particularly pronounced in the transportation sector. This topic was brought up at the national supply chain summit two and a half weeks ago. As well, it has been brought up at every discussion I've had with industry leaders, with union representatives, with business operators and with my colleagues, other members of Parliament.

Thus, I welcome the input of this committee as to what policies the federal government can introduce to help alleviate labour shortages. There's work ongoing by my colleagues at Transport Canada to figure out what else we can do in order to do so. We already have some policies. If I may, I'll run through them very quickly.

There's immigration, making sure that we attract the right types of skills and the right number of immigrants. There's day care, making sure women are able to participate in higher percentages in the labour force. There's a tax credit for seniors who are thinking about retirement, to maybe incentivize them to stay in the workforce.

That does not mean we couldn't look at other measures, and I look forward to the committee's input.

I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. I know I went over time.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, you've been asked about this before, but not too long ago, our committee asked for the correspondence between Transport Canada and the Canadian Transportation Agency on the issue of cancelled trips. In the correspondence we received, some names had been crossed out. Now, among those names was the name of the chief of staff of the Minister of Transport at the time.

Do you find this normal?

Why would the name of the chief of staff of the Minister of Transport be crossed out?

• (1625)

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Committee members know that ministers, indeed politicians, don't get involved in where the redactions occur. Redactions are done based on decisions made by our public service to protect privacy or sensitive information. I can assure you that there was no political interference in deciding what was redacted and what wasn't. Those decisions were made independently.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I understand what you are saying, but you will understand that I am very skeptical. The fact that this was a deputy minister or a chief of staff is not one of the reasons that could justify removing a name from a document. I don't understand why someone made the decision to remove the name of a chief of staff, who is an official, and not someone from the private sector.

In addition, this was a very sensitive meeting. It was held just before the message on travel credits was issued by the Transportation Agency. The companies based their decision not to refund consumers on this message. The minister's chief of staff was present at this meeting, but his name was withheld from the emails. I, for one, am uncomfortable with this.

Doesn't the fact that the minister's chief of staff was present at this meeting make you uncomfortable?

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alhabra: As I explained in a previous answer, meetings with federal Crown agencies, independent bodies, happen all the time between government officials, or even politicians and ministers, to make sure public policy is understood and upheld by those agencies. They ultimately make decisions on their own.

Let me take a moment to say that our government was there for passengers who were seeking refunds. Our government offered refunds to all Canadian travellers who were impacted by COVID-19 so that they were able to get those refunds. Now we're working—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. Unfortunately, the time is up for that round.

The next two and a half minutes go to you, Mr. Bachrach. The floor is yours.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, Greyhound provided an interconnected national bus service that connected Canadians from coast to coast, across provinces. You've expressed in the past that bus transport is solely a provincial jurisdiction.

Do you feel the provinces can be counted on to recreate a national passenger bus transportation system that is interconnected and allows Canadians across the country to get to where they need to go?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: I know my colleague has been advocating for this issue for a while. Let me start out by saying that I empathize with him, with his constituents and with Canadians across the country who are feeling the impact of the lack of an intercity bus service. That is why I've written to my provincial colleagues to ensure that we work together. I've offered the federal government's presence and support to have a national discussion about what can be done about intercity buses.

I'm glad, and I hope my colleague agrees with me, that it is under provincial jurisdiction. I understand the desire to see a role for the federal government. My commitment is to acknowledge that there's a need for this service, first of all. Many community members feel its absence. I want to respect the jurisdiction of provinces while at the same time offering support.

Next week, we'll have a conversation at the federal-provincial council of ministers' meeting. I'm looking forward to a discussion with my counterparts on this and many other issues.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Minister, people across this country are calling on you to articulate a vision for passenger bus transportation that replaces the service that Greyhound provided for decades. This is a service that needs to connect people across provinces, not just within provinces.

The risk here is that we end up with a fragmented system where people aren't able to get across the country by bus, because there are simply too many different operators and there isn't the consistency that was once offered.

What leadership role is the minister willing to play to ensure that there's a national conversation about connecting Canadians by passenger bus? What leadership is he willing to offer?

• (1630)

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, first let's talk about leadership by ensuring that members of Parliament help Canadians and work with Canadians on how the various jurisdictions work and how the various levels of governments can work together.

My responsibility is to uphold federal government responsibility, and when it comes to leadership on this issue, as I just stated gladly, I wrote last year to my provincial counterparts on this issue to rally provincial ministers to work with the federal government to come up with a solution can work together on. I'm looking forward to input from the provincial governments on what they feel they need to work together on to address this issue.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Is the minister's vision an interconnected national system that replaces what Canadians enjoyed under Greyhound? Is that the vision you would bring to that table and communicate to the provinces?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Our federal government is highly committed to public transportation. That's why we've committed \$15 billion, the largest amount in history, to work in partnership with the provinces on supporting public transit and public transportation. Yes, we have a vision, and we've offered significant investment to provinces to address these issues.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bachrach and Minister Alhabra.

Once again, on behalf of the entire committee, I want to thank you for your time before committee today. I know that you have a hard stop right now, so thank you once again.

Instead of suspending, members, if you're okay, we'll just segue directly into the questioning of the departmental officials.

Minister, you can now log off, if you wish.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, let me say thank you to you and my colleagues for their questions and this important exchange of ideas. I will also say how grateful I am that officials will stay. I'm sure they'll give you much better answers than I could.

The Chair: Okay, colleagues, we're going to go into the questioning of our witnesses.

Let's jump into it. I want to make sure that you all have the time to ask the questions you would like to ask of department officials. In this round, we will start off with Mr. Muys.

You have five minutes. The floor is yours.

Mr. Dan Muys (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Are we out of order? I can defer to my colleague Ms. Gladu. I think she was supposed to be next in the room. Let me toss it back to her.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the department officials. I'll ask you the question I really wanted to ask the minister.

I have been speaking to the minister about the charter rights of Canadians, because they have the right to freely enter and leave Canada, and all of the travel mandates are violating those rights. He indicated to me that they had the right to do that temporarily because of the pandemic, but on January 21 of this year, the World Health Organization issued new recommendations to end existing COVID-19-related travel mandates, saying that they do not provide added value and continue to contribute to the economic and social stress experienced by citizens.

With that in mind, I wondered if the department officials can indicate when these mandates will be lifted and the violation of the charter rights of Canadians will cease.

Mr. Arun Thangaraj (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Transport): As the minister said, as we look at the border measures and the posture there, we are mindful of and informed by the public health situation and the data that is required. We conduct our own analysis, and we're informed by the data importation and the public health situation domestically and internationally.

All of those measures are rigorously reviewed from a legal and public health standpoint before they are either made or determined to continue. They are regularly reviewed and, again, yesterday they were adapted and the minister announced those adjustments. All of those adjustments are informed by public health considerations.

• (1635)

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Yes, and public health officials are calling for these restrictions to be lifted. As you know, 90% of Canadians are vaccinated, but they can still get and transmit COVID. I have had all my jabs and I've had COVID. I know that the Prime Minister is in the same situation. When you have 90% of people who can get it and transmit it freely moving back and forth across the border, it doesn't really make any sense for 10% to be restricted. I hope to see those lifted as soon as possible.

Now, let's move to a discussion about rail safety. We had testimony from those who are involved in the investigations of the incidents and accidents related to rail safety. Some 21 incidents and accidents have happened in the last two years that still don't have a report of what went wrong and what kinds of corrective actions should be taken. I wonder if the department is looking at the resourcing that's applied to those, to make sure that we have an adequate resource.

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: Rail safety is a key priority for us. I think that every year we conduct about 35,000 oversight activities, and we have increased the number of staff we have by about 42%.

I will pass it over to Aaron to provide a bit more context on some of those activities, the measures we have to ensure we have safety and some of the funding commitments that have recently been made to bolster rail safety, as well as an update on some of the investigations.

Mr. Aaron McCrorie (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Safety and Security, Department of Transport): I should point out, if I understood the question properly, that it's actually the Transportation Safety Board that does the investigations into accidents. We certainly follow up and do our own analysis of the accident. An example would be that when we find something wrong with how a train is being managed, we'll take immediate action in advance of the findings of the Transportation Safety Board.

An example is that when we saw a train unattended in Lanigan, we took immediate action to issue an order to require CP Rail to properly secure those trains and to develop processes and procedures to secure them. We issued an administrative monetary penalty, because it had failed to properly follow the rules.

As Arun suggested—

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: That's good. I just wanted to make sure you guys were following up on that.

I see in the mandate letter that ports modernization is on the list. I did just want to put in a plug for the Sombra ferry dock, which got crushed, as you remember, by the Coast Guard ship and still is not in place. We've lost a border crossing. We've lost \$4 million of economic activity on either side and \$4 million of revenue for the CB-SA, so don't forget the Sombra ferry when you do your ports modernization.

In my last bit of remaining time, I want to talk about airports. We also lost our airport service in Sarnia. Many rural communities across the country are in a similar state. Can you describe what the department is intending to do about those concerns?

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: Again, as the minister said, the recovery of that sector is critically important to us. I think yesterday's announcement that all airports will be open for international travel is key to that.

As part of the recovery effort, overall there was substantial recovery in the sector. I think it was \$11 billion in total. As part of that, \$570 million was made available for critical infrastructure and capital programs, and there were additional funds of almost \$200 million to support regional air service.

Let me turn to Serge Bijimine, who is our assistant deputy minister of policy, to provide some additional information.

Mr. Serge Bijimine (Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy, Department of Transport): I hope everyone can hear me just fine. It's my first time at TRAN. I've heard that TRAN is made up of very nice people.

Just to pick up on what Arun was saying, I think you hit the nail on the head. There are also the regional air transportation initiative of \$200 million and the remote air services program at \$174 million, so there's quite a lot of money provided to regional airports to ensure that when the recovery takes place their connectivity can remain as per before COVID.

• (1640)

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you very much for all your answers.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Gladu.

Mr. Chahal, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Mr. George Chahal (Calgary Skyview, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for joining us today.

I represent Calgary Skyview. A good movement and logistics sector is extremely critical to my constituency. We also have the Calgary International Airport, as well as the CP rail line and the CN spur line on the eastern edge of my constituency.

The government has supported—and I thank you on behalf of Calgary Skyview constituents—the \$50-million investment in the Airport Trail expansion project, which was announced, built and opened over a few years. It has been a great help in dealing with many of the bottlenecks we previously faced.

Can you tell me a little more and speak to how this fund has helped reduce and prevent supply chain bottlenecks in Calgary and across the country?

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: Absolutely. I'll talk a bit about Calgary and other projects.

As the minister said, supply chains are critical, key to the mandate letter commitment and a priority for the department and for the government. One thing we've done, through our national trade corridors fund, is ensure a very strategic and critical investment that leverages private sector investment as well to reduce barriers to trade.

As you said, the Airport Trail project was approved for \$50 million in funding, and one thing we have seen is an extension between 36 Street and 60 Street. I think the remainder will be open soon, as well as other connections to the Ring Road.

Part of what we look for in any of these trade corridor funds is increasing the fluidity of movement from port to destination and to the trade market. As we continue to do those things, we have a call for proposals out. There was also an announcement with the supply chain summit of \$50 million for port investments, which will come along fairly quickly to unblock some of the most immediate and pressing concerns we're seeing with the supply chain at ports.

Mr. George Chahal: As mentioned, we see the importance of the trucking industry and the workers from my constituency. I can't think about all the challenges our truckers have faced with the Coutts border issues over the last number of weeks. I'm happy to hear that the highway has been reopened and is open to traffic now.

I've spoken to many truckers from my constituency, like Kulbir and Ashok, who were stuck at the border and couldn't get through with their trucks. They had full loads and couldn't get back to stock grocery store shelves to provide essential supplies to our communities. They couldn't get back home to their families after weeks of being away working and travelling to bring these goods and services to our cities.

Can you talk about the importance of crossings such as the Coutts border crossing to Canada and the North American supply chain, and the impact on Calgary and southern Alberta that we've seen with the illegal blockades?

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: Absolutely, and I'll turn to Serge for the specific economic data with respect to Coutts.

The minister referred to the economics: \$390 million in trade per day at the Windsor bridge. We've seen supply chain partners, especially in the auto industry, express concern over disruptions, and we've seen the impact throughout the Canadian economy.

One thing we are doing is looking at their impact at each point of critical infrastructure, at crossings but also at airports. We are maintaining consultations with stakeholders in the rail industry and others just to ensure that we have a good handle on any disruptions that could imperil or cause an inefficiency to the supply chain.

I'll turn to Serge to speak specifically about the impact on Coutts.

• (1645)

Mr. Serge Bijimine: Certainly. I have some quick numbers. At the Ambassador Bridge, the six days of blockades basically stopped almost \$400 million in trade flow each day, so we're looking at about \$2.4 billion. In Coutts, the 18 days stopped \$48 million on a daily basis, so around \$864 million total. In Emerson, the six days stopped \$73 million in trade on a daily basis, which amounted to \$438 million. At Pacific, the three days stopped \$81 million per

day, for \$243 million total, so we're looking at about \$3.9 billion in trade lost or deferred.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will yield my time to the member for Mirabel, Mr. Garon.

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon (Mirabel, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank my colleague for giving up his time.

I am speaking today as the member for Mirabel. I want to talk to you about a project called Synergie Mirabel, which you are probably familiar with, because the minister had committed to moving it forward within his department.

This is a project for a seniors' residence, a medium-sized residence, which would accommodate seniors in Sainte-Scholastique, an area devastated by the expropriations that gave rise to Mirabel Airport, which has hurt the region economically.

This project has the support of the mayor, councillors and the MNA, among others. The sub-project is funded and the zoning is ready. Everything is ready in this project. Unfortunately, there is still a no-build easement on the airport land, which prevents construction.

The minister has the power to allow construction. Our experts tell us that there is no danger to airport security. Moreover, this is an area that is not under the authority of Aéroports de Montréal.

We recently received a categorical and unexplained refusal from the minister.

I would like to know what specifically was done within the department to lead to this refusal.

I am putting the question to anyone who can answer it.

[*English*]

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: I have a bit of detail. I can turn to colleagues for that. There's been substantial work on this proposed facility and work on some of the previous regulations restricting heights of buildings that were in place at the time the airport was in use. Given that the airport is not in use, those are being relooked at in the context of the proposed building.

Again, I can assure you that officials are working very diligently on—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: I apologize for interrupting you, but I don't have much time.

I understand, but this is an urgent situation. The project has been going on for a long time. Our citizens have been misled by officials and referred to Aéroports de Montréal, which has no management mandate on this land.

How is it that the department misled our people on this? Why were they referred to Aéroports de Montréal?

[*English*]

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: Let me turn to Aaron.

Do you have any other details on this?

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: I'm sorry, Arun, I don't.

We have a role when it comes to, say, airport zoning regulations, which might speak to the height of the buildings. I don't think we don't have a regulatory role from a safety and security point of view. I apologize.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Thank you.

How does it feel at Transport Canada to know that we have to get on our knees, to beg the federal government to let us do local development in this former expropriated area, for such a unique project that is so central to the community?

Doesn't this create unease at Transport Canada?

[*English*]

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: As part of the process, we've worked with various groups to return land back to original owners and use it for other purposes, given that it's surplus to requirements.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: I just want to bring your attention to the fact that the area is already built up and the construction of this building would be rather in line with what we see around there. For us, this decision is very difficult to understand.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Garon, and welcome to our committee.

[*English*]

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours. You have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the officials for joining us today.

I want to start out where I left off with the minister, which was this discussion of bus transportation in Canada in the wake of Greyhound cancelling all of its services in the country.

The minister seems quite adamant that bus transportation is a provincial jurisdiction. What we're talking about here is an interconnected, national bus transportation system that allows Canadian

ans to get across the country. I note that right now, a number of people across the country are circulating a petition asking for the minister to lead this vision of a truly interconnected national passenger bus system.

I want to stick to policy here and not politics, because I know that's your realm. This matter of jurisdiction is a very interesting one. I want to read, from the Transport Canada website, a page entitled "Governance of the Canadian Transportation System". This is a page on your department's website. It states:

The roles of the federal and provincial governments are defined in the Constitution Act of 1867. In general, the federal government has the constitutional authority to oversee international and inter-provincial transportation, while the provincial governments are responsible for intra-provincial transportation.

Now, assuming that website is still valid and the Constitution is the Constitution, if the federal government were to take up the call of these people who have put forward this petition and involved themselves in the development of an interconnected, truly national passenger bus transportation system, would that not fall within federal jurisdiction?

• (1650)

Mr. Serge Bijimine: We'll have to look at it a bit more. Our understanding is it would still have an intra-provincial element that would fall under provinces. What you've raised is an interesting angle and something we've been talking about with the provinces for the last six months or so.

There is another meeting, as the minister said, that will take place next week on this specific issue and others. The hope is that at the end of the meeting, there will be some additional optionalities and a potential way forward and things we could look at.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: If I understand the chair's hand signals and coloured piece of paper, my time is up. It does fly by. I'm not sure I got an answer to the question, but I appreciate the information.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach. Those two-and-a-half-minute sessions go by quite quickly.

Next we have Mr. Muys.

The floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Mr. Dan Muys: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be careful to watch for the coloured paper.

Let me do as others have done and talk a little about some strategic transportation assets that are important to my constituency and my region. I want to refer to the supply chain task force that was established following the summit. The minister spoke to that.

In my region of Hamilton, Ontario, we have the largest dedicated cargo airport in the country and one of the busiest ports on all of the Great Lakes. It's the ninth or 10th largest city in the country. From what I understand from conversations with people at the city as well as the airport and others, there is no direct representation of Hamilton on the task force. Correct me if I'm wrong on that.

Mr. Serge Bijimine: We haven't established a task force yet.

Mr. Dan Muys: Okay. I would encourage some representation, then, because of it being the largest dedicated cargo airport in the country. We've got Cargojet. Amazon just opened a facility there at the end of January. DHL, built a year ago, has surpassed what it thought it would achieve in 15 years, so it's well ahead and on its way to establishing a mini hub for its North American and global distribution chain. I would certainly encourage that. Thank you for that.

Let me move on, then. As well, I spoke to the Hamilton port authority and they raised a couple of points. I know my colleague from Niagara Centre on this committee also talked a bit about the importance of Great Lakes shipping. Short sea shipping is being used increasingly to move containers. Obviously, there's an environmental benefit to that, which is great.

I have two points, then. One is that as the consideration is being made for national trade corridor funding, Hamilton port—again, a very busy port—is appreciative of what has happened so far, but there's encouragement to do more.

Second, though, and perhaps more importantly, the market forces have outpaced the capacity of the regulatory processes. I know this may not be directly an issue for Transport Canada, although it may be indirectly, but the CBSA is not able to handle the increase in container traffic that's happening, and there's a bit of a backlog. Can that be addressed?

• (1655)

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: As you said, the Hamilton port has received funding through the national trade corridors fund to expand a pier and for some modernization. It was about \$23 million in funding. It is a critical port and, as you said, the region is growing economically, so again, this is the announcement of funding available and a call for proposals for initiatives to assist ports in relieving supply chain congestion.

I'll turn to Serge for the remainder of that question.

Mr. Serge Bijimine: Sure. I just want to go back to the point around the supply chain task force. The supply chain task force has not been established yet, but as the minister also said, the national supply chain summit was the first event in a series of events. There will be regional events, and we will ensure that consideration is given to having folks from the Hamilton airport present at those regional events.

Mr. Dan Muys: Thank you. I don't see the coloured paper yet, so I'll go on.

I know that the allocation to regional airports has already been mentioned in a question from my colleague, but I want to amplify that importance. Certainly, throughout the past couple of years, because of the pandemic, the situation has been one that is more reactionary to events.

The good news now is that international travel is being reinstated across the country, but there needs to be more collaboration going forward as to the preplan, the plan for the future. That includes removing barriers. That includes investment in airport infrastructure.

I know, for example, that at the Hamilton airport, they're at full capacity right now. They need the co-operation that has been identi-

fied by others in terms of labour issues, shortages and all of these things, so that we can actually seize those opportunities going forward, because there is that potential.

Perhaps you could comment on what that might look like in the next few years.

The Chair: Could we have a quick comment, please?

Mr. Serge Bijimine: Thanks. We will take it into consideration.

Mr. Dan Muys: All right. That was quick.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have five minutes for Mr. Iacono.

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Welcome, Deputy Minister and Assistant Deputy Minister.

Anyone who watched the Super Bowl this weekend was struck by all the commercials featuring electric vehicles. The world is changing rapidly.

Can you provide an update on our government's efforts to encourage the adoption of zero-emission vehicles?

[*English*]

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: To date, we have provided subsidies. There's a program to provide subsidies of \$5,000 for zero-emission light-duty vehicles. We have provided subsidies for approximately 130,000 vehicles over the last couple of years. There have also been significant investments in charging infrastructure through our colleagues at Natural Resources Canada.

Serge, do you have anything to add to that?

• (1700)

Mr. Serge Bijimine: Yes, certainly.

[*Translation*]

To date, the government has invested \$660 million in the small businesses and 130,000 Canadians who have taken advantage of the incentives to purchase a zero-emission vehicle.

This has resulted in a cumulative reduction of five megatonnes of greenhouse gases, or GHGs, which is quite significant when you remember that the transportation sector currently generates a quarter of Canada's GHG emissions.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: What did you hear from industry and others at the National Supply Chain Summit?

What are the next steps being considered?

Mr. Serge Bijimine: It was a very good meeting, involving six ministers, 80 CEOs of companies and financial leaders, and it focused on three main themes.

The first theme was investing in our physical infrastructure with climate change in mind.

The second theme was investment in digital infrastructure. There are many opportunities to increase capacity in supply chains by choosing more digital options.

The third theme was finding paths to federal, provincial, municipal and business collaboration.

In terms of next steps, we are in the process of organizing regional sessions to be held in late February and early March to hear from more stakeholders. Then we will be putting together a working group of experts who can address these topics in more depth and advise us on what can be done in Canada to address the supply chain emergency.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you.

Can you comment on how the global container shortage is affecting the supply chain?

Are there any aspects of the situation that are unique to Canada?

Are you also looking at what is happening in other countries, such as the United States, for example?

Mr. Serge Bijimine: Yes, we are.

This is a global situation. What's happening in the United States is also happening in Canada. There is a shortage of containers. They come from Asia, then they are turned around quickly. We are looking at this problem very closely.

Today, the Competition Bureau issued a press release saying that Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States will be joining forces to study this more closely.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Iacono.

Our next round of questioning begins with Ms. Lantsman.

Ms. Lantsman, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Thanks, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the officials for joining us.

Given how serious the conversation is right now in the House with debating emergency powers legislation, I want to know from departmental officials whether you ever considered using the minister's authority in the International Bridges and Tunnels Act.

He has emergency powers in that act. It's in section 17, and I want to know if there was ever a discussion at the top levels to enact the minister's responsibility in that act in order to clear the bridges.

• (1705)

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: As part of our analysis of what the response ought to be to the situation, especially the blockade, all acts and legislation, and powers, regulatory and otherwise, were looked at prior to the decision being made.

With respect to the International Bridges and Tunnels Act, there are specific limitations on that with respect to the minister's authority. It has to be a threat to the bridge itself, the structure. Therefore, what could be done with respect to that authority and the blockade was limited.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Is it your view that you couldn't use the minister's emergency authority in the International Bridges and Tunnels Act to have any kind of evacuation or any kind of clearance?

I just want to know what was discussed at the departmental level.

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: We looked at what the authorities were in that legislation and the situations where those authorities would apply. Based on our analysis, there was nothing in those authorities that could be done. The blockage was not on the bridge itself; it was on the access ways. Therefore, the authority provided under the International Bridges and Tunnels Act would not have been effective.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Thanks.

I want to speak to you about travel restrictions. It partly is a conversation to give some in the industry, who I think have been unfairly targeted with ad hoc restrictions, a bit of comfort in trying to understand whether there is any plan going forward to have the department look at travel restrictions in a more cohesive way. I don't think we can have a repeat of omicron measures in travel and tourism.

I want to know from the department whether there's any plan to manage travel restrictions that is not on an ad hoc basis. I want to know if there is any data you are able to present to the committee that speaks to how you came to the decision, let's say, to keep PCR tests much longer than our allies or our partners. I want to know who's making those decisions and if it's the department itself.

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: Let me say first that there is data available. I know, for example, that we will look, by mode, at the importation rates and the test positivity rates. That is one of the factors, as well as the public health situation, as I said before, in Canada and internationally.

Let me turn it over to Aaron to provide a little more detail on this.

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: Throughout the pandemic, we've been working very closely with both our partners within government, primarily at the Public Health Agency of Canada, which provides the health advice that drives the decisions and measures that have been in place at the border and domestically, and the Canada Border Services Agency, which implements those measures. We've been working equally closely with the industry.

It has been a challenge. The COVID pandemic has evolved rapidly at times, in ways we didn't expect. Last summer, for example, we started to back off from some of the measures. We got rid of temperature checks, for example. We started to open up some of the airports that had been closed to international travel.

When omicron arose, as the minister suggested, we took actions to ensure the health of Canadians, and they had an impact on the aviation industry to be sure. We took measures and, based on the guidance we're getting, we're easing those measures off. We're opening up remaining airports and adjusting the testing regime based on the guidance we're getting from the Public Health Agency of Canada.

• (1710)

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Lantsman—

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Oh, that's too bad. I wasn't looking at the coloured cards.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, the floor is yours.

You have five minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you. I'm replacing Ms. Koutrakis here, Mr. Chair. I guess you had one Greek on the committee and now you have another Greek on the committee. I'm glad to take part. I'll be splitting my time with Mr. Chahal.

To the officials, first of all, thank you for your work. I know it's been a particularly challenging time through the pandemic to now.

Tell me about the harmonization approach with the Biden administration regarding the trucker vaccine mandate policy, the importance of a harmonized approach with our American allies and how the outcome was realized.

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: I will pass this on to colleagues, but one thing I would like to underscore is that in all of these measures, we are guided by public health. We also do this in consultation bilaterally, especially in this case with the United States.

In the discussion about truck drivers and the vaccine requirements, those were fully discussed with industry and with our partners in the United States.

However, let me turn it over to Aaron to take that one on.

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: Again, these measures have been put in place by our colleagues at the Public Health Agency of Canada and CBSA, but the importance of ensuring a mutual approach across the border is to ensure that, for example, travel one way doesn't result in people getting caught on the other side of the border and not being able to come back. To the greatest extent possible, we have tried to coordinate with partners around the world. At the same time, we've had to put in place measures that sometimes are based on the unique circumstances of Canada, and we do that based on the science and expertise that is provided by our colleagues within government.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much for that.

Before I turn to Mr. Chahal, I know my constituents in London would want me to ask for an update on the progress of rail in terms of the connection that would see Windsor link to Quebec City. Within that, Londoners were quite excited when Minister Alghabra came to London to announce the government's intent to fund rail improvements that would see a higher frequency of service and a higher speed of service provided. Can you update me and the committee on where things stand with respect to southwestern Ontario and phase two as part of the rail policy of the government?

Mr. Serge Bijimine: As the minister said, the first phase of procurement will be launched very shortly. The first phase is meant to address Quebec City to Toronto. The second phase is also front and centre for us, and I have no doubt we are on the right path. The analysis, information and work we are doing around the southwestern Ontario corridor is advancing at a good speed. We're hoping to have some announcements in the near future, but it is definitely part

of the plan. As the minister said when he went to London and Windsor, there are things we're looking at in the second phase of the project.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I look forward to that process. There's a lot of excitement in London surrounding it.

I'll turn it over to my colleague, Mr. Chahal.

Mr. George Chahal: I'm glad my colleague brought up the emergency bridges and tunnels act, because I guess provincial highways don't fall under that act. In Alberta, at the Coutts border, the highway is under provincial jurisdiction. Our Conservative premier, Mr. Kenney, didn't act, or was afraid to act on the illegal blockades. You stated earlier the loss. I can't put a dollar amount to the loss of the individuals who couldn't get to see their loved one who was dying, because they were stuck in the blockade.

Could you restate the dollar value of the loss? You said \$3.9 billion...lost or deferred, but could you restate what you said earlier about the Coutts, Ambassador, Surrey and Emerson...?

• (1715)

Mr. Serge Bijimine: For the Ambassador Bridge, we're looking at \$393 million a day, and it was blockaded for six days, so around \$2.4 billion.

Mr. George Chahal: Okay, and at Coutts?

Mr. Serge Bijimine: At Coutts, it was blockaded for 18 days, and the trade value per day was \$48 million, so we're looking at about \$864 million of lost or deferred trade.

For Emerson, Manitoba, the blockade lasted six days, and the trade value per day was \$73 million, so we're looking at \$438 million.

There was also the Pacific Highway blockade for three days, and the trade value per day was \$81 million, so \$243 million of trade lost or deferred.

Adding these numbers up, it's \$3.9 billion in trade lost or deferred.

The Chair: Thank you very much; and thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos and Mr. Chahal, for those questions.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Thangaraj, I would like to know if there is any way to follow up in writing on the issues that my colleague from Mirabel shared with you earlier today.

[*English*]

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: Yes, we'll provide the response in writing.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I asked the minister earlier about the participation of the minister's then chief of staff, Mr. Garneau, in a meeting with Canadian Transportation Agency officials just prior to the release of the message on travel credits.

Is it common practice to withhold the presence of a chief of staff at such a meeting in response to an access to information request, or was it done on an exceptional basis?

[English]

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: As the minister said, as part of the role we have, we seek factual information. In developing regulations, these types of interactions are regular.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I therefore conclude that it is common practice to not mention the presence of ministerial staff members at critical meetings when there are access to information requests.

In 2020, two years ago, a request was made to the Canadian Transportation Agency to prepare an amendment to the Air Passenger Protection Regulations to ensure that passengers are reimbursed if their flights are cancelled.

Can you tell us the status of this request at this time?

Mr. Serge Bijimine: The application was published in part I of the Canada Gazette a month or two ago. The next step would be to publish it in part II of the Canada Gazette, but the date is not yet confirmed.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: If I understand correctly, what was published in the Canada Gazette is the proposed new version of the Air Passenger Protection Regulations?

Is that correct?

Mr. Serge Bijimine: It is part of the process. In part I of the Canada Gazette, the government is asking for comments before adjusting and publishing a revised version in part II of the Canada Gazette. This second publication has not yet taken place.

• (1720)

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: All right, I understand.

This is not the final version; a second issue will be published in the Canada Gazette.

Does the coming into force coincide with that second publication?

Mr. Serge Bijimine: The second published version would be more polished than the first, but there would still be work to do.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: All right.

I see I have no more time to ask questions.

Thank you for your answers, Mr. Bijimine.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours. You have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd love to try to squeeze in two questions, so I'll be as brief as I possibly can.

The committee was copied on some correspondence to the minister regarding noise from general aviation taking place over the city of Montreal, especially tourist flights. This is something that my colleague Mr. Boulerice, the MP for Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, hears about from residents all the time. Essentially, these tourist flights are flying over residential areas on their way to the Olympic Stadium or other landmarks. The noise from these airplanes is causing a major concern for residents of that area.

Is the department aware of this issue? If so, what is it doing about it?

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: There are requirements at aerodromes around Canada to manage noise in and around the aerodromes. Ideally, we'd prefer that the airport operators themselves manage it locally.

I'm not immediately familiar with this particular issue, but there are processes and procedures in place at each airport to properly manage these issues.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: One suggestion that's been made is that the classification of the airspace over Montreal is more relaxed than for other metropolitan areas, like Toronto and Vancouver, with more allowance for VFR aviation.

Do you know if this is the case?

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: Unfortunately, I do not know if this is the case. The creation of airspace is a complex issue. I'm sorry, but I'm not familiar with it.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: My last question might finish up the committee's testimony for today. It has to do with interlined agreements for airlines. I met yesterday with Air North. You'll be familiar with Air North. It's an airline that provides service to many remote communities in Yukon. It has been struggling throughout the pandemic, and it's also up against these big air carriers that are vertically integrated and really tough to compete with.

Air North has come forward to the minister with this proposal for interline agreements that would provide passengers with an integrated ticket whereby the government would mandate the larger carriers to co-operate with these smaller carriers. We see that in the railway sector and the telecom sector. We see regulations that carve out space for smaller operators, especially ones that serve rural and remote communities.

Is this a policy issue, a policy proposal, that your department is aware of, and if so, what is your take on it? What is your response?

Mr. Serge Bijimine: We heard of it recently, and we're right in the middle of studying what this could be or not. We are in the early days. It's something we're studying, and we hope to be able to provide a recommendation to the minister and the government.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Mr. Chair, if I could ask very briefly, is there a timeline on getting back to companies like Air North?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach, for those questions. Unfortunately, your time is up.

Ms. Lantsman, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: I want to continue and just follow-up. I understand that the travel policy is based on advice from PHAC. Do you think the government can do a better job at developing travel policy?

For example, I mentioned that most of those measures were ad hoc, and the government often rejected that advice. My understanding is that the travel advice was a level 2, and the government went with a level 3.

I want to know if there are any plans to depoliticize this and give industry the assurance it needs that this will be done, if it happens again, in a less ad hoc way?

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: All of our travel advice and all of our analysis, as we have said, is based on the scientific evidence and the data that we have before us. The measures that we have in place, whether they be for testing or travel advice, are based on the data that we have and on advice from public health officials.

With respect to border measures, Mr. McCrorie mentioned ensuring the smooth flow of individuals across the borders. It is based on discussions that we also have with bilateral partners. Everything we've done, in terms of our border posture and travel measures, has been based on the science and data we have before us.

• (1725)

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: I understand that, but you went further than the experts had recommended. There are Canadians who have lost trust in advisories and are not adhering to them. Doctors are openly questioning almost all of those measures. We are well behind some of our allies in Europe, even with lifting the restrictions on PCR testing. Given that travel is critical to both our federal economy and our provincial economies, it's federally regulated.

Are any steps being taken to have a less politicized process about travel advice, because the advice that you were given did not match the travel advisories that Canada issued.

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: Our measures, as was announced yesterday, I believe—all the days are blending together—are based on advice and evidence that we have. Every successive change we have made, whether it be the one that was implemented in the fall as a response to omicron or the one from a couple of days ago that will accept the use of a rapid antigen test for fully vaccinated travellers, has been based on advice. Similar to the travel advice that Global Affairs provides in consultation with public health officials, it is given based on the data and evidence available when making recommendations.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: I want Canadians to know that sometimes the advice doesn't actually match the advisory. Your advice didn't match the advisory that came out.

I want to know if there's a timeline for removing all of the testing? We're seeing some of that in Europe. We're seeing signs of testing being removed from air travel in the U.S.

Is there a timeline from the department?

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: On an almost constant basis and in real time, we look at the current epidemiological situation domestically and what the appropriate measures are in Canada.

Again, as was announced yesterday, we adjust those border and travel measures based on that evidence. We do that with our colleagues at the Public Health Agency and other departments like Global Affairs, for example. We're mindful of the epidemiological situation, not only domestically but also internationally as we do that.

Based on that constant review and analysis, we make those adjustments and those adjustments are announced.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Do you consult with other countries? I'm trying to understand—and I think many have asked this question—why the science is so different in different countries, given that omicron is here.

I want to know why our measures seem more restrictive than in other countries.

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: I don't want to speak for my colleagues at the Public Health Agency of Canada, but as part of their analysis they do look at the epidemiological situation in other countries. There are consultations with provincial medical officers of health as well.

All of the measures that are put in place are based on full consultations with our colleagues at GAC and PHAC. They are very mindful, not only of the epidemiological situation but also of the measures that are in place internationally.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Thanks for your time.

I've been shown the red card, so thank you very much to everyone for preparing for this, given how busy you are.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lantsman.

I'll echo her remarks. Thank you to all witnesses and department officials for being here and answering the questions of the committee today.

That concludes our meeting. Have a great evening, everyone.

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