

SATURDAY MEDIA SCAN: BUDGET

April 29, 2017

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THE GLOBE AND MAIL: BUDGET 2017 = ELECTION 2018 ; F6; 2017.04.29

The budget that Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa delivered on Thursday, April 27, 2017, is all about an event happening on Thursday, June 7, 2018: the next provincial election. The province's Liberal government currently stands a distant second or third in the polls; those same opinion surveys have saddled Premier Kathleen Wynne with the moniker of "Canada's least popular premier." There's widespread talk about a panicked party pushing her into retirement.

But don't count out Ms. Wynne or the Liberals just yet. Not by a long shot. Election after election since 2003, this party has figured out how to win, with help from Ontario's Progressive Conservatives, who are past masters at figuring out how to lose. Team Wynne still has tricks up its sleeve – and more ammunition than ever in its fiscal arsenal.

Nine years after the Great Recession hit, Ontario's budget is finally back in balance.

How did they do it? Step one, spending restraint. Yes, really. For the past three years, Liberal rhetoric has been designed to convince voters that they've been as busy giving away money as the Tooth Fairy. In fact, they've spent the past three years wrestling down expenses in health and education, the two largest government departments.

Spending increases have been held below inflation plus population growth – not an easy trick when teachers unions are your allies, or given that Ontario already spends less per person on health than any province except Quebec. The Liberals brought in austerity-lite, while trying to deny it. For the budget to balance, they had to.

Step two, revenue growth: Over the past few years, the economy has grown faster than expected, and tax revenues, including a land-transfer tax powered by a hot housing market, and a big scoop from the new tax-like cap-and-trade system, greatly outpaced growth in expenditures. That equals, right on schedule, a balanced pre-vote budget.

If the budget remains balanced in the years to come – as the Liberals are promising, though some economists and the province's Fiscal Accountability Office have raised questions about the details – the relative size of the province's debt, known as the debt-to-GDP ratio, will steadily fall. That would be a real and substantial accomplishment.

It's also valuable political currency. That's why PC Leader Patrick Brown, the man whose election this is to lose, responded to Thursday's budget by insisting that taxes and spending are still out of control, and Liberal accounting shenanigans are covering up a deep deficit. New Democratic Party Leader Andrea Horwath, in contrast, put out a press release headlined: "Wynne's Budget Doesn't Undo The Damage She's Done."

It was Why Haven't You Cut More vs. Why Aren't You Spending More. The Liberals are aiming to walk to victory, right up the middle.

But the Wynne government's plan to win again in 2018 is mostly not about competing for Tory votes. Beyond eliminating the deficit, the budget doesn't use Tory language. Instead, it's about winning re-election, and beating the PCs, by eating the NDP's lunch.

For three years, the Liberals have been budgetting like Scrooge, while insisting that they are really Santa Claus. Now that Ontario's in balance, they're talking more than ever like Saint Nick, but they've finally got more gifts to hand out, to key constituencies: young voters, seniors, lower-income Ontarians, the education sector, health care, and anyone steaming over their hydro bill.

The Liberals are shifting from austerity-lite to NDP-lite.

For example, the NDP has been calling for a province-wide pharmacare plan – free prescription drugs for everyone. The Liberal budget cribs from the NDP by offering free drugs for anyone under the age of 24. The Liberals have long been pushing for a national pharmacare program, but the sudden arrival of free drugs for children and youth feels like a last-minute addition to the fiscal plan. Mr. Sousa told reporters it will cost \$465-million a year, but unusually, no costing figures are to be found in his budget.

Seniors? The federal Liberals eliminated the boutique tax credit for riding public transit; their provincial cousins have brought it back – for anyone over the age of 65.

Young voters? The assistance program for college and university students, OSAP, will become simpler and more generous. Announced last year, the changes will phase in this fall and next year.

Health? The sector got annual spending increases of barely more than 2 per cent over the past two years. This year, health spending is budgeted to rise by 3 per cent, and by nearly 5 per cent the year after.

Housing? As announced earlier this month, the Liberals are using the housing price bubble as an excuse to expand rent control – an economically self-defeating policy having nothing to do with popping the bubble. But it may please many renters.

Hydro? One of the most expensive new commitments, announced before the budget, is the government's plan to use your taxes to subsidize your hydro bill. Price: \$1.4-billion a year. Governments can do all sorts of dumb things when they're feeling flush with cash.

And for all that, this budget still tries to act like it's spending more than it is; the health care increases, which are modest but real, get creatively double- and triple-counted. Health spending growth from \$52.2-billion in 2016 to \$58.1-billion in 2019 is referred to as "increasing by \$11.5-billion over three years."

And Ontario's long-term infrastructure plan, which exists almost entirely outside the annual operating budget, never stops growing, at least rhetorically. Two years ago it was a 10-year, \$130-billion longterm plan. Last year, it became a 12-year, \$160-billion program. Now it's described as a 13-year, \$190-billion plan.

The Ontario NDP, whose voters are the Liberal target, of course say they hate this budget. But with its balanced bottom line and big new commitments to social spending, it feels like a fiscal plan another NDP party – the 2015 federal NDP, led by Thomas Mulcair – would have loved.

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SUDBURY STAR: CHAMBERS CONCERNED; A2; 2017.04.29

Province not doing enough to reduce its total debt, they argue;

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Chambers concerned; Province not doing enough to reduce its total debt, they argue

The Greater Sudbury Chamber of Commerce says it likes the fact the Liberal government on Thursday tabled a provincial budget that was balanced for first time since 2008.

However, in a statement issued jointly with the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, officials expressed concern Friday "that there is no clear path for long-term fiscal prudence" and no plan to reduce the province's total debt. "This will place tremendous fiscal burden on future generations and considerable pressure on future economic planning," the chambers said.

Local officials are also concerned the budget does little to help Greater Sudbury and the rest of Northern Ontario. While it was encouraging to see the budget expand funding for co-op positions and adult education opportunities, for this funding to be truly effective it will have to target regions most affected by skills shortages, the chambers said.

"Businesses in Greater Sudbury have greater difficulty finding skilled workers than those in southern Ontario," Tracy Nutt, chair of the board of the Greater Sudbury Chamber of Commerce, said. "Greater Sudbury and all of Northern Ontario faces a significant skills shortage that limits businesses'ability to grow; without regionally targeted funding for skills development, businesses may not be able to overcome that shortage."

Neither does the budget provide funding to help Greater Sudbury's businesses develop new technologies required to meet Ontario's CO2 emissions targets. Without this funding to develop new technologies, large emitters may not be able to make the necessary transition to a low-carbon economy, Nutt said.

Provincially, the chambers noted the province is relying heavily on a strong economy to meet its numbers. "Budget 2017 demonstrates that much of Ontario's fiscal outlook will depend on the prosperity of our private sector," Richard Koroscil, interim president and CEO of the OCC, said. "The government acknowledged that business investment spending slowed in 2016, though it expects firms to increase investment by 3.1 per cent, annually, to 2020 - an amount that would outpace growth in real GDP and household spending.

"These assumptions depend on business confidence, which has fallen precipitously in recent years according to the Ontario Economic Report, and U.S. demand, which is subject to considerable risk given recent comments by President Donald Trump."

Ontario's revenues rely on the level and pace of economic activity of the province, but the 2017 budget offers limited vision for how to ensure that private-sector economic growth will continue to rise.

Promised corporate income tax rate relief, which the government paused following the economic downturn, was not reinstated. In the 2009 budget, the province pledged to reduce the corporate income tax (CIT) rate to 10 per cent by 2013. Within 10 years it was estimated that the value of this CIT reduction would see Ontario benefit by increased capital investment of \$47 billion, increased annual incomes of \$29.4 billion and an estimated 591,000 net new jobs. However, the CIT reduction promise was halted in 2012 in light of the province's deteriorating fiscal situation, and so the CIT rate remained at 11.5 per cent.

One bright spot was the details provided around the clear commitment by Ontario's private sector to providing job growth for the province. The budget suggests that 98 per cent of all new jobs since the recession in Ontario have been fulltime, and 78 per cent in above-average wage industries. This positive economic activity by Ontario's private sector demonstrates a clear commitment to good, quality jobs throughout the province, the chambers said.

"Government must listen to its own budget document on the consistent creation of high-quality jobs when they consider the final report of the changing workplaces review, expected in the coming weeks," Koroscil said. "While Premier (Kathleen) Wynne and others have recently spoken about the rise of part-time work and concern over precarious work more generally, Budget 2017 states that the majority of the jobs created since the recession were in industries that pay above-average wages, in the private sector and in full-time positions."

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Balanced budget not on the level

Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa - "Chef Sousa" - as dubbed by Progressive Conservative leader Patrick Brown - served up a "balanced budget" for Ontario taxpayers Thursday.

Too bad he cooked it in Hell's Kitchen, which is what passes for Ontario's finance ministry these days.

Here's Sousa's problem and, more important, Premier Kathleen Wynne's problem.

No matter how much the Liberals try to dress up what they say is their first "balanced budget" since 2008, you can't put lipstick on a pig.

The pig is the staggering public debt the Liberals have racked up since taking power in 2003, now at \$311.9 billion.

That's 125 per cent higher than the \$138.8 billion the Liberals inherited from the previous PC government in 2003.

Even with Sousa and Wynne claiming a "balanced budget" this year - and Brown says they're actually hiding a \$5 billion operating deficit - Ontario's debt now costs taxpayers \$12 billion in interest payments annually.

If Ontario's annual interest payments on debt were a government ministry, it would be the fourth largest spender after health, education and welfare.

Think of how many more subways, or hospital beds, or MRIs the Liberals could purchase with \$12 billion a year, if it was not going down the black hole of paying interest on debt, without reducing the principal amount owed by a penny.

But that's not the end of the Liberals'financial chicanery.

In selling 60 per cent of Hydro One to the private sector, the Liberals told us the money would be used to pay down debt and build up public infrastructure.

They also said the almost \$2 billion annually they will take from us through cap and trade carbon pricing would go toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

But as PC finance critic Vic Fedeli pointed out Thursday, through sleight-of-hand, the Liberals are actually using this money to meet their daily operating expenses.

What they've done is to earmark the Hydro One and cap and trade money for the purposes they described, but then taken out an equal amount from the operating budget to spend on whatever they want.

Small wonder Ontario's finances under the Liberals are a train wreck and the government they lead is the world's most indebted sub-sovereign (non national) borrower. Postmedia Network
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ILLUSTRATION: Craig Robertson, Postmedia Network / Health Minister Eric Hoskins and Premier Kathleen Wynne spoke about the Liberals new Youth pharmacare plan at Jenner Jean-Marie Community Recreation Centre in East York Friday.;

DATELINE: TORONTO

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Ontario hopes its new youth pharmacare plan spurs national program

Ontario's Liberal government hopes a youth drug coverage plan revealed in its budget this week will help spur a national program by showing Ottawa and other provinces that pharmacare is affordable.

The provincial plan to cover more than 4,400 prescription medications for Ontarians under 25, with no co-pay or deductible, at an annual cost of \$465 million was the centrepiece of Ontario's balanced budget released Thursday.

Premier Kathleen Wynne is calling the plan, set to start in January, a step toward truly universal coverage.

"Do I believe that there should be universal pharmacare for all ages in Ontario? Yes," she said Friday. "That it will happen much more quickly if we have a federal government that is working on a national pharmacare plan."

Wynne said she is certain that other premiers will have questions for her at their next meeting this summer.

Ontario Health Minister Eric Hoskins said this approach on pharmacare is similar to Ontario's push for pension reform, which saw the province use its own proposed pension plan to successfully push for a national Canada Pension Plan enhancement.

"If you think back to Tommy Douglas and the beginning of medicare it was one province that stepped forward and the rest of the provinces and the federal government followed," he said.

Covering people under 25 - following the United Nations' definition of youth - is a good place to start, Hoskins said.

"You don't have to go from zero to 100 per cent coverage for everybody on day one," he said.

Some of the provincial health ministers across the country are hesitant on pharmacare because of the price tag, Hoskins noted.

"I haven't met a health minister who doesn't believe that it's the right thing to do, but if there's any reluctance that's been expressed to me, it's been because of concerns about what the up-front financial implications might be," he said.

"We're going to show that there are cost savings through bulk purchasing, through keeping people healthier."

Hoskins also said Ontario will work with insurance companies to ensure the savings they see from no longer having to cover medications for young employees and employees' children get passed onto employers and workers.

Steve Morgan, the lead researcher for the Citizens' Reference Panel on Pharmacare in Canada, said Ontario's cost estimate for its program sounds about right. The financial cost of covering medications for a group of people that don't traditionally use prescription drugs as much as other age groups would be relatively low, he said.

Beyond that, the Ontario plan's "incremental change" has symbolic value, said Morgan, a professor at the University of British Columbia.

"They're signalling to Justin Trudeau to say, 'Our vision for universal pharmacare is consistent with Canadian medicare. We're going to do it for kids and we're going to call on you to do the right thing and create national standards,'" he said.

Research suggests that a national pharmacare strategy would save the country between \$4 billion and \$10 billion a year because Ottawa as a single payer could wield far greater influence when negotiating drug prices with pharmaceutical companies than could a single province or territory.

Canadians now spend almost \$30 billion a year on prescription medicines.

After meeting last year with provincial and territorial health ministers, federal Health Minister Jane Philpott said addressing the cost of pharmaceuticals is one of her government's priorities. The ministers and Ottawa have formed a working group on access to medication.

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Wynne, Leal discuss local budget concerns

Premier Kathleen Wynne made the rounds, so to speak, of newsrooms around the province Friday, calling editors to talk about the budget delivered Thursday in one-on-one telephone interviews.

With 10 minutes allotted, The Examiner chose to focus on two big concerns raised locally, both by readers and by opposition politicians, over the 24 hours since the budget was released: No new long-term-care beds for Peterborough city and county, and what was at first seen by many as no new funding for agriculture.

MPP Jeff Leal called this budget "tailor-made for Peterborough." MPP Laurie Scott, the PC member for neighbouring Haliburton-Kawartha Lakes-Brock, who also serves as her party's unofficial Peterborough critic, said she won't support it because of those issues and others.

Wynne said the province isn't overlooking the need for long-term care beds in Peterborough and area, where hundreds if not thousands of seniors are on waiting lists.

"Long-term care and seniors are very much on our radar," she said, explaining that the province has taken a big-picture, \$53.8-billion approach to health, calling it "the continuum of care."

In this budget, that means \$58 million for long-term care homes, a two per cent increase over last year. There's also a six per cent increase in food allowance funding to improve the quality of food served in long-term care facilities.

The budget also includes \$100 million over three years in funding for dementia care strategies.

"There hasn't been a discussion about health care in this province that doesn't involve long-term care," Wynne said.

This could involve models beyond long-term-care facilities, she said - assisted living, home care, other approaches, noting that not everybody on those waiting lists really belongs in a long-term-care facility.

"(We would look at) different models of home, different situations including extended home care," she said. "Can we do that without (adding) long-term care beds? It's a really important challenge."

That being said, Wynne added, the province plans to rebuild or renovate 33,000 long-term-care beds by 2025, and new long-term-care beds will be added - just not in Peterborough, not this year.

Agriculture-wise, Wynne told The Examiner that recent one-time funding for rural agriculture, including \$19 million for the Greenhouse Competitiveness and Innovation Initiative, \$50 million towards a farm robotics plan and \$130 million (over five years) for wireless farm tech programs weren't part of the budget, but go a long way to addressing the future of farming in Ontario.

And, as noted Thursday in the budget presentation, a reduction in electricity costs this summer will benefit farmers.

"Your local member (Leal) is very much an advocate for agriculture," she said, something Scott noted when she reminded readers that Leal, the minister of agriculture and rural affairs, once said getting others in the Legislature to listen has been a challenge.

Wynne said that doesn't apply to her: "I've been a provincial minister of agriculture. I'm very much attuned to the issues he brings forward for rural farmers."

This conversation prompted a phone call soon after from Leal, who explained that the idea that his ministry took a financial hit is a mistake. His budget in 2016-17 was \$916 million, he noted, but there were unforeseen additional expenses, including the aforementioned greenhouse program, \$3 million for a corn-fed beef initiative and the big one, \$38 million in ministry insurance payouts to farmers affected by last summer's drought. The extras increased the ministry's budget on an interim basis to \$971 million.

So his ministry's 2017-18 budget, \$949 million, seems like a reduction, but that's because of those other factors -and it could happen again, Leal said.

"I can't control the weather -we could have another drought, or hail. But I have to be there for our farmers." kmgordon@postmedia.com

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PETERBOROUGH EXAMINER: MPP JEFF LEAL OUTLINES THE PROVINCE'S PLAN TO FUND PRESCRIPTIONS FOR PEOPLE UNDER 25; A3; 2017.04.29

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Free at the pharmacy; MPP Jeff Leal outlines the province's plan to fund prescriptions for people under 25

The Ontario government's new plan to give free prescription medication to children and youth is going to do a lot of good locally, one pharmacist said.

Adrian Cunningham, a pharmacist at Shoppers Drug Mart downtown, said the program is going to help people who work for minimum wage with no benefits - of which there are many in the city.

"The poorest are generally covered under Ontario Works, but then there are the working poor," Cunningham said.

The new program, called OHIP+, was announced on Thursday as part of the Ontario government's new budget. Starting Jan. 1, 2018, the Ontario government will cover the cost of prescription medication to anyone 24 and younger.

Cunningham said there are more than 4,400 drugs covered -everything from antibiotics to diabetes drugs, asthma inhalers, medication for ADHD and certain cancer drugs.

Even birth control pills will be covered, he said.

The government says all you'll have to do is present an Ontario health card and a prescription. Medications will be free, with no upfront costs.

Cunningham said OHIP+ will help a lot of people in their early 20s, in Peterborough - especially new post-secondary graduates.

Although students often have drug coverage through university, he said they don't often have benefits with their first job.

"There's a gap there," he said. MPP Jeff Leal said on Friday he expects the program will help a lot of families and young people locally.

"I know that in Peterborough, it can sometimes be difficult for people to make ends meet," he said.

If you have private insurance, you will still realize some savings: the program will save you dispensary fees, for example.

Meanwhile, CBC reported on Thursday that it was unclear whether premiums will be reduced for people with private insurance.

But a government press release issued by Leal states that it's a possibility.

"Ontario will work with representatives from the private insurance industry to ensure that any savings are passed on to employees and employers," it says.

NOTE: See more on Thursday's provincial budget on Page A4. JKovach@postmedia.com
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WELLAND TRIBUNE: ONTARIO HOPES ITS NEW YOUTH PHARMACARE PLAN SPURS NATIONAL PROGRAM; B3; 2017.04.29

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ILLUSTRATION: Craig Robertson, Postmedia Network / Health Minister Eric Hoskins and Premier Kathleen Wynne spoke about the Liberals new Youth pharmacare plan at Jenner Jean-Marie Community Recreation Centre in East York Friday.;

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Canadians now spend almost \$30 billion a year on prescription medicines.

After meeting last year with provincial and territorial health ministers, federal Health Minister Jane Philpott said addressing the cost of pharmaceuticals is one of her government's priorities. The ministers and Ottawa have formed a working group on access to medication.

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SOURCE: Postmedia Network

KEYWORDS: ontario,finance,minister,charles,sousa,dubbed

WORD COUNT: 372

You just can't put lipstick on a pig

Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa -"Chef Sousa" -as dubbed by Progressive Conservative leader Patrick Brown -served up a "balanced budget" for Ontario taxpayers Thursday. Too bad he cooked it in Hell's Kitchen, which is what passes for Ontario's finance ministry these days.

Here's Sousa's problem and, more important, Premier Kathleen Wynne's problem. No matter how much the Liberals try to dress up what they say is their first "balanced budget" since 2008, you can't put lipstick on a pig. The pig is the staggering public debt the Liberals have racked up since taking power in 2003, now at \$311.9 billion.

That's 125 per cent higher than the \$138.8 billion the Liberals inherited from the previous PC government in 2003.

Even with Sousa and Wynne claiming a "balanced budget" this year -and Brown says they're actually hiding a \$5 billion operating deficit -Ontario's debt now costs taxpayers \$12 billion in interest payments annually.

If Ontario's annual interest payments on debt were a government ministry, it would be the fourth largest spender after health, education and welfare.

Think of how many more subways, or hospital beds, or MRIs the Liberals could purchase with \$12 billion a year, if it was not going down the black hole of paying interest on debt, without reducing the principal amount owed by a penny. But that's not the end of the Liberals'financial chicanery.

In selling 60 per cent of Hydro One to the private sector, the Liberals told us the money would be used to pay down debt and build up public infrastructure. They also said the almost \$2 billion annually they will take from us through cap and trade carbon pricing would go toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions. But as PC finance critic Vic Fedeli pointed out Thursday, through sleight-of-hand, the Liberals are actually using this money to meet their daily operating expenses.

What they've done is to earmark the Hydro One and cap and trade money for the purposes they described, but then taken out an equal amount from the operating budget to spend on whatever they want.

Small wonder Ontario's finances under the Liberals are a train wreck and the government they lead is the world's most indebted sub-sovereign (non national) borrower.
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WELLAND TRIBUNE: DOES HOTEL TAX MEAN END OF NIAGARA FALLS DESTINATION MARKETING FEE?; A2; 2017.04.29

PUBLICATION: Welland Tribune

PAGE: A2

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: John Law

SOURCE: Welland Tribune

KEYWORDS: hotel, province, granted, municipalities, power, impose

ILLUSTRATION: Mike Dibattista, Postmedia Network / The province is allowing municipalities to adopt a hotel tax, but Mayor Jim Diodati is unsure how this will affect the Niagara Falls' contentious Destination Marketing Fee, or whether it even replaces it.;

WORD COUNT: 513

Confusion over new tax; Does hotel tax mean end of Niagara Falls Destination Marketing Fee?

Will a new hotel tax the province has granted municipalities power to impose replace the notorious Destination Marketing Fee in Niagara Falls? There were lots of guesses after Thursday's provincial budget, but not much clarification. Even Mayor Jim Diodati is unsure just what the new tax is, and what it means for the city.

"I've got a lot of questions I need answers to, but if it's done right this could be a good thing," said Diodati Friday. "I'm guessing that the province's idea is not to add a tax, but to create an environment that's more accountable, more transparent, more consistent.

"But at this point, we're still in the dark on it."

As stated in the budget, municipalities which already have a Destination Marketing Fee (DMF) in place "would be required to share their hotel tax revenue with the appropriate not-for-profit tourism organization in an amount that matches the total revenue generated by the existing DMF program." But in Niagara Falls, there is no such organization - each business which charges a DMF keeps whatever money it generates. This is not the spirit of its original intent, as introduced in 2004 by Ontario's Ministry of Tourism.

The ministry encouraged participating businesses to forward the funds to a non-profit organization to spend on tourism and development. It recommended a rate of three per cent be applied to hotel rooms.

The rate varies in Niagara Falls, however, and can be applied to non-hotel amenities such as meals, parking, coffee, etc. Many tourists are frustrated by its lack of transparency.

In February, the fee was investigated by CBC Marketplace for the third time in three years.

Diodati feels the situation in Niagara Falls "must have had some impact" on the province changing the Municipal Act to allow a hotel tax.

"When you have national media attention on something like this, more than once ... it has to have some sort of impact."

The tax has also long been pushed for by Toronto Mayor John Tory.

"Those two things together created an opportunity for the province to step in."

Diodati has reached out to the Ministry of Tourism for more clarification on the tax, and whether it means the end of the DMF.

"We will get the answers.

There's a lot of curious people, waiting to find out."

Speaking briefly to The Review Friday, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne said each municipality must discuss with its stakeholders whether the tax will replace the DMF.

"Municipalities don't have to implement this," she said. "There would have to be extensive conversations in places like Niagara where tourism is so important. This is just an enabler, and we wouldn't want to pre-empt that local process in any way."

Niagara Falls Tourism chairman Wayne Thomson said he has tried to find out whether the tax replaces the DMF, but "at this point, that's a mystery.

"There's no clarity with respect to that at all at this point. I was surprised the province actually got into that, but I think it was negotiations and pressure brought by the city of Toronto."

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EDITION: Final
BYLINE: Allison Jones
SOURCE: The Canadian Press
KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed
DATELINE: TORONTO
WORD COUNT: 478

Ontario hopes its new plan spurs national program

Ontario's Liberal government hopes a youth drug coverage plan revealed in its budget this week will help spur a national program by showing Ottawa and other provinces that pharmacare is affordable.

The provincial plan to cover more than 4,400 prescription medications for Ontarians under 25, with no co-pay or deductible, at an annual cost of \$465 million was the centrepiece of Ontario's balanced budget released Thursday.

Premier Kathleen Wynne is calling the plan, set to start in January, a step toward truly universal coverage.

"Do I believe that there should be universal pharmacare for all ages in Ontario? Yes," she said Friday. "That it will happen much more quickly if we have a federal government that is working on a national pharmacare plan."

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SECTION: News
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BYLINE: Allison Jones
SOURCE: The Canadian Press
KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed
DATELINE: TORONTO
WORD COUNT: 521

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***THE SAULT STAR: ONTARIO HOPES PHARMACARE PLAN ADOPTED FEDERALLY; A4;
2017.04.29***

PUBLICATION: The Sault Star

PAGE: A4

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Allison Jones

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed

ILLUSTRATION: Craig Robertson, Postmedia Network / Health Minister Eric Hoskins and Premier Kathleen Wynne spoke about the Liberals new Youth pharmacare plan at Jenner Jean-Marie Community Recreation Centre in East York Friday.;

DATELINE: TORONTO

WORD COUNT: 362

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PAGE: A9

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: Ontario News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Allison Jones

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed

ILLUSTRATION: Craig Robertson, Postmedia Network / Health Minister Eric Hoskins and Premier Kathleen Wynne spoke about the Liberals new Youth pharmacare plan at Jenner Jean-Marie Community Recreation Centre in East York Friday.;

DATELINE: TORONTO

WORD COUNT: 572

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OWEN SOUND SUN TIMES: WALKER SAYS THERE ARE SOME GOOD THINGS IN PROVINCIAL BUDGET, BUT DEBT CONCERNS HIM; A1 / FRONT; 2017.04.29

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PAGE: A1 / Front

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Denis Langlois

SOURCE: Owen Sound Sun Times

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,first,balanced,budget,global

WORD COUNT: 1069

Spending still worries MPP; Walker says there are some good things in provincial budget, but debt concerns him

Ontario's Liberal government says its first balanced budget since the 2008 global recession is aimed at creating a "stronger, healthier" province.

The 2017 spending plan, which was released Thursday at Queen's Park, contains several headlinegrabbing measures, including programs that will cover the cost of prescription drugs for everyone under age 25, make free tuition available to 210,000 post-secondary students starting this fall and reduce the cost of hydro by 25 per cent.

But, while acknowledging there are some "good things" in the financial blueprint, Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Progressive Conservative MPP Bill Walker says he remains deeply concerned about the government's spending - and the impact on future generations - and hopes people will take a closer look at the numbers.

"I fear that people will read these good news things and say everything is wonderful in the world like the Liberals try to portray, but we're still in a heck of a position," he said Friday in an interview.

Walker said the Liberals are using one-time funding sources - like \$1 billion from the sale of Hydro One shares and sales of the LCBO and OPG headquarters - along with \$2 billion in cap-and-trade revenue and an additional \$1.5 billion in new federal funding that's not guaranteed to be repeated next year to balance the books.

Other measures, such as the promise to cut hydro bills by 25 per cent this summer, will have to be paid by future generations, he said.

"I remain very concerned that it's a shell game, that they're moving money around and out into the future so that they can look good today and ironically a year before an election they can say, we balanced the budget," he said.

"You can only think that they're doing this to save face. The premier is the lowest she's ever been in the polls, the party brand has taken a big hit and I think they want this to be able to try to change the channel from all of the mismanagement and concerns that people have."

Walker said Ontario's debt will grow under the plan to record levels - it's expected to hit \$312 billion this year - and the province will spend about \$12 billion a year just to cover interest payments.

He said he also has concerns about what is missing from the budget.

"There's nothing there to address the school closings, nothing being paid off on our debt... they cut \$47 million from agriculture, which for an area like ours is a huge challenge," he said, adding the plan also doesn't address the root of the high hydro cost problem.

Walker said one of the good measures in the budget is the proposed new OHIP+: Children and Youth Pharmacare program, which will fully cover the cost of prescription medications for everyone aged 24 and under, regardless of family income.

He said he is also happy that the province will increase by six per cent the food allowance for residents in long-term care facilities.

"That was an issue that I, as (seniors, long-term care and accessibility) critic, had pushed and I'm glad to see they've addressed that," he said.

Walker said he is also pleased that hospital operating funding is to increase by \$518 million - or about three per cent - but said he wants to ensure that hospitals in Grey-Bruce will also see that boost.

"Typically, a lot of the money for these types of things go to more urban centres," he said.

Grey Bruce Health Services president and CEO Lance Thurston said he is not yet sure how the Ontario budget will impact the local hospital corporation.

He is expecting to receive more details late next week from the Local Health Integration Network.

"We know what the sector impact is, I think it's three per cent, and we know that the minister has said every hospital will receive an increase of two per cent. We're still trying to find out: two per cent of what? Is it two per cent of our total budget? Is it two per cent of our base budget? Is it two per cent of some other component; we have a multi-segmented budget. There's no clarity there," he said.

Thurston said, overall, the Liberal's spending plan is a "great news budget for the health care sector and the hospital sector.

"We do know that there is increases coming, it's just a matter of how much."

The province says it will also present balanced budgets in 2018 and 2019, which it says will mean "more funding for the programs and services people rely on most."

The Liberal's spending plan is to increase investments in health care by \$11.5 billion over the next three years and education by \$6.4 billion over three years.

Other highlights of this year's budget are \$190 million over three years to create 40,000 new workrelated opportunities for students and recent graduates and a \$200 million commitment to create 24,000 new child care spaces.

Francesca Dobbyn, executive director of the United Way of Bruce Grey, said she was happy to see the province increase the minimum salary people need to earn - from \$25,000 to \$35,000 - before they have to start paying off the provincial portion of their Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) loans.

She said the two per cent increases to social assistance rates are "good, but need to be better" since they are "way too low to begin with." But she said she's happy the province will be raising asset limits for people on Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program.

Dobbyn said she is delighted to see the new OHIP+ program in the budget.

"That's fantastic. That's going to help a lot of kids, a lot of families struggling with things like diabetes and some of those significant childhood illnesses, kids who have behavioural issues or psychiatric issues," she said.

Dobbyn said she would have liked to have seen a program to help qualifying adults receive dental care and hikes to rent supplement funding.

Huron-Bruce PC MPP Lisa Thompson said the Liberal government ignored her party's "four reasonable budget asks," which included a long-term plan to get Ontario's debt under control, immediate steps to "address the root of Ontario's hydro crisis" and an immediate moratorium on school closures.

Thompson said the Liberals have "no plan to help support sustained growth in rural Ontario."
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THE CHRONICLE JOURNAL: THE MIFEGYMISO ABORTION PILL BECAME AVAILABLE TO CANADIANS IN JANUARY THIS YEAR; 2017.04.29

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DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: Quebec- Ontario general news

KEYWORDS: photo,mifegymiso,abortion,became,available,canadians

WORD COUNT: 455

[File Photo The Mifegymiso abortion pill became available to Canadians in January this year.
code:2]

File Photo

The Mifegymiso abortion pill became available to Canadians in January this year.

code:2

INDEX: Health, Ontario, Politics

HL:Ontario making abortion pill Mifegymiso free for all who need it

By Jessica Smith Cross

THE CANADIAN PRESS

TORONTO - The Ontario government is promising to soon make an abortion pill free for all women in the province.

Mifegymiso, known as RU-486 outside of Canada, is a combination of two drugs, mifepristone and misoprostol. After years of study, Health Canada approved its use as a non-surgical option for abortion up to seven weeks. It became available to the Canadian public in January and costs \$300 to \$450.

According to the Ontario health minister's office, the government is in conversations with the drug manufacturer, Celopharma, and hopes to begin covering the drug in the near future. Women with a prescription will be able to get it for free at a pharmacy.

The announcement, made in the Ontario budget released Thursday, was welcomed by reproductive rights advocates.

Lyndsey Butcher, executive director of the Shore Centre, a sexual health resource centre in the Waterloo, Ont, region, said she was thrilled by the news.

Even though the abortion pill was technically made available to Canadians in January, access to it has been limited, Butcher said, and women in her area have had to go to abortion clinics in Toronto to obtain it.

Butcher hopes the Ontario government's decision to make the pill free will encourage more doctors to take a mandatory six-hour online training course on Mifegymiso and then offer a prescription for patients who need it.

Women will be able to fill their prescription at a pharmacy and have the abortion - which is the same experience as an early-term miscarriage - at home, she said.

"It's about personal preference and choice," Butcher said. "Some women would rather have the abortion at home, in their own time. Whereas, with surgical abortion women need to go into a clinic, often past protesters."

Catherine Macnab, Executive Director of Planned Parenthood Ottawa, said her organization is trying to build a network of doctors and pharmacists who can support each other in making Mifegymiso available to patients.

She said it's not an easy choice for doctors, in part because not all want to be known as abortion providers. Doctors must also confirm the pregnancy is in its early stages with an ultrasound before the drug can be prescribed and, for some, that can be difficult to arrange quickly, she said.

Mifegymiso has been commonly used in some other countries for nearly three decades, including France. It's been available in the U.S. since 2000.

New Brunswick and Alberta also recently announced the drug would be available in those provinces for free.

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DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: Columns Comment.

KEYWORDS: thomas,walkom,cheer,liberals,kathleen,ontario

WORD COUNT: 682

[By Thomas Walkom Give one cheer for the Liberals. Kathleen Wynne's Ontario government has finally b]

By Thomas Walkom

Give one cheer for the Liberals. Kathleen Wynne's Ontario government has finally bit the bullet on publicly funded pharmacare.

Their scheme to provide those under 25 with free prescription drugs isn't comprehensive. Nor, in spite of Finance Minister Charles Sousa's boast, is it exactly path-breaking. Saskatchewan already offers a similar, albeit less generous, drug plan to children 14 and under.

But it is a start.

The plan, announced in Thursday's budget, would allow any Ontarian age 24 and under who needs prescription drugs for medical purposes to receive them at no cost.

Unlike the province's drug plan for seniors, there would be no co-payment and no deductible. Unlike the drug plan for welfare recipients, there would be no means test.

Rather, like medicare, it would be universally available and cover the entire cost of roughly 4,400 drugs.

Experts can argue whether the Liberal pharmacare plan is better or worse than that pitched by Andrea Horwath's Ontario New Democrats. The NDP proposes a scheme that would cover everyone under 65, but only for 125 commonly prescribed drugs.

But the Liberals have the advantage of being in power right now. If they follow through on their promise, their truncated pharmacare plan will come into effect next January.

I suspect they will follow through, because this idea is likely to be popular. And once a popular pharmacare scheme is in place, it will be politically difficult for any government to kill it.

Fiscally, the Liberal drug plan has the advantage of being cheap - largely because younger people tend to be in good health. Officials say it will cost roughly \$465 million a year, a relatively small amount for a government that spends more than \$140 billion annually.

Politically, the drug scheme is a classic pre-election Liberal feint to the left. After years of foundering and with an election due in 2018, Wynne has rediscovered the virtue of activist government.

Health-care spending, in particular, is being boosted. The government kept the lid screwed tight. It is loosening it.

The average annual rate of growth in total health spending is rising from 1.8 to 3.3 per cent - with a big chunk of that new spending going to hospitals.

If re-elected, the Liberals may return to their tight-fisted ways. They have done so before. Their surprise decision to authorize the sale of Hydro One demonstrates that the Wynne Liberals are infinitely flexible.

But they will find it politically difficult to reverse themselves on pharmacare. It is the missing piece of medicare. Voters understand that.

Voters also understand that employee health benefit plans are in decline. Employers find them too expensive. Precarious workers rarely, if ever, qualify for them.

For these reasons, any move toward universal publicly funded pharmacare is welcome and probably irreversible. Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown told reporters Thursday that he would prefer a scheme that is means-tested. But Ontario already has a drug benefit program for the poor.

What is useful about this scheme is precisely what Brown doesn't like about it: It is a step on the road to universal pharmacare.

Sousa told reporters that he hopes Ontario's move will persuade Ottawa and other provinces to act. Perhaps it will.

But if that doesn't happen, this budget at least commits Ontario to something. It makes no sense to exclude out-of-hospital drug therapy from public health insurance. It never has.

There is much in this budget that is unsatisfactory. Welfare rates adjusted for inflation remain flat. The problems faced by seniors trying to get long-term care are not really addressed. As NDP Leader Horwath noted, even the pharmacare proposals have a haphazard air about them.

But at least the government has promised something positive. I don't know whether this will be enough to give the Liberals a victory in the next election. I don't know whether the Liberals deserve a victory in the next election.

However, if they manage to get this thing going in January, they do deserve, at the very least, a round of one-handed applause.

Thomas Walkom writes for the Toronto Star. twalkom@thestar.ca

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SECTION: Issues & Ideas

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BYLINE: Kelly Mcparland

SOURCE: National Post

KEYWORDS: above,others,budget,water,flooding,titanic

ILLUSTRATION: Craig Robertson, Postmedia News / Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne and Charles Sousa at the reading of the budget at Queen's Park.;

IMAGES: Craig Robertson, Postmedia News / Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne and Charles Sousa at the reading of the budget at Queen's Park.

[NTNP_20170429_All_but_Toronto_A16_02_I001.jpg];

WORD COUNT: 758

Can we swallow this humbug?

There was one goal above all others for Thursday's Ontario's budget: to halt the water that has been flooding into this Titanic of a government and keep it from sinking from sight.

This is a government that has been desperate for good news. Attempts to prevent Premier Kathleen Wynne's poll ratings from dropping towards single digits have failed.

A much ballyhooed pledge to reduce astronomical hydro bills produced no bump in the ratings. Though much has been made of Donald Trump's underwhelming performance in his first 100 days as president, and the growing sense of disillusion among his supporters, his 44 per cent approval rating is 32 points above Wynne's standing in Ontario.

Finance Minister Charles Sousa's budget had to stop the bleeding. There was simply no alternative. By whatever means possible, a positive message had to be concocted that could be spun out over the province's disgruntled inhabitants, somehow convincing them to give the tired, old Liberal regime yet another chance. It had to be simple, straightforward, and bullet-proof enough that the local media could be gulled into repeating it in the headlines that are all most people will read when it comes to budget stories.

To that degree, Sousa succeeded.

"Ontario balances budget, pours billions into health care," the Globe and Mail announced, just as the government must have prayed. "Ontario Budget 2017: Balanced Books for Ontario, and free drugs for those under 24," the CBC reported. The Toronto Star (well, we knew the Liberals could count on the Star) editorialized: "Wynne government promises much-needed investment in child care." The Star, as you'd expect, faithfully treats new government outlays as "investments" rather than more of the spending that has left the province \$312 billion in hock.

There haven't been a lot of noteworthy achievements in Western politics of late, but - as the budget demonstrated - great strides have been made in understanding and manipulating media messaging. Sure, most of the articles about Sousa's plan eventually got around to noting the

many gaping holes in the document. The budget claims to be "balanced" even though debt will rise another \$26.4 billion this fiscal year. Debt servicing costs will again eat up \$1 billion a month, topping all but the highest priority programs. Even to reach those dubious levels, a great deal of hocus pocus was required: billions of dollars in expenditures for capital projects are kept off the books; billions more in borrowing is shoved into the future; one-off asset sales like the Hydro One sell-off are used to make the numbers look better than they are.

But Ontarians who care already knew that state of affairs. And look at the goodies on offer: free abortion pills! A transit credit for seniors! More childcare spaces and ... did we mention this already? ... a 25 per cent cut to electricity bills, which is really a 17 per cent cut, and will actually cost the province billions down the road, but who's counting? By this time next year will Ontario's easily-swayed voters remember any of the dirty details of the budget or the flim-flam used to manufacture its bottom line? Not likely. But they won't be allowed to forget the government's claim to have balanced the books, because the Liberal party will spend heavily to keep it on the airwaves (possibly using public funds on the premise that the government has a responsibility to keep residents informed of its activities).

Sousa insists the books will remain in the black for three more years, thanks in part to greater land transfer taxes from Toronto's ballooning housing prices. The \$3.1 billion a year he expects to gain might explain why the Liberals took so long to respond to demands for efforts to cool the market, which has even prosperous, fully-employed families struggling to find a home they can afford.

Many of the news reports pointed out that this was an election document, meant to present the government in the best light and win over voters even though the Liberals still have a year before they have to face voters. Of course it is. Its overwhelming purpose was to protect the interests of the Liberal party, even if it means chaining the province to the benevolence of its lenders and gambling the future on interest rate levels.

That has long been the Liberal way, and it has kept them in power for almost 14 years. Against all the odds they might even stay there, as long as Ontarians continue to swallow the sort of humbug they were presented with Thursday.

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EDITION: All_but_Toronto

SOURCE: National Post

KEYWORDS: proof,needed,ontario,budget,tabled,driven

WORD COUNT: 839

Ontario Liberals just never learn

As if any more proof was needed, the Ontario budget tabled this week has driven home, yet again, that the province's Liberals, and their leader Kathleen Wynne, haven't learned a thing. The only real question is whether the voters of Canada's most populous province have.

The budget is predictably heavy on the self-congratulation and back-patting that it seems all such announcements are now obligated to contain. The government is particularly proud of having "balanced the budget," as it had previously promised, by the next fiscal year. This is clearly something the Liberals are banking on ahead of the 2018 election.

And it's no wonder. The Ontario Liberals have spent money like the proverbial drunken sailor for a decade, ramping up the province's debt to \$312 billion (it was \$132 billion when they took office in 2003). Then again, sailors eventually run out of money and report back to their post. Ontario just keeps borrowing, and interest payments are already \$1 billion a month - the third-largest single expense. Balancing the budget is clearly how the Liberals are hoping to sell voters on their fitness to manage an economy as large as Ontario's.

It's not always irresponsible to borrow to build. But it's a little rich for the Liberals to claim to have balanced the books while still adding tens of billions to the province's debt tab.

Pity it's all an illusion.

The books aren't balanced, they're just reimagined. Short-term or even one-time cash payouts from asset sales are being counted as revenue. The province has also decided to only count debt accrued through operational shortfalls as real debt; money borrowed to build infrastructure apparently doesn't count, even though it'll still be added to Ontario's bottom line and will result in mounting interest payments..

And then there's the signature prescription drug plan. The Liberals have announced that, starting on Jan. 1 of next year, the Ontario Health Insurance Plan will cover the full cost of prescriptions for all Ontario residents under the age of 25. What the Liberals are clearly hoping will be seen as a sign of their progressive generosity - who'd dare object to helping sick kids get the medicines they need? - makes less sense the more you look at it. Making prescription drugs more accessible to those who simply cannot afford them is a valid public policy goal. An inability to properly treat existing medical conditions before they become an acute crisis eventually drives up health care costs, when patients who can't afford to get better eventually worsen and

require hospital care, perhaps over the long term. Prevention through treatment is cost-effective and humane.

But the program is overly broad. The most reliable surveys of Canadians indicate that only roughly 10 per cent of the population truly cannot afford needed drugs; many Canadians are at least partially covered through public service or corporate plans, or personally obtained supplemental insurance. And yet the children of these residents, the comfortable majority of Ontarians, will now receive their drugs courtesy of the Ontario taxpayer, with no semblance of means testing. It's just that kind of mindless spending that helped get the Liberals into their fiscal mess in the first place, and it takes place against a background of hospital wards full to the bursting due to chronic funding shortfalls at hospitals and a woefully insufficient longterm care system. But, again, they never learn. The money goes to the splashiest new promise, not the long-standing urgent need.

We could go on. There's their new Basic Income Pilot project proposal that, as economist Kevin Milligan revealed in these pages this week, will send most of its money to young adults who still live at home with their parents, without ending the other social supports that will make it possible to evaluate the pilot properly. There's an expansion of child care spaces that funnel money into institutional facilities, which Canadians consistently rank last among their preferred child care options. There's a tax credit for seniors who use transit, which, much like the pharmacare plan, contains no means testing element (and overall, data show Canada's seniors are doing quite well). It all speaks to the recurring theme of this Liberal government: every lucky break on the revenue front should be immediately negated by more spending. Every tax coming in above budgeted expectations must immediately be committed to shoring up a riding or two. The entire prolonged return to balance shall be celebrated by digging more holes for the future.

All of this is disappointing.

None of it is surprising. This is just how this government is programmed to operate, which explains why it's about to do the same thing to Ontario's housing rental market that it did to the hydro sector - destroy it through cleverly spun and possibly wellintentioned, yet predictably doomed interventions.

The Liberals just can't help themselves, and they don't even bother pretending otherwise anymore. The voters know all they need to. Whether they are any more capable of learning than the Liberals will be determined at the polls next year.

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SOURCE: - Postmedia Network

KEYWORDS: ontario,finance,minister,charles,sousa,dubbed

WORD COUNT: 377

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Too bad he cooked it in Hell's Kitchen, which is what passes for Ontario's finance ministry these days.

Here's Sousa's problem and, more important, Premier Kathleen Wynne's problem.

No matter how much the Liberals try to dress up what they say is their first "balanced budget" since 2008, you can't put lipstick on a pig.

The pig is the staggering public debt the Liberals have racked up since taking power in 2003, now at \$311.9 billion.

That's 125 per cent higher than the \$138.8 billion the Liberals inherited from the previous PC government in 2003.

Even with Sousa and Wynne claiming a "balanced budget" this year - and Brown says they're actually hiding a \$5 billion operating deficit - Ontario's debt now costs taxpayers \$12 billion in interest payments annually.

If Ontario's annual interest payments on debt were a government ministry, it would be the fourth largest spender after health, education and welfare.

Think of how many more subways, or hospital beds, or MRIs the Liberals could purchase with \$12 billion a year, if it was not going down the black hole of paying interest on debt, without reducing the principal amount owed by a penny.

But that's not the end of the Liberals' financial chicanery.

In selling 60 per cent of Hydro One to the private sector, the Liberals told us the money would be used to pay down debt and build up public infrastructure.

They also said the almost \$2 billion annually they will take from us through cap and trade carbon pricing would go toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

But as PC finance critic Vic Fedeli pointed out Thursday, through sleight-of-hand, the Liberals are actually using this money to meet their daily operating expenses.

What they've done is to earmark the Hydro One and cap and trade money for the purposes they described, but then taken out an equal amount from the operating budget to spend on whatever they want.

Small wonder Ontario's finances under the Liberals are a train wreck and the government they lead is the world's most indebted sub-sovereign (non national) borrower.

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SIMCOE REFORMER: ONTARIO HOPES ITS NEW YOUTH PHARMACARE PLAN SPURS NATIONAL PROGRAM; A2; 2017.04.29

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BYLINE: Allison Jones

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed

ILLUSTRATION: Craig Robertson, Postmedia Network / Health Minister Eric Hoskins and Premier Kathleen Wynne spoke about the Liberals new youth pharmacare plan at Jenner Jean-Marie Community Recreation Centre in East York Friday.;

DATELINE: TORONTO

WORD COUNT: 575

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Premier Kathleen Wynne is calling the plan, set to start in January, a step toward truly universal coverage.

"Do I believe that there should be universal pharmacare for all ages in Ontario? Yes," she said Friday. "that it will happen much more quickly if we have a federal government that is working on a national pharmacare plan." Wynne said she is certain that other premiers will have questions for her at their next meeting this summer.

Ontario Health Minister Eric Hoskins said this approach on pharmacare is similar to Ontario's push for pension reform, which saw the province use its own proposed pension plan to successfully push for a national Canada Pension Plan enhancement.

"If you think back to Tommy Douglas and the beginning of medicare it was one province that stepped forward and the rest of the provinces and the federal government followed," he said.

Covering people under 25 - following the United Nations' definition of youth - is a good place to start, Hoskins said.

"You don't have to go from zero to 100 per cent coverage for everybody on day one," he said.

Some of the provincial health ministers across the country are hesitant on pharmacare because of the price tag, Hoskins noted.

"I haven't met a health minister who doesn't believe that it's the right thing to do, but if there's any reluctance that's been expressed to me, it's been because of concerns about what the up-front financial implications might be," he said.

"We're going to show that there are cost savings through bulk purchasing, through keeping people healthier." Hoskins also said Ontario will work with insurance companies to ensure the savings they see from no longer having to cover medications for young employees and employees' children get passed onto employers and workers.

Steve Morgan, the lead researcher for the Citizens' Reference Panel on Pharmacare in Canada, said Ontario's cost estimate for its program sounds about right. The financial cost of covering medications for a group of people that don't traditionally use prescription drugs as much as other age groups would be relatively low, he said.

Beyond that, the Ontario plan's "incremental change" has symbolic value, said Morgan, a professor at the University of British Columbia.

"They're signalling to Justin Trudeau to say, 'Our vision for universal pharmacare is consistent with Canadian medicare. We're going to do it for kids and we're going to call on you to do the right thing and create national standards,'" he said.

Research suggests that a national pharmacare strategy would save the country between \$4 billion and \$10 billion a year because Ottawa as a single payer could wield far greater influence when negotiating drug prices with pharmaceutical companies than could a single province or territory.

Canadians now spend almost \$30 billion a year on prescription medicines.

After meeting last year with provincial and territorial health ministers, federal Health Minister Jane Philpott said addressing the cost of pharmaceuticals is one of her government's priorities. The ministers and Ottawa have formed a working group on access to medication.
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ST. CATHARINES STANDARD: ONTARIO HOPES ITS NEW YOUTH PHARMACARE PLAN SPURS NATIONAL PROGRAM; B3; 2017.04.29

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BYLINE: Allison Jones

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed

ILLUSTRATION: Craig Robertson, Postmedia Network / Health Minister Eric Hoskins and Premier Kathleen Wynne spoke about the Liberals new Youth pharmacare plan at Jenner Jean-Marie Community Recreation Centre in East York Friday.;

DATELINE: TORONTO

WORD COUNT: 572

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ST. CATHARINES STANDARD: YOU JUST CAN'T PUT LIPSTICK ON A PIG; A6;
2017.04.29

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SECTION: Opinion

EDITION: Final

SOURCE: Postmedia Network

KEYWORDS: ontario,finance,minister,charles,sousa,dubbed

WORD COUNT: 372

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That's 125 per cent higher than the \$138.8 billion the Liberals inherited from the previous PC government in 2003.

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In selling 60 per cent of Hydro One to the private sector, the Liberals told us the money would be used to pay down debt and build up public infrastructure. They also said the almost \$2 billion annually they will take from us through cap and trade carbon pricing would go toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions. But as PC finance critic Vic Fedeli pointed out Thursday, through sleight-of-hand, the Liberals are actually using this money to meet their daily operating expenses.

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Small wonder Ontario's finances under the Liberals are a train wreck and the government they lead is the world's most indebted sub-sovereign (non national) borrower.
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KEYWORDS: ontario,finance,minister,charles,sousa,dubbed

WORD COUNT: 376

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EDITION: Final
BYLINE: Nathan Taylor And Bob Bruton
SOURCE: Postmedia Network
KEYWORDS: balance,budget,still,being,questioned,pretty
WORD COUNT: 910

Brown blasts budget

The balance in Ontario's 2017 budget is still being questioned.

"I'm pretty happy about this budget. We've balanced it," Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne said Friday, the day after Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa delivered his budget.

Ontario Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown continued to disagree.

"It's actually a \$5-billion operational deficit, so Ontario is not balanced," he said. "That's a sham, that's a charade, that Sousa is trying to present to the public, but it's misleading."

Brown said the Grits are using one-time money to balance the books, such as the Hydro One sale, revenue from government asset sales, government land sales and double-counting the cap-and-trade money, and of federal infrastructure money.

But Wynne said provincial revenues are up, helping balance the budget, for a basic reason.

"The Ontario economy is doing very well," she said, adding "it is government's job to make sure" all Ontarians can benefit from the strong economy.

One such budget measure is the pharmacare program for children and youths, covering prescriptions for most acute and common chronic conditions for those age 24 and younger, with no deductions or co-payment, starting Jan. 1.

But Brown said it's not a fair plan. "I'd like a plan that's more equitable. What I mean by that: I don't believe millionaire kids need help paying for their prescriptions," he said. "Do I think (Canadian pop music star) Justin Bieber needs to have his prescriptions paid for under this plan? "When I say means-testing, when I say more of an equitable plan, I would certainly not support covering those who don't need any help at all and not providing help for those who need it."

But Wynne said Ontario doesn't do a "means test" for things like hip replacement and other procedures - people just have it covered. That's what universal care is. Some might not support universal care.

"We do," she said. "We are covering cancer drugs. We are covering medication for rare diseases."

Wynne said her government has built 810 schools (including Orillia Secondary School) and renovated 780. The province is providing \$16 billion in capital funding grants over 10 years to build new schools.

The premier noted her government, when it came to power, put a moratorium on closures.

"At the end of that moratorium, schools boards were saying, 'You're really tying our hands,'" Wynne said.

The issue of school closures is "a very challenging thing" and Wynne said the discussions happening in communities around pressures on small schools are not always "good discussions."

Her government would be much more interested in boards and schools collaborating with each other to find options for schools in smaller communities, Wynne said.

Brown said that's not the whole story, however.

"You look at the fine print - there's 300 schools on the chopping block," he said. "We've seen the history of this, too. I think of the elementary schools in Port McNicoll and Waubesa, Barrie Central, of course. There's been a history of school closures.

"I actually got up in the legislature this week. I read (Wynne) quotes from when she first entered politics. She said she was getting into politics to stop (former Ontario premier) Mike Harris's school closures, and 'Mike the Knife,' she called him. She has now closed 100 more schools than Mike Harris and (another former PC premier) Ernie Eves combined, and there are 300 more on the chopping block. So, how hypocritical and disingenuous, and there's no help in this budget."

The 2017 budget also includes previous announcements, such as the 25% cut in hydro rates by this summer. Wynne said this is not early campaigning ahead of the 2018 Ontario election.

"For a couple of years, we've been trying to find ways to help people with their electricity bills," she said, using the Ontario Electricity Support Program, to help low-income Ontarians, as an example. "We realized that wasn't enough."

Wynne said she is used to hearing critics claim this is premature electioneering, but "that can't stop me ... from doing the things that are right."

Brown disagreed. "Most likely, the next budget will be a glorified platform," he said. "I think this one is their election budget."

The PC boss said there need to be structural changes to hydro - stop selling Hydro One shares, rein in executive salaries right now, stop over-generating water power and having to give it away, and stop signing new generation contracts.

"I will have a more elaborate discussion of hydro in the (election) platform," he said. "What I did put out, the structural changes, I didn't pick a number out of thin air like the NDP or Liberals did, but changes I asked the government to do would result in lower hydro rates."

Wynne said she's unaware of a Tory hydro plan, however.

"We've seen no evidence of a plan (from the PCs)," she said. "If Patrick Brown has a good idea, he should be telling the people of Ontario what that is."

The Liberals' plan to find savings so it can cut rates by 25% is to finance the costs of electricity generation contracts during longer periods of time.

"The Liberal plan is not a plan; it simply borrows money. Borrowing money is not a plan," Brown said. "I want to make sure that what I present to Ontarians is not some number out of thin air - it's actually based on reasoned evidence."

The next Ontario election is expected to be held in June 2018. ntaylor@postmedia.com
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**NIAGARA FALLS REVIEW: ONTARIO HOPES ITS NEW YOUTH PHARMACARE PLAN
SPURS NATIONAL PROGRAM; B3; 2017.04.29**

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BYLINE: Allison Jones

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed

ILLUSTRATION: Craig Robertson, Postmedia Network / Health Minister Eric Hoskins and Premier Kathleen Wynne spoke about the Liberals new Youth pharmacare plan at Jenner Jean-Marie Community Recreation Centre in East York Friday.;

DATELINE: TORONTO

WORD COUNT: 572

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Canadians now spend almost \$30 billion a year on prescription medicines.

After meeting last year with provincial and territorial health ministers, federal Health Minister Jane Philpott said addressing the cost of pharmaceuticals is one of her government's priorities. The ministers and Ottawa have formed a working group on access to medication.

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KEYWORDS: ontario,finance,minister,charles,sousa,dubbed

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You just can't put lipstick on a pig

Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa -"Chef Sousa" -as dubbed by Progressive Conservative leader Patrick Brown -served up a "balanced budget" for Ontario taxpayers Thursday. Too bad he cooked it in Hell's Kitchen, which is what passes for Ontario's finance ministry these days.

Here's Sousa's problem and, more important, Premier Kathleen Wynne's problem. No matter how much the Liberals try to dress up what they say is their first "balanced budget" since 2008, you can't put lipstick on a pig. The pig is the staggering public debt the Liberals have racked up since taking power in 2003, now at \$311.9 billion.

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Think of how many more subways, or hospital beds, or MRIs the Liberals could purchase with \$12 billion a year, if it was not going down the black hole of paying interest on debt, without reducing the principal amount owed by a penny. But that's not the end of the Liberals'financial chicanery.

In selling 60 per cent of Hydro One to the private sector, the Liberals told us the money would be used to pay down debt and build up public infrastructure. They also said the almost \$2 billion annually they will take from us through cap and trade carbon pricing would go toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions. But as PC finance critic Vic Fedeli pointed out Thursday, through sleight-of-hand, the Liberals are actually using this money to meet their daily operating expenses.

What they've done is to earmark the Hydro One and cap and trade money for the purposes they described, but then taken out an equal amount from the operating budget to spend on whatever they want.

Small wonder Ontario's finances under the Liberals are a train wreck and the government they lead is the world's most indebted sub-sovereign (non national) borrower.
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**NIAGARA FALLS REVIEW: DOES HOTEL TAX MEAN END OF NIAGARA FALLS
DESTINATION MARKETING FEE?; A1 / FRONT; 2017.04.29**

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SECTION: News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: John Law

SOURCE: Niagara Falls Review

KEYWORDS: hotel,province,granted,municipalities,power,impose

ILLUSTRATION: Mike Dibattista, Review File Photo / The province is allowing municipalities to adopt a hotel tax, but Mayor Jim Diodati is unsure how this will affect the Niagara Falls' contentious Destination Marketing Fee, or whether it even replaces it.;

WORD COUNT: 513

Confusion over new tax; Does hotel tax mean end of Niagara Falls Destination Marketing Fee?

Will a new hotel tax the province has granted municipalities power to impose replace the notorious Destination Marketing Fee in Niagara Falls? There were lots of guesses after Thursday's provincial budget, but not much clarification. Even Mayor Jim Diodati is unsure just what the new tax is, and what it means for the city.

"I've got a lot of questions I need answers to, but if it's done right this could be a good thing," said Diodati Friday. "I'm guessing that the province's idea is not to add a tax, but to create an environment that's more accountable, more transparent, more consistent.

"But at this point, we're still in the dark on it."

As stated in the budget, municipalities which already have a Destination Marketing Fee (DMF) in place "would be required to share their hotel tax revenue with the appropriate not-for-profit tourism organization in an amount that matches the total revenue generated by the existing DMF program." But in Niagara Falls, there is no such organization - each business which charges a DMF keeps whatever money it generates. This is not the spirit of its original intent, as introduced in 2004 by Ontario's Ministry of Tourism.

The ministry encouraged participating businesses to forward the funds to a non-profit organization to spend on tourism and development. It recommended a rate of three per cent be applied to hotel rooms.

The rate varies in Niagara Falls, however, and can be applied to non-hotel amenities such as meals, parking, coffee, etc. Many tourists are frustrated by its lack of transparency.

In February, the fee was investigated by CBC Marketplace for the third time in three years.

Diodati feels the situation in Niagara Falls "must have had some impact" on the province changing the Municipal Act to allow a hotel tax.

"When you have national media attention on something like this, more than once ... it has to have some sort of impact."

The tax has also long been pushed for by Toronto Mayor John Tory.

"Those two things together created an opportunity for the province to step in."

Diodati has reached out to the Ministry of Tourism for more clarification on the tax, and whether it means the end of the DMF.

"We will get the answers. There's a lot of curious people, waiting to find out."

Speaking briefly to The Review Friday, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne said each municipality must discuss with its stakeholders whether the tax will replace the DMF.

"Municipalities don't have to implement this," she said. "There would have to be extensive conversations in places like Niagara where tourism is so important. This is just an enabler, and we wouldn't want to pre-empt that local process in any way."

Niagara Falls Tourism chairman Wayne Thomson said he has tried to find out whether the tax replaces the DMF, but "at this point, that's a mystery."

"There's no clarity with respect to that at all at this point. I was surprised the province actually got into that, but I think it was negotiations and pressure brought by the city of Toronto."

jlaw@postmedia.com

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***NORTH BAY NUGGET: MINISTRY'S BUDGET INTACT - THIBEAULT; A1 / FRONT;
2017.04.29***

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BYLINE: Jennifer Hamilton-Mccharles
SOURCE: North Bay Nugget
KEYWORDS: ontario,energy,minister,glenn,thibeault,disputes
ILLUSTRATION: / Glenn Thibeault; / Vic Fedeli; / Kathleen Wynne; / Patrick Brown;
WORD COUNT: 1116

Ministry's budget intact - Thibeault; Energy minister disputes Conservative's budget claims

Ontario Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault disputes Vic Fedeli's claim that the provincial budget "leaves the people of rural and Northern Ontario with less."

On Thursday, Fedeli, Nipissing MPP and Conservative finance critic, claimed the Liberals are cutting \$70 million from the budget of the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines.

"Vic's claim that we cut \$70 million from MNDM is absolutely not the case," Thibeault responded Friday. "The budget for the ministry is \$100 million. The additional \$70 million was put into the budget last year and was one-time funding to decommission mines."

In addition, Thibeault said, the province has increased the budget for highway resurfacing by \$100 million to \$654 million.

"Highway 11 and Highway 534 (from Restoule Provincial Park to near Highway 11 in Powassan) are among the highways that will see an investment."

He said the budget also includes 72 new long-term care beds for Mattawa.

Thibeault also disputes Fedeli's claim that the Liberals are abandoning the Ring of Fire chromite mining development 600 kilometres northwest of Timmins. Fedeli said the Ring of Fire was mentioned in the 2014 budget, and cut and pasted into the 2015 and 2016 budgets. But this year it was removed.

"This government is completely behind this project," Thibeault responded. "None of that has changed. We recognize the importance of the Ring of Fire and how this project will benefit everyone."

Speaking Friday, Premier Kathleen Wynne said she's "pretty happy with this budget. We've balanced it."

Conservative Leader Patrick Brown continued to disagree.

"It's actually a \$5-billion operational deficit, so Ontario is not balanced," he said. "That's a sham, that's a charade, that Sousa is trying to present to the public, but it's misleading."

Brown said the Grits are balancing the books by using one-time money, such as the Hydro One sale, revenue from government asset sales, government land sales and double-counting the cap-and-trade money, as well as federal infrastructure money.

But Wynne said provincial revenues are up, helping balance the budget, for a basic reason.

"The Ontario economy is doing very well," she said, adding "it is government's job to make sure" all Ontarians can benefit from the strong economy.

One such budget measure is the pharmacare program for children and youths, covering prescriptions for most acute and common chronic conditions for those age 24 and younger, with no deductions or co-payment, starting Jan. 1.

But Brown said it's not a fair plan.

"I'd like a plan that's more equitable. What I mean by that: I don't believe millionaire kids need help paying for their prescriptions," he said. "Do I think (Canadian pop music star) Justin Bieber needs to have his prescriptions paid for under this plan? "When I say means-testing, when I say more of an equitable plan, I would certainly not support covering those who don't need any help at all and not providing help for those who need it."

But Wynne said Ontario doesn't do a "means test" for things like hip replacement and other procedures -people just have it covered. That's what universal care is. Some might not support universal care.

"We do," she said. "We are covering cancer drugs. We are covering medication for rare diseases."

Wynne said her government has built 810 schools and renovated 780. The province is providing \$16 billion in capital funding grants over 10 years to build new schools.

The premier noted her government, when it came to power, put a moratorium on closures.

"At the end of that moratorium, schools boards were saying, 'You're really tying our hands,'" Wynne said.

The issue of school closures is "a very challenging thing" and Wynne said the discussions happening in communities around pressures on small schools are not always "good discussions."

Her government would be much more interested in boards and schools collaborating with each other to find options for schools in smaller communities, Wynne said.

Brown said that's not the whole story, however.

"You look at the fine print -there's 300 schools on the chopping block," he said. "We've seen the history of this, too. I think of the elementary schools in Port McNicoll and Waubesa, Barrie Central, of course. There's been a history of school closures."

"I actually got up in the legislature this week. I read (Wynne) quotes from when she first entered politics. She said she was getting into politics to stop (former Ontario premier) Mike Harris's school closures, and 'Mike the Knife,' she called him. She has now closed 100 more schools than Mike Harris and (another former PC premier) Ernie Eves combined, and there are 300 more on the chopping block. So, how hypocritical and disingenuous, and there's no help in this budget."

The 2017 budget also includes previous announcements, such as the 25% cut in hydro rates by this summer.

Wynne said this is not early campaigning ahead of the 2018 Ontario election.

"For a couple of years, we've been trying to find ways to help people with their electricity bills," she said, using the Ontario Electricity Support Program, to help low-income Ontarians, as an example. "We realized that wasn't enough."

Wynne said she is used to hearing critics claim this is premature electioneering, but "that can't stop me ... from doing the things that are right."

Brown disagreed. "Most likely, the next budget will be a glorified platform," he said. "I think this one is their election budget."

The PC boss said there need to be structural changes to hydro -stop selling Hydro One shares, rein in executive salaries right now, stop over-generating water power and having to give it away, and stop signing new generation contracts.

"I will have a more elaborate discussion of hydro in the (election) platform," he said. "What I did put out, the structural changes, I didn't pick a number out of thin air like the NDP or Liberals did, but changes I asked the government to do would result in lower hydro rates."

Wynne said she's unaware of a Tory hydro plan, however.

"We've seen no evidence of a plan (from the PCs)," she said. "If Patrick Brown has a good idea, he should be telling the people of Ontario what that is."

The Liberals' plan to find savings so it can cut rates by 25 per cent is to finance the costs of electricity-generation contracts during longer periods of time.

"The Liberal plan is not a plan; it simply borrows money. Borrowing money is not a plan," Brown said. "I want to make sure that what I present to Ontarians is not some number out of thin air - it's actually based on reasoned evidence."

The next Ontario election is expected to be held in June 2018. With files from By Bob Bruton, Nathan Taylor, Postmedia
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THE CHATHAM DAILY NEWS: BALANCED BUDGET NOT ON THE LEVEL; A5;
2017.04.29

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Balanced budget not on the level

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BYLINE: Trevor Terfloth

SOURCE: The Chatham Daily News

KEYWORDS: recent,provincial,budget,little,address,needs

ILLUSTRATION: / Nicholls;

WORD COUNT: 378

Budget lacking for C-K: MPP; Nicholls calls Ontario budget disappointing

The recent provincial budget does little to address the needs of Chatham-Kent, as well as Southwestern Ontario in general, says the MPP for the area.

Chatham-Kent Essex MPP Rick Nicholls, of the Progressive Conservatives, called it an underwhelming proposal.

"Disappointed, but not surprised," he told The Daily News on Friday. "The government is saying that they have a balanced budget. In my opinion, it's nothing more than an election ploy."

Nicholls said the Liberal budget doesn't address paying down the debt, supporting rural schools or scrapping the Green Energy Act.

"It's not that we're against renewable energy, but it's got to be affordable," he said. "Stop signing these contracts for wind energy."

The budget includes the following measures: -A pharmacare plan for anyone age 24 and under. Will cover the cost of all medicines funded through the Ontario Drug Benefit Program. There will be no deductible or co-payment.

-The price of a 200-cigarette carton goes up by \$2 this year -\$10 over the next three years -plus the HST.

-\$1.3 billion to reduce wait times; \$890 million for surgical procedures; and \$245 million to improve specialist access.

-A public transit tax credit for seniors. The 15-per-cent refundable credit has an average benefit of \$130 a year. The program will cost \$10 million a year.

-Ontario's plan to cut hydro rates by 25 per cent.

-\$200 million for 24,000 new childcare spaces.

-\$518 million in new operating funding for hospitals.

-Introducing a 15-per-cent nonresident speculator tax on home purchases.

-Free tuition for 210,000 postsecondary students through an updated OSAP.

While delivering the budget, Finance Minister Charles Sousa said his party was thinking longterm with its plans.

"These decisions that we're making today are not about the election cycles," he said. "They're based on a long-term benefit to the people of Ontario."

However, Nicholls said he didn't see anything "jump off the page" for Southwestern Ontario.

Mayor Randy Hope said some of the budget promises were positive, including pharmacare and tuition, but added he needs to see more details before determining how Chatham-Kent will fare.

"They talk about more money for hospitals. I just hope that's not GTA-focused," he said.

"Schools seem to (have) a lot of GTA focus." -With files from Postmedia Network

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THE BROCKVILLE RECORDER & TIMES: ONTARIO HOPES ITS NEW YOUTH PHARMACARE PLAN SPURS NATIONAL PROGRAM; A5; 2017.04.29

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PAGE: A5

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SECTION: Ontario News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Allison Jones

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed

ILLUSTRATION: Craig Robertson, Postmedia Network / Health Minister Eric Hoskins and Premier Kathleen Wynne spoke about the Liberals new Youth pharmacare plan at Jenner Jean-Marie Community Recreation Centre in East York Friday.;

DATELINE: TORONTO

WORD COUNT: 572

Ontario hopes its new youth pharmacare plan spurs national program

Ontario's Liberal government hopes a youth drug coverage plan revealed in its budget this week will help spur a national program by showing Ottawa and other provinces that pharmacare is affordable.

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Covering people under 25 - following the United Nations' definition of youth - is a good place to start, Hoskins said.

"You don't have to go from zero to 100 per cent coverage for everybody on day one," he said.

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**BRANTFORD EXPOSITOR: ONTARIO HOPES ITS NEW YOUTH PHARMACARE PLAN
SPURS NATIONAL PROGRAM; A7; 2017.04.29**

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BYLINE: Michael-Allan Marion
SOURCE: Brantford Expositor
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WORD COUNT: 815

Budget gets mixed reviews

The Kathleen Wynne government's 2017 balanced budget provided a mix of local reaction.

The document secures the health and future for aspiring youth and indigenous students wanting better educations while also providing health care improvements and greater security for seniors. say some.

Others wonder if the government is cooking the books by presenting a phoney balanced budget that merely adds to the provincial debt while increasing the provincial debt, shortchanging agriculture and doing nothing to halt school closures in rural areas.

Local reaction to the first balanced budget in a decade delivered by Finance Minister Charles Sousa is that mixed.

Brant MPP Dave Levac, also Speaker of the Legislature, said in an interview he wanted to give a fair assessment of the budget and what it can achieve in his riding of Brantford, Brant County and Six Nations.

But he confessed he couldn't help being impressed at the government's "ground breaking" proposal to provide universal pharmacare for people 24 years old and younger.

"It bodes well for the future. It builds a firm foundation for young people's health," he said.

"I don't think any parent will say we shouldn't do that for our children. It's a good foundation that we can build on and it's got to help the healthcare system down the road."

Levac also like provisions that help indigenous residents, particularly those meant to help communities like Six Nations and the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation.

They include: * \$200 million over three years to boost post-secondary education and training opportunities for indigenous people; * \$44.2 million over two years to expand or establish programs to make the justice system more culturally relevant, including the Gladue Program, which encourages courts to consider non-custodial sentences for indigenous offenders; * \$2 million over two years to develop anti-racism programs that will be designed and delivered by indigenous people.

"Any kid not getting a proper education is no longer acceptable," Levac said.

Haldimand-Norfolk MPP Toby Barrett joined several Progressive Conservative MPPs in decrying the budget as a case of the government "cooking the books" to hide the fact that the provincial debt has grown to \$312 billion.

"We're seeing government hyperbole in advance of next year's election," said Barrett, who said the government is using cash from sales of such provincial assets as Hydro One to hide a shortfall.

"Many independent government and non-government financial officers have said a truly balanced budget isn't possible."

He continued to call for a moratorium on school closures and an immediate review of the flawed pupil accommodation review guideline that determines the closures.

As the PC agriculture critic, Barrett also decried that the budget cut \$47.1 million from the agriculture portfolio, causing the total allocation to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs to lower to \$1.03 billion from \$1.07 billion.

"This budget is a snub to agribusiness and rural Ontario," Barrett said.

"While farmers are trying to rationalize threats to supply management and rising input costs, their provincial government doesn't seem to be in their corner."

He pointed to greenhouse operators who are hit hard by cap and trade with skyrocketing costs for their gas bills, and process vegetable growers who are facing a threat to orderly marketing.

"The bottom line is life and business has become tougher and more expensive compared to neighbouring jurisdictions in the U.S. and Canada."

Brantford Mayor Chris Friel was encouraged to see priority given to more affordable childcare, busing, universal drug coverage for children and youth, paid college tuition for low-income students and improved access to healthcare.

"These are investments that are consistent with the city's Safe Brantford, Graduate Brantford and Healthy Brantford initiatives," Friel said.

"We also appreciate the government's commitment to infrastructure investment, however we would have liked to see more allocated to mid-sized cities like Brantford, which are in need of necessary infrastructure upgrades and investment in local transit."

Several agricultural groups lamented that the interests of agriculture got little attention in the budget.

"It's kind of disappointing that there is not a lot there for agriculture specifically," said Larry Davis, a director of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture for Brant, Haldimand and Norfolk.

He noted that the \$47.1 million missing from the budget was practically the same amount the government allocated to continue the Growing Forward program.

"Maybe that's just a movement of money to another account. Monies are always moving around and that could be just an adjustment."

Davis said the federation is relieved to see some previous commitments confirmed. They include \$100 million for an expansion in the natural gas network in rural areas that the OFA and other agriculture groups have been lobbying for the past three years to win, relief for hydro costs and investment in high-speed Internet.

"Those were already committed," he said, "but it's good to see them confirmed."

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PUBLICATION: The Belleville Intelligencer
PAGE: A6
DATE: 2017.04.29
SECTION: Opinion
EDITION: Final
BYLINE: Kelly Mcparland
SOURCE: Postmedia Network
KEYWORDS: above,others,budget,water,flooding,titanic
WORD COUNT: 450

Will voters care about this budget?

There was one goal above all others for Thursday's Ontario's budget: to halt the water that has been flooding into this Titanic of a government and keep it from sinking from sight.

This is a government that has been desperate for good news. Attempts to prevent Premier Kathleen Wynne's poll ratings from dropping towards single digits have failed. A much ballyhooed pledge to reduce astronomical hydro bills produced no bump in the ratings. Though much has been made of Donald Trump's underwhelming performance in his first 100 days as president, and the growing sense of disillusion among his supporters, his 44 per cent approval rating is 32 points above Wynne's standing in Ontario.

Finance Minister Charles Sousa's budget had to stop the bleeding. There was simply no alternative. By whatever means possible, a positive message had to be concocted that could be spun out over the province's disgruntled inhabitants, somehow convincing them to give the tired, old Liberal regime yet another chance. It had to be simple, straightforward, and bullet-proof enough that the local media could be gulled into repeating it in the headlines that are all most people will read when it comes to budget stories.

To that degree, Sousa succeeded.

There haven't been a lot of noteworthy achievements in Western politics of late, but - as the budget demonstrated - great strides have been made in understanding and manipulating media messaging.

But Ontarians who care already knew that state of affairs. And look at the goodies on offer: free abortion pills! A transit credit for seniors! More childcare spaces and ... did we mention this already? ... a 25 per cent cut to electricity bills, which is really a 17 per cent cut, and will actually cost the province billions down the road, but who's counting? By this time next year will Ontario's easily-swayed voters remember any of the dirty details of the budget or the flim-flam used to manufacture its bottom line? Not likely. But they won't be allowed to forget the government's claim to have balanced the books, because the Liberal party will spend heavily to keep it on the airwaves (possibly using public funds on the premise that the government has a responsibility to keep residents informed of its activities).

Many of the news reports pointed out that this was an election document, meant to present the government in the best light and win over voters even though the Liberals still have a year before they have to face voters. Of course it is. Its overwhelming purpose was to protect the interests of the Liberal party, even if it means chaining the province to the benevolence of its lenders and gambling the future on interest rate levels.

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SECTION: Opinion

EDITION: Final

SOURCE: The Belleville Intelligencer

KEYWORDS: forgiveness, seems, question, ontario, liberals, asking

WORD COUNT: 423

Too little, too late for Wynne's Liberals

How much does forgiveness cost? That seems to be the question the Ontario Liberals were asking themselves while creating the 2017 provincial budget. Thursday's financial document certainly appears to paint a rosy picture of the province's finances with the government proudly beating its chest over balanced books and major changes and improvements to health care in Ontario.

Yet, once the applause dies down, the smoke clears and Premier Kathleen Wynne is done congratulating herself and her MPPs, it's hard not to feel sort of empty over the whole thing. Sure, the government is making some genuinely positive changes across Ontario, particularly in the health care sector, but does the spending erase the past? Likely not, though we probably won't know for sure until we head back to the polls. Wynne's government has been anything but popular with many Ontarians and the mishandling of Hydro One is pretty hard to either ignore or forget.

MPP Lou Rinaldi was out front Friday morning as he spoke to the Quinte West Chamber of Commerce and boasted about the positives in the budget. He focussed heavily on the improvements to health care - an educated move considering the fears over Trenton Memorial Hospital in that community - and stressed the Liberals want to give some of the money back to the residents.

Todd Smith, the Conservative member for neighbouring riding of Prince Edward-Hastings, may have been a bit closer to the truth, though, when he suggested the Liberals crafted not only a budget, but an "election plan."

Naturally, in his role as energy critic, Smith pointed to the hydro boondoggle and said the Liberals debt-financing and sale of government buildings are what played pivotal roles in the balanced books.

They sold everything that wasn't bolted down to make themselves look good in their last budget before an election. They sold Hydro One; they sold Ontario Power Generation headquarters. If they could sell it this year - they did. That's money they won't have next year," Smith stated.

Regardless of Smith's comments, it is difficult not to feel as if the Liberals have constructed a budget which is aimed as erasing all bad memories with the hopes of garnering support when votes are cast for the next provincial government.

However, the public tend to focus on the bad and forget the good. Memories are better for recalling the bad and the Liberals lost a lot of support with hydro issues. It's doubtful this budget has enough cash in it to buy back the support Wynne so badly needs.

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THE BELLEVILLE INTELLIGENCER: ONTARIO HOPES ITS NEW YOUTH PHARMACARE PLAN SPURS NATIONAL PROGRAM; A5; 2017.04.29

PUBLICATION: The Belleville Intelligencer

PAGE: A5

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: Ontario News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Allison Jones

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed

ILLUSTRATION: Craig Robertson, Postmedia Network / Health Minister Eric Hoskins and Premier Kathleen Wynne spoke about the Liberals new Youth pharmacare plan at Jenner Jean-Marie Community Recreation Centre in East York Friday.;

DATELINE: TORONTO

WORD COUNT: 572

Ontario hopes its new youth pharmacare plan spurs national program

Ontario's Liberal government hopes a youth drug coverage plan revealed in its budget this week will help spur a national program by showing Ottawa and other provinces that pharmacare is affordable.

The provincial plan to cover more than 4,400 prescription medications for Ontarians under 25, with no co-pay or deductible, at an annual cost of \$465 million was the centrepiece of Ontario's balanced budget released Thursday.

Premier Kathleen Wynne is calling the plan, set to start in January, a step toward truly universal coverage.

"Do I believe that there should be universal pharmacare for all ages in Ontario? Yes," she said Friday. "That it will happen much more quickly if we have a federal government that is working on a national pharmacare plan."

Wynne said she is certain that other premiers will have questions for her at their next meeting this summer.

Ontario Health Minister Eric Hoskins said this approach on pharmacare is similar to Ontario's push for pension reform, which saw the province use its own proposed pension plan to successfully push for a national Canada Pension Plan enhancement.

"If you think back to Tommy Douglas and the beginning of medicare it was one province that stepped forward and the rest of the provinces and the federal government followed," he said.

Covering people under 25 - following the United Nations' definition of youth - is a good place to start, Hoskins said.

"You don't have to go from zero to 100 per cent coverage for everybody on day one," he said.

Some of the provincial health ministers across the country are hesitant on pharmacare because of the price tag, Hoskins noted.

"I haven't met a health minister who doesn't believe that it's the right thing to do, but if there's any reluctance that's been expressed to me, it's been because of concerns about what the up-front financial implications might be," he said.

"We're going to show that there are cost savings through bulk purchasing, through keeping people healthier."

Hoskins also said Ontario will work with insurance companies to ensure the savings they see from no longer having to cover medications for young employees and employees' children get passed onto employers and workers.

Steve Morgan, the lead researcher for the Citizens' Reference Panel on Pharmacare in Canada, said Ontario's cost estimate for its program sounds about right. The financial cost of covering medications for a group of people that don't traditionally use prescription drugs as much as other age groups would be relatively low, he said.

Beyond that, the Ontario plan's "incremental change" has symbolic value, said Morgan, a professor at the University of British Columbia.

"They're signalling to Justin Trudeau to say, 'Our vision for universal pharmacare is consistent with Canadian medicare. We're going to do it for kids and we're going to call on you to do the right thing and create national standards,'" he said.

Research suggests that a national pharmacare strategy would save the country between \$4 billion and \$10 billion a year because Ottawa as a single payer could wield far greater influence when negotiating drug prices with pharmaceutical companies than could a single province or territory.

Canadians now spend almost \$30 billion a year on prescription medicines.

After meeting last year with provincial and territorial health ministers, federal Health Minister Jane Philpott said addressing the cost of pharmaceuticals is one of her government's priorities. The ministers and Ottawa have formed a working group on access to medication.

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THE BELLEVILLE INTELLIGENCER: SMITH CALLS BUDGET AN 'ELECTION PLAN'; A2;
2017.04.29

PUBLICATION: The Belleville Intelligencer
PAGE: A2
DATE: 2017.04.29
SECTION: News
EDITION: Final
BYLINE: Jason Miller
SOURCE: The Belleville Intelligencer
KEYWORDS: reduce,hydro,rates,being,called,accounting
WORD COUNT: 369

Smith calls budget an 'election plan'

The government's plan to reduce hydro rates is being called a bag of accounting tricks by MPP Todd Smith.

Northumberland-Quinte West MPP Lou Rinaldi told a gathering in Quinte West, Friday, the plan is to continue chopping distribution fees, with a 25 per cent target in sight for urban centres.

"Starting next week, there will be an additional nine per cent," Rinaldi said of reduced delivery charges. "There will be further reductions once legislation is passed, hopefully in July, to reduce it even more."

He said areas like Trenton will experience a combined reduction of 25 per cent.

"Areas like the former Murray Township or Sidney Township, that are more rural, could see a reduction up to 40 to 50 per cent," said Rinaldi.

Rinaldi added the government is getting there by doing things like eradicating a line item on the hydro bill, collected to offset supports for low-income people.

"That's going to come off the hydro bill, because that's really a social program," Rinaldi said, adding the province is opting to fund it via general revenue.

The numbers just don't add up, says Prince Edward-Hastings MPP Todd Smith, noting the cost of the Liberal government's electricity debt-financing plan and the sale of government buildings are the driving factors in a budget full of accounting tricks.

"They sold everything that wasn't bolted down to make themselves look good in their last budget before an election. They sold Hydro One; they sold Ontario Power Generation headquarters. If they could sell it this year - they did. That's money they won't have next year," Smith stated.

He claims the government is keeping big expenses off the books, including the cost of its \$50 billion electricity debt financing.

"That's an expense that the government is using an accounting trick to keep off their books," Smith stated. "If it was being financed the way all electricity costs have usually been financed, the budget would be in deficit."

Smith pointed out the government remains committed to the fire sale of Hydro One, as it's the only hope the government has of not drowning in red ink.

"This budget isn't a financial plan for the province." Smith concluded. "It's an election plan for the Liberals"

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THE BELLEVILLE INTELLIGENCER: LOCAL MPP DISCUSSES PROVINCIAL DOCUMENT WHILE DISMISSING PARTY CRITICISM; A2; 2017.04.29

PUBLICATION: The Belleville Intelligencer

PAGE: A2

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Jason Miller

SOURCE: The Belleville Intelligencer

KEYWORDS: provincial,government,balanced,books,launched,pharmacare

ILLUSTRATION: Jason Miller, The Intelligencer / Northumberland-Quinte West MPP Lou Rinaldi talks about the 2017 budget, during a meeting staged by the Quinte West Chamber of Commerce at city hall Friday.;

DATELINE: QUINTE WEST

WORD COUNT: 744

Rinaldi backs budget; Local MPP discusses provincial document while dismissing party criticism

The provincial government has balanced the books and launched a pharmacare program for millions of young people a year ahead of the next election campaign.

Aside from billions in new supports, particularly what the government labelled a new \$7 billion booster shot for healthcare, arguably the most talked about plank in the spending package is the \$465 million envelope to cover 4,400 drugs for four million children and young adults, starting Jan. 1, 2018.

The healthcare file was top of mind for Lou Rinaldi, MPP for Northumberland-Quinte West, as he previewed the budget with the Quinte West Chamber of Commerce Friday.

"Our revenues have been steadily going up, so I think we need to turn the money back to the people as dividends for struggling for the last seven or eight years to help us achieve a balanced budget," Rinaldi said.

"Our minister of health has been working on (pharmacare) this for five years," Rinaldi said, adding the next step is to win over federal partners for universal pharmacare, but "they're not there yet. I hope this first step will entice other provinces."

Rinaldi said the program, which covers hundreds of medications such as treatments for acute and chronic illness, including some pediatric cancers, will be a boost to families and people under the age of 25 struggling to get steady footing.

The opposition, including PC energy critic MPP Todd Smith, of Prince Edward-Hastings, has blasted the budget, deeming it "full of accounting tricks" and a desperate measure by an unpopular premier to improve her ratings before the June 2018 ballot.

Rinaldi wasn't phased by the political rhetoric, especially when it pertains to pharmacare.

"If you're going to criticize, then you put something on the table," Rinaldi said.

He said what the NDP has put on the table falls short of the need.

The New Democrat proposal, though including all Ontarions, limited coverage to 125 medications, which Rinaldi said is thousands less than the Liberals option.

As for MPP Smith's PCs, Rinaldi said they've offered less than the NDP.

"The official opposition haven't come up with anything," Rinaldi said.

There is a pledge to open up to 100,000 new child-care spaces, starting with a quarter by year's end.

Affordable housing is also on the agenda, with rent control measures being implemented to protect tenants and make costs more affordable.

"There was rent control on buildings, built prior to 1991," Rinaldi said. "We're extending rent control, to any new rental units."

A 15 per cent foreign home buyers tax is aimed at cooling the boiling housing market being heated by offshore investors.

Revenue will come from sources such as smokers, who will pay more per carton, translating to a \$10 jump over the next three years, starting with a \$2 hike this week.

Rinaldi said the government, if elected, should "have no problem whatsoever" balancing the books over the next two to three years, if economic growth projections stay true.

Staying out of the red was one positive signal for Quinte West Chamber of Commerce manager Suzanne Andrews.

"Some of the exciting things is to see a balanced budget," she said. Up until now, Andrews was concerned about the government selling off assets and debt financing to pay for its spending package. "I was a little concerned about that. As we go forward the financing of that debt will tie the hands of the government on what they can deliver."

The provincial debt now sits at \$312 billion.

Andrews picked out finer details like financial literacy for high school students.

"That's something we've been hearing from local manufacturers and employers, that people are coming into the workforce and they're not prepared," he said.

During Rinaldi's presentation, Andrews raised concerns about the need for revenue raised from capand-trade to remain in Ontario.

"We were concerned about money being raised from Ontario businesses going to other businesses in other jurisdictions," she said of Ontario businesses getting credit for reducing emissions. "On top of high hydro rates and a lot of the red tape, it's an additional cost on business and we wanted to see a different system. We're still not totally convinced this is the right program for Ontario."

She's waiting to see how pharmacare impacts insurance premiums for families.

"Maybe we will see those rates go down and maybe more businesses can then afford to offer these programs to their employees," she said. "They are expensive and pharmaceuticals is a big part of that."

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***THE BELLEVILLE INTELLIGENCER: BUDGET GOOD NEWS FOR QHC; A1 / FRONT;
2017.04.29***

PUBLICATION: The Belleville Intelligencer

PAGE: A1 / Front

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Luke Hendry

SOURCE: The Intelligencer

KEYWORDS: harrington,deliver,quinte,health,chief,financial

ILLUSTRATION: Luke Hendry, The Intelligencer / Quinte Health Care vice-president and chief financial officer Brad Harrington stands outside Belleville General Hospital Friday. He said the Ontario budget unveiled a day earlier "is a very good budget for the system as a whole, and the government is listening specifically to the hospital sector.";

WORD COUNT: 639

Budget good news for QHC; Chief financial officer says provincial budget shows government has been listening

It's not often Brad Harrington gets to deliver good news.

As a vice-president of Quinte Health Care and its chief financial officer, Harrington's duties in the last five years have often included grappling with declining provincial funding and explaining the bad news to the public: cuts to jobs and services, along with other major restructuring, were often the focus.

But on the morning after the release of Thursday's Ontario budget, Harrington was in a good mood and relaxed as he gave his first impressions.

"It's a great-news budget," Harrington said.

The plan gives hospitals two to three per cent more funding in addition to other improvements in the health sector.

"Overall, it's a very good budget for the system as a whole, and the government is listening specifically to the hospital sector.

"We haven't had significant funding over the last four to five years for general expense increases - costs of contracts, those things, so this was definitely needed."

While Ontario's health spending has increased annually, it went to other parts of the sector, with the exception of a smaller increase last year. Locally, QHC also received one-time funding for various reasons.

"Fundamentally this means we're going to be into a more stable environment and more able to respond to the capacity pressures that we've seen," said QHC chairman Doug McGregor, a Prince Edward County resident.

"It's helping us stabilize the services that we do deliver, giving us more opportunity to explore improving the services and working with our community partners to help ensure that the services will be there when they need them.

"I don't think there's anything disappointing - at least not yet," he added. Technical data is still on the way, he and Harrington said.

The corporation's leadership has often said changing demographics are wreaking havoc on hospitals, including QHC's four in Belleville, Trenton, Bancroft and Picton.

They're trying to cope with an increased number of older patients who are not only sicker than in the past but have multiple, more complex conditions.

Critics have said the Liberal government is now making electionfriendly decisions which are simply fixing problems created by the government and the party's preceding government.

But McGregor said the budget's approach to hospitals appears to be different because it is "targeting legitimate pressure points.

"I don't think it's a case of correcting for mistakes so much as being on top of the issues that are out there," he said.

Harrington expressed relief at Ontario's extension of its transformation fund for smaller hospitals.

In the past, it's been used for technological upgrades and other improvements.

"It affects the Picton and North Hastings hospitals to the tune of about half a million (dollars) per year," he said.

"For a system like QHC, where we have small hospitals... it's absolutely critical that we get that funding, so we're very pleased."

McGregor and Harrington also lauded the Ontario Hospital Association's advocacy. That's included pressuring the government to address capacity problems and has been "quite effective," McGregor said.

There are, however, several major issues needing more attention, said Harrington.

"Quinte would like to see significantly more work on the impact of the funding formula on our type of hospital system - and changes to the funding formula. I think that's coming."

Doctors and the province remain at odds about compensation and what doctors say are unfair limitations on their practices.

"We're hopeful there'll be more robust negotiations" between the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care and the Ontario Medical Association, Harrington said.

"In order for us to deliver highquality care we need to ensure that our physicians have appropriate workload and appropriate remuneration."

Hospital costs are also rising due to increases in collective bargaining agreements.

"Changes to the arbitration system would be beneficial," said Harrington, if increases awarded in those agreements are to be "reasonable." lhendry@postmedia.com

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THE BARRIE EXAMINER: ONTARIO HOPES ITS NEW YOUTH PHARMACARE PLAN SPURS NATIONAL PROGRAM; C3; 2017.04.29

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SECTION: National News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Allison Jones

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed

ILLUSTRATION: Craig Robertson, Postmedia Network / Health Minister Eric Hoskins and Premier Kathleen Wynne spoke about the Liberals new Youth pharmacare plan at Jenner Jean-Marie Community Recreation Centre in East York Friday.;

DATELINE: TORONTO

WORD COUNT: 572

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"That it will happen much more quickly if we have a federal government that is working on a national pharmacare plan."

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Canadians now spend almost \$30 billion a year on prescription medicines.

After meeting last year with provincial and territorial health ministers, federal Health Minister Jane Philpott said addressing the cost of pharmaceuticals is one of her government's priorities.

The ministers and Ottawa have formed a working group on access to medication.

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THE BARRIE EXAMINER: WYNNE AND BROWN GO TOE-TO-TOE OVER PROVINCIAL BUDGET, WHAT IT MEANS TO ONTARIANS; A1 / FRONT; 2017.04.29

PUBLICATION: The Barrie Examiner

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DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Bob Bruton And Nathan Taylor

SOURCE: Postmedia Network

KEYWORDS: balance,budget,still,being,questioned,pretty

ILLUSTRATION: / Wynne; / Brown;

WORD COUNT: 910

Budget sparring match; Wynne and Brown go toe-to-toe over provincial budget, what it means to Ontarians

The balance in Ontario's 2017 budget is still being questioned.

"I'm pretty happy about this budget. We've balanced it," Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne said Friday, the day after Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa delivered his budget.

Ontario Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown continued to disagree.

"It's actually a \$5-billion operational deficit, so Ontario is not balanced," he said. "That's a sham, that's a charade, that Sousa is trying to present to the public, but it's misleading."

Brown said the Grits are using one-time money to balance the books, such as the Hydro One sale, revenue from government asset sales, government land sales and double-counting the cap-and-trade money, and of federal infrastructure money.

But Wynne said provincial revenues are up, helping balance the budget, for a basic reason.

"The Ontario economy is doing very well," she said, adding "it is government's job to make sure" all Ontarians can benefit from the strong economy.

One such budget measure is the pharmacare program for children and youths, covering prescriptions for most acute and common chronic conditions for those age 24 and younger, with no deductions or co-payment, starting Jan. 1.

But Brown said it's not a fair plan.

"I'd like a plan that's more equitable.

What I mean by that: I don't believe millionaire kids need help paying for their prescriptions," he said. "Do I think (Canadian pop music star) Justin Bieber needs to have his prescriptions paid for under this plan? "When I say means-testing, when I say more of an equitable plan, I would certainly not support covering those who don't need any help at all and not providing help for those who need it."

But Wynne said Ontario doesn't do a "means test" for things like hip replacement and other procedures - people just have it covered. That's what universal care is. Some might not support universal care.

"We do," she said. "We are covering cancer drugs. We are covering medication for rare diseases."

Wynne said her government has built 810 schools (including Orillia Secondary School) and renovated 780. The province is providing \$16 billion in capital funding grants over 10 years to build new schools.

The premier noted her government, when it came to power, put a moratorium on closures.

"At the end of that moratorium, schools boards were saying, 'You're really tying our hands,'" Wynne said. The issue of school closures is "a very challenging thing" and Wynne said the discussions happening in communities around pressures on small schools are not always "good discussions."

Her government would be much more interested in boards and schools collaborating with each other to find options for schools in smaller communities, Wynne said.

Brown said that's not the whole story, however.

"You look at the fine print - there's 300 schools on the chopping block," he said. "We've seen the history of this, too. I think of the elementary schools in Port McNicoll and Waubesa, Barrie Central, of course. There's been a history of school closures."

"I actually got up in the legislature this week. I read (Wynne) quotes from when she first entered politics. She said she was getting into politics to stop (former Ontario premier) Mike Harris's school closures, and 'Mike the Knife,' she called him. She has now closed 100 more schools than Mike Harris and (another former PC premier) Ernie Eves combined, and there are 300 more on the chopping block. So, how hypocritical and disingenuous, and there's no help in this budget."

The 2017 budget also includes previous announcements, such as the 25% cut in hydro rates by this summer.

Wynne said this is not early campaigning ahead of the 2018 Ontario election.

"For a couple of years, we've been trying to find ways to help people with their electricity bills," she said, using the Ontario Electricity Support Program, to help low-income Ontarians, as an example. "We realized that wasn't enough."

Wynne said she is used to hearing critics claim this is premature electioneering, but "that can't stop me ... from doing the things that are right."

Brown disagreed. "Most likely, the next budget will be a glorified platform," he said. "I think this one is their election budget."

The PC boss said there need to be structural changes to hydro - stop selling Hydro One shares, rein in executive salaries right now, stop over-generating water power and having to give it away, and stop signing new generation contracts.

"I will have a more elaborate discussion of hydro in the (election) platform," he said. "What I did put out, the structural changes, I didn't pick a number out of thin air like the NDP or Liberals did, but changes I asked the government to do would result in lower hydro rates."

Wynne said she's unaware of a Tory hydro plan, however.

"We've seen no evidence of a plan (from the PCs)," she said. "If Patrick Brown has a good idea, he should be telling the people of Ontario what that is."

The Liberals' plan to find savings so it can cut rates by 25% is to finance the costs of electricity generation contracts during longer periods of time.

"The Liberal plan is not a plan; it simply borrows money. Borrowing money is not a plan," Brown said. "I want to make sure that what I present to Ontarians is not some number out of thin air - it's actually based on reasoned evidence."

The next Ontario election is expected to be held in June 2018. bbruton@postmedia.com
ntaylor@postmedia.com

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DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: News

EDITION: Final

SOURCE: - Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: hospitals,budget,includes,increase,million,hospital

ILLUSTRATION: / (See hardcopy for photo);

WORD COUNT: 221

Help For Health, Hospitals

HOSPITALS:

The budget includes an increase of \$518 million in hospital funding, a three-per-cent boost. It comes after hospitals warned of overcrowding and patients being placed in hallways, boardrooms and even cafeterias when there weren't enough beds. The Ontario Hospital Association had asked for a larger funding increase of 4.9 per cent.

The budget promises an extra \$9 billion for hospital construction projects over 10 years, and announced newly approved hospital construction projects in Niagara, Windsor, Hamilton, Mississauga and the Weeneebayko hospital replacement project in northern Ontario, as well as a new \$2.5 million for the planning of an expansion to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto.

SENIOR HEALTH:

The budget includes \$100 million over three years for the province's new dementia strategy, which will include helping patients and their caregivers find support, and improving training and education for health-care workers in dementia care. The budget includes an extra \$58 million for long-term care homes, a two-per-cent increase. Residents' food allowance will increase by six per cent, which comes after negative news reports that the province spends more per capita on food for inmates than seniors in long-term care.

The budget also increases funding to Behavioural Supports Ontario by \$10 million, which will help longterm care homes handle patients with complex behavioural issues related to dementia.

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BYLINE: Omarkhan

SOURCE: Ottawa Sun

KEYWORDS: recently,liberals,wondered,kathleen,wynne,weighed

ILLUSTRATION: / SOUSA; Postmedia Network Files / Kathleen Wynne speaks as a school board trustee in 2002.;

COLUMN: Guest Columnist

WORD COUNT: 561

What happened to the Wynne we knew?; Zeal that propelled her to premier's office is missing

Recently some Liberals have wondered when they'd see the Kathleen Wynne they used to know.

Weighed down by the burdens of governing, she seemed to have lost her zeal for the kitchen table politics that propelled her into the premier's office.

Party activists yearned for the grass roots organizer who channeled her outrage at Mike Harris's classroom cutbacks into a winning run for school board trustee. Where was the woman who in that same campaign refused to bow her head before shadowy groups who labelled her an "extremist lesbian?" Demoralized by low poll numbers, and media reports of palace intrigue, some party loyalists had begun to wonder if the person they had known for so many years had changed.

Yet those of us who have worked closely with her always saw the same person who won over the party faithful at the 2013 leadership convention by describing liberalism as "not just some letters on a lawn sign" but a "generosity of spirit that defines us at our best."

We saw her commitment to an activist progressive agenda driven by a belief that government has a role to play in helping shape a society that affords equal opportunity to all within it, regardless of where you were born or who your parents are.

So why hasn't this been able to break through? It could be because some of her toughest decisions, like divesting majority ownership of Hydro One in order to pay for overdue road and public transit upgrades, have been difficult to communicate.

Perhaps it's because after 15 years of Liberal rule, and accumulated baggage, the winning coalition of blue collar, multicultural and progressive voters that delivered four consecutive Liberal wins feels taken for granted or left behind.

To turn the corner Wynne needs to follow her progressive gut. The premier is at her best when she plays the role of street fighter for the activist centre.

Recently, Ontarians have seen the Wynne they thought they knew. Be it providing relief from overheated hydro bills, taking action on housing affordability, dolling out financial support for those who care for elderly loved ones or increasing childcare investments to help working parents, the premier has shifted her focus to the day-to-day issues that affect Ontarians' wallets and are in line with her core set of values.

All of this culminated on Thursday as Finance Minister Charles Sousa delivered a budget that includes the boldest expansion of medicare in a generation. Led by Health Minister Eric Hoskins, the Wynne government is launching a program that will cover the full cost of medications for kids and young adults, with an ultimate goal of providing comprehensive pharmacare coverage to all Ontarians.

No longer will parents have to choose between paying for their child's prescriptions or the rent.

Wynne represents Ontario's best chance of avoiding a shift to the type of right-wing politics we see down south.

But she needs to keep listening to her gut. She needs to return to being a street fighter for the issues that matter to the people who have always believed in her.

If she does that, Ontarians will give her four more years.

Omar Khan is a longtime Liberal party activist and political strategist who spent over a decade working as a political adviser to several Ontario cabinet ministers and currently works as vice-president, public affairs, at Hill+Knowlton Strategies in Toronto.

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OTTAWA SUN: ABORTION PILL FREE SOON IN ONTARIO; A11; 2017.04.29

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SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: ontario,government,promising,abortion,women,province

DATELINE: TORONTO

WORD COUNT: 109

Abortion pill free soon in Ontario

The Ontario government is promising to soon make an abortion pill free for all women in the province.

Mifegymiso, known as RU-486 outside of Canada, is a combination of two drugs, mifepristone and misoprostol. After years of study, Health Canada approved its use as a non-surgical option for abortion up to seven weeks. It became available to the Canadian public in January and costs \$300 to \$450.

According to the Ontario health minister's office, the government is in conversations with the drug manufacturer, and hopes to begin covering the drug in the near future.

The announcement, made in the Ontario budget released Thursday, was welcomed by reproductive rights advocates.

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Ottawa Sun: Youth drug plan unveiled; A11; 2017.04.29

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SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed

DATELINE: TORONTO

WORD COUNT: 143

Youth drug plan unveiled

Ontario's Liberal government hopes a youth drug coverage plan revealed in its budget this week will help spur a national program by showing Ottawa and other provinces that pharmacare is affordable.

The provincial plan to cover more than 4,400 prescription medications for Ontarians under 25, with no co-pay or deductible, at an annual cost of \$465 million was the centrepiece of Ontario's balanced budget released Thursday.

Premier Kathleen Wynne is calling the plan, set to start in January, a step toward truly universal coverage.

"Do I believe that there should be universal pharmacare for all ages in Ontario? Yes," she said Friday. "That it will happen much more quickly if we have a federal government that is working on a national pharmacare plan."

Wynne said she is certain that other premiers will have questions for her at their next meeting this summer.

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BYLINE: Shawn Jeffords

SOURCE: Political Bureau Chief

KEYWORDS: premier,kathleen,wynne,turned,toronto,according

ILLUSTRATION: Stan Behal, Toronto Sun Files / Toronto Mayor John Tory, left, says it's 'unbelievable' that after weeks of lobbying on the city's behalf, his appeals were ignored by Kathleen Wynne, right, and her Liberals in the provincial government's latest budget.; / (See hardcopy for photo);

WORD COUNT: 384

Tory Rips Wynne Budget; Says premier had a chance to help T.O., but turned her back

Premier Kathleen Wynne has turned her back on the City of Toronto.

That's according to Mayor John Tory who said Friday that the Liberal budget has ignored the needs of Ontario's largest city and "economic engine." The statement comes after weeks of vigorous lobbying by the mayor for increased provincial investment in transit and social housing. The city's needs were not met in the budget, he said.

"Premier Kathleen Wynne and her government had a chance to stand up for Toronto on transit and on housing," Tory said. "Instead, at least on the pages of this budget, they turned their backs."

Tory's war of words with the Wynne government began in January when the premier stunned the mayor by rejecting his proposal to toll the Gardiner Expressway and Don Valley Parkway. Since then, Tory has used most of his speaking engagements and media availabilities to stress that the Liberals must pony up billions in funding to help the city.

Tory said that the government, often in reply to his comments, trots out a list of funding it has committed in past years. Now is the time to invest for the future, and the province has missed an opportunity, he said.

"We need a provincial partner who is focused on building our city's future and not measuring its achievements in dollars already spent," he said. "You can't play a highlights reel of last year and expect people to believe that you're going to be on the ice for the next game."

Asked about Tory's comments Friday, Wynne said she was "disappointed". She then listed the transit projects and social housing funds the province has made in previous years.

"We are meeting what the mayor is looking for in many, many ways," Wynne said. "He's been our partner. We're going to continue to work with him."

Tory said he intends to meet with Toronto MPPs and opposition leaders in hopes that he can persuade them to pressure Wynne into dedicating more cash to Toronto. He also plans to ask the federal government insist the province make matching investments during the next wave of infrastructure spending.

"I'm disappointed, I'm frustrated," Tory said. "I find it unbelievable that we would miss the opportunity when you do have the federal government stepping up in a significant way."

sjeffords@postmedia.com

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BYLINE: Omar Khan

SOURCE: Toronto Sun

KEYWORDS: recently,liberals,wondered,kathleen,wynne,weighed

ILLUSTRATION: Postmedia Network Files / Kathleen Wynne speaks as a school board trustee in 2002.;

COLUMN: Guest Columnist

WORD COUNT: 561

Wynne has lost her way; Zeal that propelled her to premier missing

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Party activists yearned for the grass roots organizer who channeled her outrage at Mike Harris's classroom cutbacks into a winning run for school board trustee. Where was the woman who in that same campaign refused to bow her head before shadowy groups who labelled her an "extremist lesbian?" Demoralized by low poll numbers, and media reports of palace intrigue, some party loyalists had begun to wonder if the person they had known for so many years had changed.

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So why hasn't this been able to break through? It could be because some of her toughest decisions, like divesting majority ownership of Hydro One in order to pay for overdue road and public transit upgrades, have been difficult to communicate. Perhaps it's because after 15 years of Liberal rule, and accumulated baggage, the winning coalition of blue collar, multicultural and progressive voters that delivered four consecutive Liberal wins feels taken for granted or left behind.

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TORONTO SUN: LIBERAL BUDGET PILES DEBT ON ONTARIO TAXPAYERS; A6;
2017.04.29

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DATE: 2017.04.29

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BYLINE: James Wallace

SOURCE: Toronto Sun

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,years,excelled,casting,failure

ILLUSTRATION: / SOUSA;

COLUMN: V-P, Editorial, Suns

WORD COUNT: 488

Anything But Balanced; Liberal budget piles debt on Ontario taxpayers

Ontario's Liberal government has for years excelled at casting failure and selfinterest as accomplishment and public service.

For example, government mismanagement that led to devastating electricity rate hikes across the province was addressed with billions in new debt and marketed as "Ontario's Fair Hydro Plan."

The government's new cap and trade energy program "designed to help fight climate change" does nothing to actually address climate change, but does put billions of dollars into the Liberal government's pocket by creating a new tax that raises the cost of living for all Ontarians.

And this week, the Liberals unveiled a budget that boasted about "balancing" the provinces books for the first time in a decade, though did that through ill-advised asset sales and accounting sleight of hand.

Reality will see more and record debt piled onto Ontarians to bankroll a budget focused on election goodies intended bolster an unpopular government facing electoral ruin.

Meanwhile, for the desperatelyneeded meat and potatoes spending on transit and public housing, there was nada, or next to it, in Finance Minister Charles Sousa's budget.

Which is what prompted Mayor John Tory to fume (or as close to Tory gets to that) about the "decades of inaction on transit" from successive provincial governments that have undermined badly needed improvements to both transit and public housing.

And for anyone who hasn't noticed, both are a disgrace.

Chronic gridlock in Toronto and across the GTA costs billions in lost productivity and locks working people in cars, subways and buses needlessly for uncounted hours.

Public housing is a scandal.

Buildings are falling apart. Some projects are riddled with crime and the province looks on indifferently while residents live in fear and the waiting lists for those who are vulnerable and in need can stretch to a decade.

These are broken public programs.

This issue isn't, as Premier Kathleen Wynne suggested, about how much the province has done for Toronto in the past.

It's about what's needed to fix things. At some point over the past 14 years, the Liberals ought to have made sustainable funding for transit and public transit a real priority.

Fixing Toronto's transit and social housing problems will require "continuous investment" from Queen's Park, Tory suggested.

And surely, the Liberals can't deny that? In opposition, when Mike Harris was in power, they were quick to take that view.

And as Tory suggested, with the federal Liberals dangling some \$5 billion for Toronto in new transit and housing spending over the next 11 years, the failure of the provincial Liberals to come to the table as a partner makes no sense whatsoever.

As a consequence, without matching provincial funding, Toronto's desperately needed downtown subway relief line won't be built. The waterfront transit line won't be built. Public housing units will sit vacant in disrepair.

Instead, the city will get a great, catchy, new slogan to make things better.

Something with the word "fair" in it. jawallace@postmedia.com
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PUBLICATION: Toronto Sun

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SECTION: News

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BYLINE: Phil Gillies

SOURCE: Toronto Sun

KEYWORDS: toronto,traffic,problem,money,problems,rapidly

ILLUSTRATION: Ernest Doroszuk, Toronto Sun / PC leader Patrick Brown could become a champion of urbanites and a city-building premier by announcing the province would take over operation of the Gardiner Expressway, below left, and the Don Valley Parkway if the Tories form the next government.; Ernest Doroszuk, Toronto Sun Files / (See hardcopy for photo); Michael Peake, Toronto Sun Files / ;

COLUMN: Guest Columnist

WORD COUNT: 833

Brown's road to victory; Province should take over DVP, Gardiner

Toronto has a traffic problem. And it has a money problem. And the two problems are rapidly colliding.

The city's downtown core is served by just two city-owned highways, the Gardiner Expressway and the Don Valley Parkway.

Both are jammed with traffic most of the day and sometimes much of the evening, too. Drive times and driver frustration are on the rise.

Oh, and the Gardiner is falling apart. The elevated expressway opened to traffic in 1964.

Successive Toronto councils have failed to maintain the structure properly, and now the estimated cost to fix the highway is close to \$3 billion.

Meanwhile, Toronto desperately needs more transit. Indeed, new subways, heavy surface rail and lightrail projects are planned and approved - but often with little money attached to build them. The grand tally of unfunded City of Toronto transit and infrastructure projects sits at \$33 billion.

Mayor John Tory floated two ideas in 2016 to raise capital for infrastructure - to sell off part of Toronto Hydro that ran into strong opposition from council and the public, and a toll on the Gardiner and DVP.

The toll proposal initially won support from council and, at first, from Premier Kathleen Wynne, whose government needed to grant regulatory approval for the proposal.

Then the plan went public and the you-know-what hit the fan.

Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown came out strongly against tolling, in a pitch to stand up for the beleaguered commuters from the 905 and the outer 416 suburbs, as did the provincial NDP - despite the fact their party colleagues on city council supported it.

Wynne started to hear a storm of anguish from her Liberal caucus members and the public, and in January hastily reversed her position and nixed provincial approval for tolling the two highways.

Wynne, meanwhile, doubled the municipal share of the provincial gas tax, from 2% to 4% - a \$170-million gesture appreciated by Tory, but one that failed to blunt his stinging criticism of the Province for telling council what it could do with roads the city owns and maintains.

So, what next? With a commanding lead in the polls, and a provincial election coming in June 2018, Brown must start thinking about governing.

We know what he's against - tolling the Toronto highways - but what would he do as premier to help a cash-strapped city with its highway problem? The answer: Brown should announce his government would upload the DVP and the Gardiner, and make them part of the provincial highway system.

His government, if elected, would assume the land, operation and policing of the two highways and responsibility for the pending rebuild of the Gardiner.

In return, Brown's team could address existing provincial capital commitments to transit in Toronto.

There are currently funds pledged for streetcar replacement, the Scarborough subway extension and other projects, exceeding \$2 billion. This doesn't include electrification costs for GO lines to accommodate SmartTrack, but these and future transit commitments could be adjusted to allow for the new provincial commitment to the Gardiner.

There is an advantage to Toronto in this.

At present, the city has no federal funding for the Gardiner rebuild. Indeed, there seems to be little enthusiasm in Ottawa for this proposition.

The federal government would rather put its money into transit. Their 2017 budget speaks of investing \$20 billion in transit over the next 11 years.

So, I would argue allowing the city to put its \$3 billion into transit projects rather than having to invest it in the Gardiner is a much better use of funds and this investment is much more likely to leverage federal funding.

And if Brown allows the city to keep the additional gas tax funding already doled out by Wynne, Tory can put that to good use on other road projects around the city.

Finally, the province is in the highways business. They have the experience and tools to fix the Gardiner - I'm betting at a lower cost than projected by the city.

There are, of course, operating costs attached to running the two highways, but they are not huge numbers - about \$8 million a year.

Current annual maintenance costs of holding the Gardiner together are much higher - \$39 million in 2016, but will almost disappear after the rebuild.

Then there's policing - everything from stalled vehicles to pulling over speeders and dealing with serious accidents.

There about 3,200 police incidents a year on the Gardiner and DVP, and assuming calls average \$1,000 each - that's around \$3 million per year, another saving for the city as policing would be handed over to the Ontario Provincial Police.

Overall, running the two highways should not be too big a pill for would-be premier Brown to swallow.

There it is. A plan that would see Patrick Brown become a champion of urbanites and a city-building premier, without earning the ire of suburban commuters.

Gillies, a former Progressive Conservative MPP, is the municipal lead at Enterprise Public Affairs

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OTTAWA CITIZEN: 'ABORTION PILL 'WILL PARTLY TAKE CLINICS OUT OF THE EQUATION; A6; 2017.04.29

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DATE: 2017.04.29

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BYLINE: Joanne Laucius

SOURCE: Ottawa Citizen

KEYWORDS: allegations,protesters,harassing,patients,staff,headed

ILLUSTRATION: Jean Levac / Leanne Parrish and other pro-choice supporters rallied earlier this week to call upon the city to do more to protect Ottawa's Morgentaler Clinic. A new pill will mean fewer women having to visit the clinic.; Phil Walter, Getty Images / The abortion drug now available in Canada under the name Mifegymiso is already offered in many countries.;

IMAGES: Jean Levac / Leanne Parrish and other pro-choice supporters rallied earlier this week to call upon the city to do more to protect Ottawa's Morgentaler Clinic. A new pill will mean fewer women having to visit the clinic. [OTCT_20170429_Early_A6_02_I001.jpg]; Phil Walter, Getty Images / The abortion drug now available in Canada under the name Mifegymiso is already offered in many countries. [OTCT_20170429_Early_A6_02_I002.jpg];

WORD COUNT: 1276

'Abortion pill'will partly take clinics out of the equation; Women wanting Mifegymiso can have their doctors write out a prescription

Allegations that anti-abortion protesters are harassing patients and staff headed into The Morgentaler Clinic on Bank Street have attracted attention across Canada. But an "abortion pill" that has been available since January is poised to shift the entire abortion paradigm.

Mifegymiso is a two-drug nonsurgical option for early-term "medical" abortion. It can be prescribed by any trained and registered physician and dispensed by a pharmacist. Mifegymiso won't eliminate surgical abortions, but it is expected to ease abortion access for women who live in remote and rural areas, decrease wait times in cities and help reduce the threat of harassment and intimidation for patients and physicians.

"It would prevent the sort of thing that's happening in Ottawa," said family planning specialist Dr. Dustin Costescu, an assistant professor at McMaster University and one of the lead authors of medical abortion guidelines for the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC).

So far, more than 1,300 Canadian physicians and pharmacists have taken a required online course offered by SOGC that qualifies them to prescribe or dispense the drug. About 20 more sign up every day.

Meanwhile, a Planned Parenthood Ottawa initiative is aimed at smoothing out the barriers that prevent physicians from offering medical abortions. The program will link women seeking an abortion to physicians who are trained to prescribe Mifegymiso and pharmacists who will dispense it. It is to be launched in the next few months.

"The whole thing about the abortion pill is that you don't have to go to an abortion clinic," said Catherine Macnab, executive director of Planned Parenthood Ottawa.

She sees a day when medical abortions are available through telemedicine. Mifegymiso will change the landscape for patients, but doctors have to see the potential first, said Macnab.

"It's a big innovative change in reproductive health. We want to be able to say, 'You don't have to be an abortion clinic to offer this.'" Lots of physicians are interested in providing the drug, but there are many "micro-barriers," said Macnab. "We wanted to see what would happen if we dismantled all the micro-barriers."

Among those barriers: Doctors who prescribe Mifegymiso must take a SOGC course, which typically takes six hours online.

At the same time, according to the original Health Canada rules, getting the drug to the patient was a multi-step program. First, there's an ultrasound to determine that the woman is in the early stages of pregnancy. According to Health Canada guidelines, Mifegymiso can only be administered in the first seven weeks of pregnancy, although it can be prescribed "offlabel" for up to 10 weeks.

Second, a doctor has to prescribe the drug. And third, a pharmacist has to dispense it. Until recently, the patient would have to take the prescription to a pharmacy to be dispensed, then the drug would have to be delivered to the doctor's office so the patient could take it there. Doctors could also dispense Mifegymiso, but that would mean keeping a supply of the drug on hand at a cost of about \$300 per dose.

"It's a lot to expect doctors to take this on," said Macnab. Essentially, the only physicians who were prescribing it were those who already worked in abortion clinics.

Last month, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario cleared away one of the barriers. Now, patients can take the prescription to a pharmacy and receive the drug themselves. The product monograph says Mifegymiso should be "administered under the supervision of the prescriber," but Health Canada said physicians can use their own discretion and the drug does not need to be taken in the presence of the prescriber.

What's more, in Thursday's provincial budget, the Liberals said Ontario would publicly fund Mifegymiso some time in 2017 as part of an expansion into health care options for women.

Planned Parenthood Ottawa has spent the past two years trying to build partnerships with physicians so it could offer confidential referrals to those who are willing to prescribe Mifegymiso. "We hear that doctors don't want to be public about this," she said.

Planned Parenthood plans to introduce a "tool kit" in June if it gets at least one physician and one pharmacist on board. Macnab is hoping for five of each, as well as a network of ultrasound clinics.

Costescu agrees that confidentiality and freedom from harassment are a common concern for doctors. "The Ottawa case points this out. Clinics are often harassed."

One in three Canadian women will have an abortion. In Ottawa, abortions are available in one hospital and two private clinics. Medical abortions are available at the hospital and one private clinic.

There is typically a wait time of about two weeks in this region, but that has stretched to seven or more weeks if the clinics don't coordinate their holiday closings, said Macnab. Aside from that, in what can be loosely defined as "eastern Ontario," abortions are also performed in hospitals in Peterborough, North Bay and Kingston.

If every small town had a general practitioner who is comfortable with medical abortion, women wouldn't be forced to travel long distances, said Frédérique Chabot, health information officer for Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights. "Even a few service providers in a region makes a big impact."

The Planned Parenthood project will create a blueprint for access across Canada, she said. "We're hoping this can be exportable to other regions."

Medical abortions don't change the number of abortions in countries where they are readily available - but they do change the type of treatment that women seek out, said Costescu.

In France, where medical abortions have been available for almost 30 years, about 70 per cent of abortions are medical and the remainder are surgical, he said. But it depends on how the prescribingdispensing system works. In the U.S., where medical abortions are available mostly in clinics, only about 10 per cent of abortions are medical.

THE FACTS ABOUT THE DRUG MIFEGYMISO

Q: What is Mifegymiso?

A: Mifegymiso is the brand name of a two-drug combination that includes mifepristone (also known as RU-486) and misoprostol. Canada is the second country, after Australia, to approve the combination.

Q: How does it work?

A: Mifepristone, which is taken first, blocks the effects of the hormone progesterone, causing the lining of the uterus to break down. It is followed two days later by misoprostol, which causes uterine contractions. The effect is like an early miscarriage.

Q: What are the risks?

A: According to Health Canada, a death occurred in Canada during a clinical trial for mifepristone. There have also been more than 2,200 serious adverse reactions and 14 deaths associated with the formulation of the drug authorized in the U.S. Up to one in 20 women who use the drug will require a followup surgical procedure because the pregnancy is not terminated.

Q: What are the side-effects?

A: They include cramps, diarrhea, nausea, fever or chills, headache, dizziness and fatigue.

Q: Is the cost covered by public health plans?

A: Mifegymiso costs \$300 plus dispensing fees. It is publicly funded in New Brunswick and Alberta. Some insurance plans cover the cost.

In this week's provincial budget, the Liberals said Ontario would publicly fund Mifegymiso some time in 2017.

Q: Isn't there another medical abortion drug already on the market?

A: Mifegymiso is the first drug to be approved in Canada specifically for medical abortion. The combination of the chemotherapy drug methotrexate and misoprostol has been used for medical abortions. Methotrexate was used off-label.

Q: What about other countries?

A: Mifepristone has been on the market in China and France for almost 30 years. It is now available in at least 57 countries.

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SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed

ILLUSTRATION: Craig Robertson, Postmedia Network / Health Minister Eric Hoskins and Premier Kathleen Wynne spoke about the Liberals new Youth pharmacare plan at Jenner Jean-Marie Community Recreation Centre in East York Friday.;

DATELINE: TORONTO

WORD COUNT: 572

Ontario hopes its new youth pharmacare plan spurs national program

Ontario's Liberal government hopes a youth drug coverage plan revealed in its budget this week will help spur a national program by showing Ottawa and other provinces that pharmacare is affordable.

The provincial plan to cover more than 4,400 prescription medications for Ontarians under 25, with no co-pay or deductible, at an annual cost of \$465 million was the centrepiece of Ontario's balanced budget released Thursday.

Premier Kathleen Wynne is calling the plan, set to start in January, a step toward truly universal coverage.

"Do I believe that there should be universal pharmacare for all ages in Ontario? Yes," she said Friday. "That it will happen much more quickly if we have a federal government that is working on a national pharmacare plan."

Wynne said she is certain that other premiers will have questions for her at their next meeting this summer.

Ontario Health Minister Eric Hoskins said this approach on pharmacare is similar to Ontario's push for pension reform, which saw the province use its own proposed pension plan to successfully push for a national Canada Pension Plan enhancement.

"If you think back to Tommy Douglas and the beginning of medicare it was one province that stepped forward and the rest of the provinces and the federal government followed," he said.

Covering people under 25 - following the United Nations' definition of youth - is a good place to start, Hoskins said.

"You don't have to go from zero to 100 per cent coverage for everybody on day one," he said.

Some of the provincial health ministers across the country are hesitant on pharmacare because of the price tag, Hoskins noted.

"I haven't met a health minister who doesn't believe that it's the right thing to do, but if there's any reluctance that's been expressed to me, it's been because of concerns about what the up-front financial implications might be," he said.

"We're going to show that there are cost savings through bulk purchasing, through keeping people healthier."

Hoskins also said Ontario will work with insurance companies to ensure the savings they see from no longer having to cover medications for young employees and employees' children get passed onto employers and workers.

Steve Morgan, the lead researcher for the Citizens' Reference Panel on Pharmacare in Canada, said Ontario's cost estimate for its program sounds about right. The financial cost of covering medications for a group of people that don't traditionally use prescription drugs as much as other age groups would be relatively low, he said.

Beyond that, the Ontario plan's "incremental change" has symbolic value, said Morgan, a professor at the University of British Columbia.

"They're signalling to Justin Trudeau to say, 'Our vision for universal pharmacare is consistent with Canadian medicare. We're going to do it for kids and we're going to call on you to do the right thing and create national standards,'" he said.

Research suggests that a national pharmacare strategy would save the country between \$4 billion and \$10 billion a year because Ottawa as a single payer could wield far greater influence when negotiating drug prices with pharmaceutical companies than could a single province or territory.

Canadians now spend almost \$30 billion a year on prescription medicines.

After meeting last year with provincial and territorial health ministers, federal Health Minister Jane Philpott said addressing the cost of pharmaceuticals is one of her government's priorities. The ministers and Ottawa have formed a working group on access to medication.

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KINGSTON WHIG-STANDARD: 'WE'RE GIVING HEALTH CARE A MAJOR BOOST'; A1 / FRONT; 2017.04.29

PUBLICATION: Kingston Whig-Standard

PAGE: A1 / Front

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Ian Macalpine

SOURCE: Kingston Whig-Standard

KEYWORDS: kingston,islands,sophie,kiwala,backdrop,local

ILLUSTRATION: Ian Macalpine, The Whig-Standard / Kingston and the Islands MPP Sophie Kiwala speaks about Ontario's latest budget at the Shoppers Drug Mart at 1101 Princess St. in Kingston on Friday, in front of Shoppers pharmacy assistant Sarah Lecourt, left, and pharmacist Jalta Shah.;

COLUMN: The Whig-Standard

WORD COUNT: 871

'We're giving health care a major boost'

Kingston and the Islands MPP Sophie Kiwala used the backdrop of a local drugstore to sing the praises of her government's provincial budget and to bring attention to one of the programs it hopes will help children, youth and their families.

Kiwala spoke at the Shoppers Drug Mart at 1101 Princess St. Friday afternoon, a day after Ontario Minister of Finance Charles Sousa delivered the 2017 budget at Queen's Park in Toronto.

Kiwala was particularly pleased that by Jan. 1 of next year, all children and youth 24 years of age or younger will get prescription medication for free.

It is hoped the new program will improve access to prescription medication for more than four million children and young people and take a financial strain off families that need to buy medication for their children.

"The last time in the world that you want to have a challenge with finances is when your children are sick," Kiwala said.

More than 4,400 drugs covered under the Ontario Drug Benefit Program will be free as of Jan. 1, 2018.

"We're giving health care a major boost," Kiwala said.

She said Ontario is the first province in Canada to offer the program.

Kiwala made the announcement in front of officials from Family and Children's Services of Frontenac, Lennox and Addington, the KEYS Job Centre, and Kids Inclusive.

Kiwala said the plan would help people who work part time or on contract who may not have a drug benefit plan.

"Workers can't always count on benefit plans like they used to, and that has consequences for families," she said.

Heather Morrison, board chair of Family and Children's Services, said after Kiwala's speech that the initiative helps strengthen families and keep kids at home and out of the system.

Morrison said 90 per cent of children they work with live with their own family, and many families struggle to make ends meet.

"To access medication when you need it, as Sophie alluded to, can be a barrier to health and well-being," Morrison said. "Therefore it's a poverty issue and one of the determinates of health," Morrison said.

"If we make it so that people who are living on low income can access their medical needs and prescriptions for their children, we have removed one of those barriers that can then make families more vulnerable."

Kiwala also spoke about balancing the budget and highlighted a number of other new programs put in place by the Liberal government.

"It's a budget that looks after families and their health care, young people, and it invests in developing child care spaces, our economy, our infrastructure and students who are attending post-secondary school."

Students won't have to start paying back student loans until they start making \$35,000 or more a year, up from \$25,000.

She also announced the government is investing \$190 billion in Ontario's roads, highways and bridges over the next 13 years.

"This represents the largest infrastructure investment in Ontario's history, and it will result in a well-connected, safe and efficient province."

Kiwala said the investment will create 120,000 jobs.

Kiwala hinted that money may be coming in the future to help fund a new crossing over the Cataraqui River.

"This infrastructure plan will be receiving an investment of \$26 billion in funding over the next 10 years just for highways, and that includes 750 bridges."

"We're not going to talk anymore about that at this point," Kiwala joked.

In an interview afterwards, Kiwala said she's talking with provincial officials about the bridge funding.

"Although the third crossing was not written in the budget, I am going to continue to advocate for Kingston on that project and I look forward to more news in the future," she said. "Every

community wants to have their project listed in the budget, and I understand that, but there's a very significant packet of funding for infrastructure for roads and bridges and I can tell you I'll be making sure that we have some conversation about that in the future."

Kiwala said it was unfortunate, but she wasn't concerned that the estimated price of the bridge over the past year has jumped from \$120 million to \$180 million.

"My role is to advocate on behalf of the city the projects they deem are appropriate for the city and work with the federal government as well," she said.

She still believes the three levels of government should pay an equal share towards the cost of the bridge.

"The ideal scenario would be the three levels of government would split the funding."

In her speech, she also spoke about an investment of \$7 billion in health care over the next three years to reduce wait times, improve access to care and to enhance patient experience.

She also said Kingston General Hospital might benefit from an announced \$9 billion over 10 years to support hospital construction.

"There's a lot of talk about the third crossing, but at the same time KGH Phase 2 renovation is very much on my radar and that is also a huge project [\$500 million]," she said after her speech.

Kiwala also spoke of investments to support victims of fetal alcohol syndrome and the opioid crisis. imacalpine@postmedia.com

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TORONTO STAR: *PROVINCIAL BUDGET LEFT OUT GRASSY NARROWS, CHIEF SAYS;*
A10; 2017.04.29

PUBLICATION: Toronto Star

PAGE: A10

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: News

EDITION: ONT

BYLINE: Jayme Poisson and David Bruser Toronto Star

KEYWORDS: chief,grassy,narrows,first,nation,disappointed

ILLUSTRATION: Grassy Narrows Chief Simon Fobister says the upcoming budget leaves the future of his people in doubt.

WORD COUNT: 576

Provincial budget left out Grassy Narrows, chief says; Ontario 'immediately' giving \$2.1M for pre-cleanup studies, environment ministry says

The chief of Grassy Narrows First Nation is disappointed that this year's provincial budget did not set aside funds to clean up mercury in the river near his home.

"This budget leaves the future of my people in doubt," said Chief Simon Fobister, who since February has sent three letters to Premier Kathleen Wynne asking her to secure the funding in the \$150-billion budget.

"There is nothing in here for cleaning the river that is our life blood, and nothing for the healing of our people," Fobister said.

In response to the chief's concerns, a spokesperson for the provincial Environment Ministry said the government is "immediately" giving \$2.1 million to fund pre-cleanup studies.

"This is a significant next step towards accelerating ongoing fieldwork and moving forward with the remediation action plan," spokesperson Gary Wheeler said.

The \$2.1 million is far short of what scientists say it would cost to clean up the river over the next several years.

At the end of March, the chief scientist for Grassy Narrows, John Rudd - who initially recommended a cleanup of the mercury in the 1980s - pegged the costs of cleaning up the mercury over ten years at \$85.7 million. The goal of Rudd's 10-year plan is to bring mercury levels in the Wabigoon River walleye down to a level where it would be safe for subsistence fishers.

The three-part plan will work to shut off any ongoing mercury sources from the mill or surrounding areas, add clay and oxygen or nitrogen to the river to speed up natural recovery and monitor the area long-term.

In a March 29 letter to Wynne, the Grassy Narrows chief and council asked the premier to implement Rudd's plan "without delay" and requested funds for the entire decade-long cleanup be included in the budget, with money for future years' work to be placed in a trust.

Chief Fobister said he wrote his letters to Wynne in an attempt to lock up significant cleanup funding before the next election.

"This is her last budget. What if they won't get re-elected? Is the next government going to do the cleanup? There's no guarantee. She's not setting up the next government to meet that commitment."

"It is disappointing," Rudd said on Friday. His team is going to start studying and sampling sediment in the waters near Grassy Narrows next week. "I hope it's not déjà vu all over again. We did a great study in the 1980s and it was put on the shelf."

An engineering firm was to start work soon on designing the river cleanup methods, Rudd said, but the \$2.1 million, "would not even get the engineering firm started."

Rudd, who met with Wynne in February, said the premier was "very committed and quite definitive" about the provincial commitment to deal with the mercury problem.

Between 1962 and 1970, the Dryden paper plant, then owned by Reed Paper, dumped 10 tonnes of mercury into the Wabigoon River, upstream from Grassy Narrows. The site of the plant is about 100 kilometres upstream from Grassy Narrows and nearby Whitedog First Nation.

The government of the day chose to let the river clean itself naturally, but over the last year, an ongoing Star investigation has found high mercury levels in fish, soil dug up behind the factory and river sedimented. The three findings suggest there is likely an ongoing mercury source and the mill property is it, or located near it.

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PAGE: A10

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SECTION: News

EDITION: ONT

BYLINE: Robert Benzie Toronto Star

KEYWORDS: premier,kathleen,wynne,insists,liberals,balance

ILLUSTRATION: Premier Kathleen Wynne, with Finance Minister Charles Sousa and Health Minister Eric Hoskins, right, speaks to a parent and her child. Andrew Francis Wallace/Toronto Star

WORD COUNT: 628

Balancing act not about 'being loved'; Wynne says Liberals didn't intend for budget to woo Ontarians in next election

It's not about her; it's about you.

Premier Kathleen Wynne insists the Liberals did not balance the budget and launch an ambitious new youth pharmacare program to make Ontario voters fall in love with her before next year's election.

"Of course, politicians, human beings, love to be loved. But this budget and my political career is not about ... me being loved," Wynne said Friday as she promoted Finance Minister Charles Sousa's budget.

"Our economy is doing very well, but I want everybody to feel that," said the premier in Thorncliffe Park, one of the more economically challenged neighbourhoods in her Don Valley West Riding.

"I want them to feel that they are part of that success and they are part of that optimistic future. So whether people love me or not is beside the point," she said. "The election will come. There will be a poll on that day and the people of Ontario will decide. In the interim, I am going to be working as hard as I can to do everything that I can to help people."

Wynne, who trails Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown and NDP Leader Andrea Horwath in public-opinion polls 13 months before the next election, has, at least, won over some doubters in her own party.

Former treasurer Greg Sorbara, key architect of a Liberal dynasty that began in 2003, warned last month it was "extremely unlikely" the Grits could get re-elected because of the "palpable" anger toward the premier.

"The fact is the numbers do not lie and the ability to win the next election is in grave, grave doubt," he told TVOntario's Steve Paikin on March 21.

But a bullish Sorbara said Thursday's budget "may be a real game-changer" and is "a true milestone for a government that has been under significant pressure for some time."

"The budget confirms what many of us have suspected for some time: Things have improved dramatically in Ontario," he said.

"With new spending being directed toward areas that have cried out for attention for a long time, the Wynne government has made its priorities a whole lot clearer.

"More important, the budget is conclusive evidence that the province has finally turned the corner."

That endorsement, from one of the most respected figures in the Ontario Liberal Party, is noteworthy.

Also significant is that MPPs are relieved to have good news to spread in their ridings, with the balanced budget's free pharmacare for everyone 24 and under, hospital construction and other election-ready initiatives contained in it.

"We might turn this thing around," confided one skittish Liberal, who expressed relief that the Tories are not offering up any policy alternatives to distract attention from the governing party.

Another Grit insider said the combination of the 25-per-cent reduction in hydro rates, the 15-per-cent real-estate tax for foreign buyers, expanded rent control and youth pharmacare should quell concerns about Wynne's future.

"We have a good story to tell," he said.

Ensuring that narrative gets out there in time for the June 7, 2018 election is essential to Wynne's re-election hopes.

On Friday afternoon, the premier, her chief of staff Andrew Bevan, and campaign guru David Herle met with several hundred Liberal staffers at Queen's Park to thank them for their hard work on the budget and to deliver a pep talk.

Wynne, who arrived to the packed room to the tune of her 2014 campaign song, Katy Perry's "Roar," delivered a message to partisans behind closed doors similar to the one she posted earlier on Facebook.

"We worked hard to eliminate the deficit, because it lets government do more to address the very real concerns that people have," she said, imploring her staff to "not be idle or complacent where it comes to our economy and to trade."

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TORONTO STAR: BUDGET SEES HIT FOR SMOKERS, LEVIES HOTEL TAXES FOR CITIES;
B3; 2017.04.29

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EDITION: ONT

BYLINE: Lisa Wright Toronto Star

KEYWORDS: smokers,hotel,guests,business,owners,exactly

ILLUSTRATION: Toronto Mayor John Tory had been pushing the province for the ability to levy a hotel tax. Chris Young/THE CANADIAN PRESS FILE PHOTO

WORD COUNT: 505

No tax relief for business; Budget sees hit for smokers, levies hotel taxes for cities

Smokers, hotel guests and business owners weren't exactly lit up by the budget that was tabled Thursday at Queen's Park.

For starters, business groups are disappointed that long-awaited cuts to corporate and small business taxes weren't addressed yet again in the Ontario budget, which they say was heavy on spending and very short on ways to generate revenue - outside the new sin tax on smokes over the next three years.

"There were a lot of important things in there to do with (improvements to) health care, education and infrastructure, but I don't think a \$10 tax on a carton of cigarettes is going to get them there," said Dave Walsh, tax service line leader at accounting giant BDO Canada.

Smokers actually got a double whammy after Ottawa hiked cigarette taxes in the March federal budget, when the excise duty rate increased to \$21.56 per 200 cigarettes from \$21.03.

But Toronto Mayor John Tory got his wish granted after the province said it would allow municipalities to impose a tax on hotel stays and Airbnb-style short accommodations.

The Greater Toronto Hotel Association, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce and the Canadian Federation of Independent Business all oppose the tax.

However Tory kept pushing the province for the ability to levy a hotel tax after Premier Kathleen Wynne yanked the city's power last January to toll the Gardiner Expressway and the Don Valley Parkway as he had planned.

"Corporate income tax rate relief - which the government paused following the economic downturn (in 2008) - was not reinstated again. We're disappointed," said Richard Koroscil, interim president and CEO, Ontario Chamber of Commerce.

He said not cutting corporate taxes jeopardizes "tens of billions of dollars in potential capital investment and hundreds of thousands of new jobs."

While commending the government for finally balancing its books, he said the business community is concerned that the debt is ballooning and there is no plan for surplus, nor plans to begin debt repayment.

Julie Kwiecinski, director of provincial affairs (Ontario) at the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, said the finance ministry also ignored the group's request to eliminate the small-business tax over five to 10 years, and to reduce the general corporate income tax rate to 10 per cent from 11.5 per cent.

"At the current rate of 4.5 per cent, Ontario is saddled with the second highest small business corporate income tax rate in the country," she said.

Meanwhile the Investment Industry Regulatory Organization of Canada (IIROC), CARP and Prosper Canada were pleased with proposed changes in the budget to the Ontario Securities Act that will give IIROC stronger enforcement powers, giving the regulator legal authority to pursue the collection of disciplinary fines directly through the courts.

"As a result, wrongdoers in Ontario will no longer be able to avoid payment simply by leaving the securities industry and abandoning their registration with IIROC," the group said in a statement.

There is nearly \$20 million in unpaid fines owing to IIROC in Ontario dating back to 2008.
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SECTION: Greater Toronto

EDITION: ONT

BYLINE: Ben Spurr and Jennifer Pagliaro Toronto Star

KEYWORDS: mayor,accused,premier,kathleen,government,turning

WORD COUNT: 1031

'They turned their backs' on Toronto; Lack of provincial funding for transit, social housing disappointing, Tory says

Mayor John Tory has accused Premier Kathleen Wynne's government of turning its back on Toronto following a budget announcement that provided no new money for social housing repairs and failed to match federal commitments for transit.

"The most crucial needs of the people of the city of Toronto were not met by this budget," Tory told reporters a day after the province released a balanced budget that was touted for new drug coverage and increases to child care. "Premier Kathleen Wynne and her government had a chance to stand up for Toronto on transit and on housing. Instead, at least on the pages of this budget, they turned their backs."

Tory flatly admitted that without provincial funding, the transit projects that council has designated as its top priorities won't be completed.

The recent federal budget committed what city officials estimate will be between \$4.5 billion and \$5 billion to pay up to 40 per cent of the cost of new transit projects.

The mayor had called on Queen's Park to match the federal funding, but his hopes were dashed with Thursday's budget announcement.

"Let's be clear, without matching dollars from the province, the relief line cannot be built," Tory said. "Waterfront transit will not be built. The Eglinton East LRT cannot be built."

The province is already investing billions of dollars in Toronto transit, including the Eglinton Crosstown and Finch West LRTs, and an expansion of GO Transit service that supports the mayor's SmartTrack plan.

Tory acknowledged these previous commitments, but asserted that "decades of inaction on transit" means that "continuous investment" from Queen's Park is required.

"I don't think there's a single person you would find in the city of Toronto who would say we should just stop building transit now with the list of projects that we have and not bother going forward," he said.

Tory also said the province had failed to come forward with desperately needed cash for social housing repairs - that he expected the government to speak "clearly and with conviction" about the needs of those vulnerable residents.

He was disappointed.

"Yes, the Government of Ontario has taken steps to cool our housing market and make things more affordable for those who can afford to buy," he said. "But the province also owes something to those who rely on social housing for a roof over their heads - a roof that past provincial governments built, failed to maintain, and then handed off to cities, especially Toronto."

By the end of next year, Toronto Community Housing is planning to have closed 1,000 units if more funds aren't secured. The budget for repairs in 2018 is currently \$350 million short on cash, not including the committed new federal funding, of which the details are still unknown.

Many of the buildings were previously downgraded by the province with a decades-long repairs backlog and no money in reserves to make amends.

"I just don't think that people thought that, as the federal government finally came through the door to say 'we're here to be part of transit and housing,' that they expected to see the province on the way out the same door, kind of saying, 'Well, for the future, we don't really have any plans,'" Tory said.

The mayor said he trusted Wynne understood Toronto's needs, stopping short on Friday of blasting the premier for that inaction on the transit and housing files, after he had for months repeated that it would be a "grave mistake" for the province to do nothing in the wake of a reversal on allowing the city to toll its own expressways. Speaking later in the day to reporters at Thorncliffe Park, Wynne said she was "disappointed" in Tory's analysis that the budget is shortchanging Toronto.

"When I look at the billions of dollars that we are investing in Toronto ... we have made a significant, significant investment," she said, citing LRT lines on Finch and Sheppard Aves., the Eglinton Crosstown LRT, the Scarborough subway extension, upgrades to Union Station and plans to give the city an additional \$170 million in annual gas tax revenue. "I know that Mayor Tory is talking about 'well, what comes next.' These are multi-year projects."

Wynne said her government is also "very committed to both affordable and social housing," noting \$130 million can be used towards green energy retrofits, including for social housing. She did not address the ongoing request the province contribute a one-third share - or \$864 million - for needed repairs to prevent the buildings from crumbling.

Council has designated four transit projects as its top priorities: the relief line subway, Waterfront LRT lines, the Eglinton East LRT and Tory's SmartTrack plan. Together they will cost an estimated \$13.6 billion.

Although the city has agreed to pay for SmartTrack without a direct provincial contribution, the other projects are mostly unfunded and the lack of money for them in Thursday's budget leaves them in limbo.

The shortfall for the \$1.6-billion Eglinton East LRT, in particular, could prove politically problematic for Tory as it threatens to throw a wrench into the highly charged debate over Scarborough transit.

Tory pitched the LRT, which would be an extension of the Crosstown to the University of Toronto's Scarborough campus, as part of a package of Scarborough transit that includes the controversial one-stop subway extension to the Scarborough Town Centre.

The mayor originally said that both lines could be paid for using a \$3.56 billion in funding previously secured from all three levels of government. However, since he first floated the plan in January 2016, the cost of the subway extension has ballooned by over \$1 billion to \$3.35 billion, leaving no money for the LRT.

Tory refused to concede that Scarborough could end up with just a single subway stop out of the plan, however, saying he would pressure Toronto Liberal MPPs to change the premier's mind.

"I'm not going to go to the place that says, well it's not going to get done - any one of these," he said. "I'm determined to see it built because it is part of the plan for Scarborough."

With files from Robert Benzie
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WATERLOO REGION RECORD: DESPITE BALANCED BUDGET, WYNNE IS POLITICAL POISON NOW; B1; 2017.04.29

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EDITION: First

BYLINE: Luisa D'Amato

KEYWORDS: remember,dalton,mcguinty,former,premier,ontario

WORD COUNT: 651

Despite balanced budget, Wynne is political poison now

Remember Dalton McGuinty?

The former premier of Ontario once said the leader of a government acts like the liver in a human body, absorbing toxins.

It's a good analogy. In our political system, the premier has extraordinary power and is responsible for all government decisions.

Eventually, there are enough unpopular moves that people are just furious with you. That's when there has to be a change of leadership. The outgoing leader takes away much of the bad karma and protects the party.

McGuinty understood that, and made his exit in 2012. He helped buy at least six more years for the Liberals.

His successor, Kathleen Wynne, doesn't understand that, and insists she will lead the party into next year's election. That is why she will almost certainly lose.

Wynne's approval levels are now at a catastrophic 12 per cent, according to the Angus Reid Institute, which polled Ontarians in March. Eighty-one per cent disapprove of her performance.

Those numbers are pretty hard to overcome without a change in leadership, and even prominent Liberals are saying so.

Some people have wondered if there is bigotry at play, handicapping our first openly gay, female premier. For the vast majority, that's probably not a factor. After all, she won handily in 2014.

A better explanation is that there are a lot of toxins growing right now, because the party has overstayed its welcome. Fourteen years is a long time in politics, long enough to lose touch with voters' needs.

The Liberals have outraged voters by moving gas plants at great cost to save Liberal seats. Their mismanaged energy plans have sent hydro prices through the roof. They have vastly increased the provincial debt and squandered public resources with the partial sell-off of Hydro.

Most of all, they didn't notice or care until the last minute that people were hurting, and angry. The 11th-hour scramble to offer a 25 per cent rebate on hydro costs is too little, too late, too close to the election. We see through it.

The polls show our discontent. Innovative Research Group of Toronto says 33 per cent of Ontarians still consider themselves Liberals (compared to 26 per cent Conservatives and 11 per cent New Democrats).

But many of those Liberals deeply disapprove of Wynne. One in four said she must quit before they'd vote Liberal next time. One in three want to see big changes before they'd support her.

Progressive Conservative leader Patrick Brown is not well known at all by Ontario voters. But he still has an overwhelming lead in the polls, which will be hard to beat, says Wilfrid Laurier University political scientist and polling expert Barry Kay.

"The time for a change, I think, will prevail," he said.

Liberals didn't really win the past couple of elections so much as the Conservatives lost them, with former leader Tim Hudak's right-wing policies. Brown is a new face. All he has to do is keep his ears open and his mouth shut.

Reaction from Hamilton: In yesterday's column, I took on a Hamilton city councillor who said Kitchener-Waterloo's light rail transit system is ugly and unattractive.

I said it was beyond ludicrous that anyone from Hamilton, with its downtown decay and industrial wasteland by the harbour, should be dissing any other place.

Hamilton readers fought back with words and pictures depicting waterfalls, forests and sunrises in their city.

What emerges is the divide between people who live in Hamilton and people who don't. The city's residents, especially if they have the money to live in a nice neighbourhood, enjoy its natural beauty.

But only insiders see the inside. Outsiders, driving past the city, see the harbour with its fire-belching smokestacks and polluted water, riddled with PCBs, heavy metals and invasive fish species that alone can survive the contaminants. Something will have to be done about that before the city can really change its image.

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KEYWORDS: latest,fiscal,ontario,finance,minister,charles

WORD COUNT: 516

Budget gives Ontario choices

The latest fiscal plan from Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa should be called "the keep-your-fingers-crossed budget."

Ordinary Ontarians will keep their fingers crossed that, with its hefty spending increases and balanced bottom line, the 2017-18 budget unveiled this week can improve their lives, affordably.

As for the Liberals, their fingers are crossed that Sousa's offering will raise their dismal public approval ratings and keep them in power after the June 2018 provincial election.

While only time can resolve this uncertainty, Sousa has crafted an eye-pleasing financial blueprint that combines important new social service expenditures with a welcome, if overdue, end to deficits for the first time in a decade.

Social progressives and fiscal hawks can both cheer.

When it comes to new spending, the Liberals' priorities are right: An additional \$7 billion will be injected into Ontario's health-care system over the next three years, with much of that money - \$518 million in this year alone - going to hospitals, which have struggled with frozen budgets for several years.

Just as notably, the government is making its first foray into pharmacare, offering free prescription drugs for everyone

24-years-old and younger, at an estimated annual cost of

\$465 million.

So far so good. Yet some economists and Ontario's Financial Accountability Office have raised doubts over whether provincial deficits have been truly banished, suggesting that only the one-time sales of government assets made possible the balanced books.

That debate will be hard to resolve, but the Liberals surely deserve high marks for exerting a greater control over spending in recent years.

What is more worrying is the issue of sustainability. The Liberals are betting Ontario's increasingly robust economy will keep packing on muscle and effortlessly pay the government's bills.

The shadow hanging over this optimism comes from south of the border and U.S. President Donald Trump.

His wrecking-ball approach to trade could curtail Ontario exports to the U.S. and leave the government, as well as the

province, poorer. What's the Liberals' Plan B for avoiding more deficits?

Ontario's long-term prospects would also be better if the Liberals were more aggressive about dealing with the \$311-billion provincial debt.

It has more than doubled since they took office in 2003 and, despite this week's balanced books, provincial debt will grow by a further \$26.4 billion this year.

By 2019, it will cost the province \$12 billion annually merely to service that debt. The public needs to see some indication of a debt repayment strategy to change this trajectory.

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WATERLOO REGION RECORD: WITH THE BUDGET, THE BATTLE FOR PROGRESSIVE MINDS BEGINS; A11; 2017.04.29

PUBLICATION: Waterloo Region Record

PAGE: A11

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: EDITORIAL

EDITION: First

BYLINE: Martin Regg Cohn

KEYWORDS: budget, normally, comes, campaign, arrived, prematurely

WORD COUNT: 878

With the budget, the battle for progressive minds begins

A pre-election budget normally comes on the eve of a campaign.

This one arrived prematurely - a pre-pre-election budget - the better to shore up worsening Liberal fortunes. While there's still time, well before next year's campaign.

Just as a hanging clears the mind, fear of an electoral lynching has forced the Liberal brain trust to appeal for clemency. For they come now with offerings.

Repent and repeat:

Free pharmaceuticals for young people (a blessing). Transit breaks for old people (a sop).

Cheaper child care for young parents (long overdue). Free tuition for most college students (already announced but still worthy and worth repeating).

Rent control for everyone (a reprise). Hefty discounts off everyone's hydro bills (a perennial).

And the first balanced budget after a decade of deficits (about time). Which clears the way for its more progressive measures, notably phased pharmacare.

All this thanks to surging tax revenues from a robust economic recovery that is leading the country and most of the industrialized world, while driving unemployment down.

Just days after the NDP proposed its own embryonic pharmacare program, we now know why the Liberals were at a loss for words all week: They didn't want to give away their own budget plan.

By redressing the embarrassing gap in Canadian health care - medicare without full pharmacare - Ontario is finally taking a first step toward a truly universal program. The rival Liberal and NDP plans have similar projected costs (under \$500 million a year), and offer only partial coverage, each in their own way.

Taken together, however, they serve as a reminder that the battle for progressive voters has already begun - the giveaways are underway. The budget materials include colourful graphics

emblazoned with the word "free" so many times that they resemble those Boxing Day door crashers in Best Buy ads.

But along with the Progressive Conservatives, all three parties are also vying for the title of prudent financial steward by embracing the goal of a balanced budget.

Now the Liberals can lay claim to fulfilling the promise of a balanced budget they made back in 2008, when the great recession forced them to forego a planned surplus, plunging the province into a \$19-billion deficit to bail out an ailing economy. Digging out from a decade of deficits required the government to rein in public sector salaries and pare spending, but surging revenues have changed the tide.

"Balancing the books has never been an end in itself," Finance Minister Charles Sousa insisted Thursday.

But it is more than a means to an end. It also has political meaning.

It is a truism of politics, borne out in the last federal election, that red ink is rarely a vote-determining issue at the ballot box. But Premier Kathleen Wynne recognized that a perpetual deficit would hurt her credibility on the economy; constrain her government from funding worthy social programs; and crowd out Ontario's fiscal capacity in case of future economic downturns.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, and the 2008-10 economic crisis surely merited such a designation and assignation. But there are ample reasons, political and economical, for eliminating the deficit now that Ontario's economy has leapt into the lead.

Balancing the budget isn't as simple as it sounds, however. The independent Financial Accountability Office kept casting doubt on whether the government could meet its target, and the PCs predicted it would never happen.

Now that it has, the Tories insist it still hasn't, because the government is cooking the books. The NDP noted that the government's allocation of \$465 million for pharmacare is mysteriously missing from the budget document, suggesting a last-minute, back-of-the-envelope calculation.

Fair point on pharmacare, but if that's what it takes to get started on free prescription drugs, so be it. The truth is that pharmacare makes sense on so many levels - medical, ideological and economical - that political will matters more than precise estimates at this point.

The bigger gap in the government's pharmacare plan is that while completely free, it essentially excludes adults between 25 and 65. That's not just tough luck for middle-aged adults, it's also bad news for the bulk buying benefits that are the hallmark of truly universal pharmacare scaled up to the entire population.

The drawback in the NDP's plan is that while everyone is covered (albeit with co-payments), only the 125 most commonly prescribed and effective drugs would be covered, leaving people who require costly anti-cancer medicines, for example, on their own.

Both of these belated proposals are a promising start, but still suffer from a lack of ambition. With a provincial budget of \$141 billion, and total health spending of \$54 billion, why are these two putatively progressive parties straining to stay under a modest \$500-million cap for such a consequential program?

Still, it's a start - for pharmacare, and the pre-election campaign. Whether this budget marks the beginning of a Liberal revival, or the start of a losing battle, is a question that voters might answer with another question:

After this pre-pre-election budget, are people better off than they were four years ago when Wynne and Sousa first took over? For the Liberals, Tories and New Democrats, that battle question may be the ballot question.

Martin Regg Cohn's commentary appears in Torstar newspapers.

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PUBLICATION: Waterloo Region Record

PAGE: A4

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: NEWS

EDITION: First

BYLINE: Allison Jones

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed

WORD COUNT: 571

Can pharmacare spur national program?; Ontario hopes plan for youth will show affordability

Ontario's Liberal government hopes a youth drug coverage plan revealed in its budget this week will help spur a national program by showing Ottawa and other provinces that pharmacare is affordable.

The provincial plan to cover more than 4,400 prescription medications for Ontarians under 25, with no copay or deductible, at an annual cost of \$465 million was the centrepiece of Ontario's balanced budget released Thursday.

Premier Kathleen Wynne is calling the plan, set to start in January, a step toward truly universal coverage.

"Do I believe that there should be universal pharmacare for all ages in Ontario? Yes," she said Friday. "That it will happen much more quickly if we have a federal government that is working on a national pharmacare plan."

Wynne said she is certain that other premiers will have questions for her at their next meeting this summer.

Ontario Health Minister Eric Hoskins said this approach on pharmacare is similar to Ontario's push for pension reform, which saw the province use its own proposed pension plan to successfully push for a national Canada Pension Plan enhancement.

"If you think back to Tommy Douglas and the beginning of medicare, it was one province that stepped forward and the rest of the provinces and the federal government followed," he said.

Covering people under 25 - following the United Nations' definition of youth - is a good place to start, Hoskins said.

"You don't have to go from zero to 100 per cent coverage for everybody on Day 1," he said.

Some of the provincial health ministers across the country are hesitant on pharmacare because of the price tag, Hoskins noted.

"I haven't met a health minister who doesn't believe that it's the right thing to do, but if there's any reluctance that's been expressed to me, it's been because of concerns about what the upfront financial implications might be.

"We're going to show that there are cost savings through bulk purchasing, through keeping people healthier."

Hoskins also said Ontario will work with insurance companies to ensure the savings they see from no longer having to cover medications for young employees and employees' children get passed on to employers and workers.

Steve Morgan, the lead researcher for the Citizens' Reference Panel on Pharmacare in Canada, said Ontario's cost estimate for its program sounds about right. The cost of covering medications for a group of people who don't traditionally use prescription drugs as much as other age groups would be relatively low, he said.

Beyond that, the Ontario plan's "incremental change" has symbolic value, said Morgan, a professor at the University of British Columbia.

"They're signalling to Justin Trudeau to say, 'Our vision for universal pharmacare is consistent with Canadian medicare. We're going to do it for kids and we're going to call on you to do the right thing and create national standards.'"

Research suggests that a national pharmacare strategy would save the country between \$4 billion and \$10 billion a year because Ottawa as a single payer could wield far greater influence when negotiating drug prices with pharmaceutical companies than could a single province or territory.

Canadians now spend almost \$30 billion a year on prescription medicines.

After meeting last year with provincial and territorial health ministers, federal Health Minister Jane Philpott said addressing the cost of pharmaceuticals is one of her government's priorities. The ministers and Ottawa have formed a working group on access to medication.
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PUBLICATION: The Hamilton Spectator

PAGE: A17

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: Editorial

EDITION: First

BYLINE: John Roe

KEYWORDS: latest,fiscal,ontario,finance,minister,charles

WORD COUNT: 518

Budget gives Ontario choices

The latest fiscal plan from Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa should be called "the keep-your-fingers-crossed budget."

Ordinary Ontarians will keep their fingers crossed that, with its hefty spending increases and balanced bottom line, the 2017-18 budget unveiled this week can improve their lives, affordably.

As for the Liberals, their fingers are crossed that Sousa's offering will raise their dismal public approval ratings and keep them in power after the June 2018 provincial election.

While only time can resolve this uncertainty, Sousa has crafted an eye-pleasing financial blueprint that combines important new social service expenditures with a welcome, if overdue, end to deficits for the first time in a decade.

Social progressives and fiscal hawks can both cheer.

When it comes to new spending, the Liberals' priorities are right: An additional \$7 billion will be injected into Ontario's health-care system over the next three years, with much of that money - \$518 million in this year alone - going to hospitals, which have struggled with frozen budgets for several years.

Just as notably, the government is making its first foray into pharmacare, offering free prescription drugs for everyone 24-years-old and younger, at an estimated annual cost of \$465 million.

So far so good. Yet some economists and Ontario's Financial Accountability Office have raised doubts over whether provincial deficits have been truly banished, suggesting that only the one-time sales of government assets made possible the balanced books.

That debate will be hard to resolve, but the Liberals surely deserve high marks for exerting a greater control over spending in recent years.

What is more worrying is the issue of sustainability. The Liberals are betting Ontario's increasingly robust economy will keep packing on muscle and effortlessly pay the government's bills.

The shadow hanging over this optimism comes from south of the border and U.S. President Donald Trump.

His wrecking-ball approach to trade could curtail Ontario exports to the United States and leave the government, as well as the province, poorer.

What's the Liberals' Plan B for avoiding more deficits?

Ontario's long-term prospects would also be better if the Liberals were more aggressive about dealing with the \$311-billion provincial debt.

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***THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR: CAN YOUTH PHARMACARE SPUR NATIONAL PROGRAM?;
A13; 2017.04.29***

PUBLICATION: The Hamilton Spectator

PAGE: A13

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: Canada / World

EDITION: First

BYLINE: Allison Jones The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed

WORD COUNT: 497

Can youth pharmacare spur national program?; Ottawa hopes its plan can show affordability

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Canadians spend almost \$30 billion a year on medicines.
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DAILY OBSERVER (PEMBROKE): ONTARIO HOPES ITS NEW YOUTH PHARMACARE PLAN SPURS NATIONAL PROGRAM; A9; 2017.04.29

PUBLICATION: Daily Observer (Pembroke)

PAGE: A9

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: National News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Allison Jones

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed

ILLUSTRATION: Craig Robertson, Postmedia Network / Health Minister Eric Hoskins and Premier Kathleen Wynne spoke about the Liberals new Youth pharmacare plan at Jenner Jean-Marie Community Recreation Centre in East York Friday.;

DATELINE: TORONTO

WORD COUNT: 572

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DAILY OBSERVER (PEMBROKE): TAKE TWO ASPIRIN, VOTE LIBERAL IN THE MORNING;
A4; 2017.04.29

PUBLICATION: Daily Observer (Pembroke)

PAGE: A4

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: Opinion

EDITION: Final

SOURCE: Postmedia Network

KEYWORDS: decades, politicians, canada, struggled, introduce, universal

WORD COUNT: 445

Take two aspirin, vote Liberal in the morning

For decades, liberal-minded politicians in Canada have struggled to introduce universal drug coverage. Having decided that state-funded health care was the best way to ensure general prosperity, they've long wanted taxpayers to fund prescribed medicines too. Problem: Pharmacare is very, very expensive.

But Ontario's government has found a clever way to kickstart it: Make pharmacare available to the segment of the population least likely to need it. The provincial budget released Thursday proposes universal drug coverage for all Ontarians under 25 years old. There's no means testing; all young people will be covered, at an estimated cost to the treasury of \$465 million in year one. Apparently this will fund access to 4,400 drugs.

The plan is skilful politics (we'll get to what sort of policy it is momentarily). Premier Kathleen Wynne, facing an election next year in which she is not exactly viewed as the frontrunner, can now outflank the NDP on the left. Its leader, Andrea Horwath, recently proposed a pharmacare program for all, priced at \$475 million but funding only 125 medications.

The budget pitch also speaks to a slice of the population that doesn't always vote, but which might one day remember the favours the Liberals are larding on it (the government is also introducing more measures to help pay for post-secondary education, for instance).

Third, it feels like a compassionate and affordable step: It doesn't cost billions, yet it helps our children. Who among us does not want to help our children? Thus, no future government is likely to rescind this measure. Which is the cleverest point of all: Pharmacare gets a toehold in Ontario that even Patrick Brown's Progressive Conservatives are unlikely to undo. Indeed, it can only expand in future.

Good, say those on the left. But we worry: Even the existing public health-care system is stretched, underfunded at every turn. Wynne's government acknowledged that Thursday with its "booster shot" funding of \$7 billion to help deal with the grim overcrowding in hospitals, the shortage of long-term care beds and the difficulty of obtaining affordable home care. Hospitals had hoped for a funding increase of 4.9 per cent; they'll get three per cent. Ontario's doctors don't yet have a contract, and nurses and other levels of care worker aren't always paid what they deserve. Does piling on another program help Ontarians in the long run? Ah, but the budget is balanced, you say. Well yes, but spending is still at record levels, and Ontario's debt is expected to hit \$312 billion in 2017-18. Our debt-to-GDP ratio is far from admirable.

Pharmacare is good medicine for the Liberals. For the long-term sustainability of health care?
Maybe not.

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TIMES-JOURNAL (ST.THOMAS): ONTARIO HOPES ITS NEW YOUTH PHARMACARE PLAN SPURS NATIONAL PROGRAM; A10; 2017.04.29

PUBLICATION: Times-Journal (St.Thomas)

PAGE: A10

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: Ontario News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Allison Jones

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed

ILLUSTRATION: Craig Robertson, Postmedia Network / Health Minister Eric Hoskins and Premier Kathleen Wynne spoke about the Liberals new Youth pharmacare plan at Jenner Jean-Marie Community Recreation Centre in East York Friday.;

DATELINE: TORONTO

WORD COUNT: 572

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**CORNWALL STANDARD FREEHOLDER: ONTARIO HOPES ITS NEW YOUTH
PHARMACARE PLAN SPURS NATIONAL PROGRAM; A5; 2017.04.29**

PUBLICATION: Cornwall Standard Freeholder

PAGE: A5

DATE: 2017.04.29

SECTION: Ontario News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Allison Jones

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,hopes,youth,coverage,revealed

ILLUSTRATION: Craig Robertson, Postmedia Network / Health Minister Eric Hoskins and Premier Kathleen Wynne spoke about the Liberals new Youth pharmacare plan at Jenner Jean-Marie Community Recreation Centre in East York Friday.;

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NATIONAL POST: LIBERALS PROMISED ONTARIO BUDGET WOULD COMBAT OVERCROWDED HOSPITALS. INSTEAD, THEY'RE ABOUT TO GET WORSE

Victor Ferreira | April 28, 2017 | Last Updated: Apr 29 12:57 PM ET
More from Victor Ferreira | @VicF77

Jamie Lee Ball spent five days in Brampton Civic Hospital on a stretcher.
HandoutJamie Lee Ball spent five days in Brampton Civic Hospital on a stretcher.
[Twitter](#) [Google+](#) [Reddit](#) [Email](#) [Typo?](#) [More](#)

When they first saw that the Ontario government had allocated \$518 million to hospital operating costs in the 2017 budget, Jamie-Lee Ball and her mother were ecstatic.

After she spent five days on a stretcher in a Brampton Civic Hospital hallway because no beds were available, Ball's story reached Queen's Park and the Liberals promised to combat the bed shortage in the 2017 budget. In an interview days before he released the budget Thursday, Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa said "we don't want people to be in hallways."

But the \$518 million, Ball has learned, won't help solve a capacity crisis that has led to the province's hospitals opening 1,100 unfunded beds. Instead, the funding will do little more than cover inflation and will not be enough to even sustain the current system, according to the Ontario Health Coalition.

"The average taxpayer is going to see (\$518 million) and say, 'Oh that's great,' " Ball said. "When you explain it's just inflation, it's really shocking to me.

"I don't understand how this is even negotiable. To offer Canadians their basic rights in regards to health care shouldn't be something they even have to discuss."

The money ensures that each hospital will receive a minimum two per cent increase across the board. It does not meet the five per cent hike — more than \$800 million — that hospital officials had sought to maintain current service levels.

Hospitals would have required a two per cent increase for inflation, an additional two per cent to account for population growth and aging and one per cent for increased demand, according to Natalie Mehra, executive director of the Ontario Health Coalition.

Of all the provinces, Ontario has the fewest number of hospital beds per 1,000 people available at 2.3, while Newfoundland and Labrador tops the list with 4.6. Between 2012 and 2015, funding for operational costs was frozen and in 2016, hospitals only received a one per cent increase.

"You can't continue to have years and year of cuts and then one year before an election put some money in and pretend everything is OK," Mehra said.

Wait times for the beds also remain long, according to the last auditor-general report, as only 30 per cent of patients at three Ontario hospitals were transferred from the emergency room to acute-care wards in under eight hours — the target set by the province's Ministry of Health.

THE CANADIAN PRESS/Nathan Denette ORG XMIT: NSD517

THE CANADIAN PRESS/Nathan Denette ORG XMIT: NSD517 Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa, right, and Premier Kathleen Wynne get a standing ovation after announcing free universal health care to everyone over the age of 24 as part of the 2017 Ontario budget at Queen's Park in Toronto on Thursday, April 27, 2017.

Hospitals may no longer need the number of beds they had in the 1980s and 1990s, NDP health critic France Gelinas said, but "the pendulum has swung way too far" because of the lack of funding. Upon reading the budget, Gelinas was upset to see that not only would the situation not improve, it was set to worsen.

"Have they never been to a hospital?" Gelinas said. "Have none of them ever suffered the indignity of being on a stretcher for two days in a row waiting for a bed?"

That's a reality at Hamilton Health Sciences — and its seven hospitals. Since 2016, they've been operating above 100 per cent capacity, reaching a peak of 110 per cent in February, CEO Rob MacIsaac said. As a result, the hospitals have had to place patients in sun rooms, hallways and storage spaces.

Alex Urosevic, Toronto Sun

Alex Urosevic, Toronto Sun Portrait of Metrolinx Chair Rob MacIsaac, who writes our Saving Toronto piece on how the commute will change in 20 years.

"We appreciate the additional funding we're receiving this year but it will take a number of years to really overcome the problems we're experiencing," MacIsaac said. "In the interim, we'll have to continue to utilize unconventional spaces to house the patients we can't squeeze in regular rooms."

The challenge, MacIsaac said, is that hospitals are packed with alternate level of care patients — those who no longer need to stay in the hospital but cannot return home. At Hamilton Health Sciences, 13 per cent of beds are occupied by patients who need to be transferred to nursing homes, mental health facilities or rehabilitation centres. However, freeing up these beds would still leave the hospitals above the ideal capacity of 85 per cent.

Related

Ontario hospital patient suffering from internal bleeding left on stretcher in hallway for five days
The realization that even hundreds of millions of dollars in funding would not make a dent in the capacity crisis left Ball's mother, Lori Leckie depressed, she said.

"All the crying they're doing about 'poor Jamie-Lee Ball' and then we get this bulls—?," she said. "Shame on the finance minister."

NORTH BAY NUGGET: THIBEAULT DEFENDS LIBERAL BUDGET

By JENNIFER HAMILTON-MCCHARLES, The Nugget
Saturday, April 29, 2017 3:34:28 EDT AM

Ontario Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault disputes Vic Fedeli's claim that the provincial budget "leaves the people of rural and Northern Ontario with less."

On Thursday, Fedeli, Nipissing MPP and Conservative finance critic, claimed the Liberals are cutting \$70 million from the budget of the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines.

"Vic's claim that we cut \$70 million from MNDM is absolutely not the case," Thibeault responded Friday. "The budget for the ministry is \$100 million. The additional \$70 million was put into the budget last year and was one-time funding to decommission mines."

In addition, Thibeault said, the province has increased the budget for highway resurfacing by \$100 million to \$654 million.

"Highway 11 and Highway 534 (from Restoule Provincial Park to near Highway 11 in Powassan) are among the highways that will see an investment."

He said the budget also includes 72 new long-term care beds for Mattawa.

Thibeault also disputes Fedeli's claim that the Liberals are abandoning the Ring of Fire chromite mining development 600 kilometres northwest of Timmins

Fedeli said the Ring of Fire was mentioned in the 2014 budget, and cut and pasted into the 2015 and 2016 budgets. But this year it was removed.

"This government is completely behind this project," Thibeault responded. "None of that has changed. We recognize the importance of the Ring of Fire and how this project will benefit everyone."

Speaking Friday, Premier Kathleen Wynne said she's "pretty happy with this budget. We've balanced it."

Conservative Leader Patrick Brown continued to disagree.

"It's actually a \$5-billion operational deficit, so Ontario is not balanced," he said. "That's a sham, that's a charade, that Sousa is trying to present to the public, but it's misleading."

Brown said the Grits are balancing the books by using one-time money, such as the Hydro One sale, revenue from government asset sales, government land sales and double-counting the cap-and-trade money, as well as federal infrastructure money.

But Wynne said provincial revenues are up, helping balance the budget, for a basic reason.

"The Ontario economy is doing very well," she said, adding "it is government's job to make sure" all Ontarians can benefit from the strong economy.

One such budget measure is the pharmacare program for children and youths, covering prescriptions for most acute and common chronic conditions for those age 24 and younger, with no deductions or co-payment, starting Jan. 1.

But Brown said it's not a fair plan.

"I'd like a plan that's more equitable. What I mean by that: I don't believe millionaire kids need help paying for their prescriptions," he said. "Do I think (Canadian pop music star) Justin Bieber needs to have his prescriptions paid for under this plan?"

"When I say means-testing, when I say more of an equitable plan, I would certainly not support covering those who don't need any help at all and not providing help for those who need it."

But Wynne said Ontario doesn't do a "means test" for things like hip replacement and other procedures - people just have it covered. That's what universal care is. Some might not support universal care.

"We do," she said. "We are covering cancer drugs. We are covering medication for rare diseases."

Wynne said her government has built 810 schools and renovated 780. The province is providing \$16 billion in capital funding grants over 10 years to build new schools.

The premier noted her government, when it came to power, put a moratorium on closures.

"At the end of that moratorium, schools boards were saying, 'You're really tying our hands,'" Wynne said.

The issue of school closures is "a very challenging thing" and Wynne said the discussions happening in communities around pressures on small schools are not always "good discussions."

Her government would be much more interested in boards and schools collaborating with each other to find options for schools in smaller communities, Wynne said.

Brown said that's not the whole story, however.

"You look at the fine print - there's 300 schools on the chopping block," he said. "We've seen the history of this, too. I think of the elementary schools in Port McNicoll and Waubesa, Barrie Central, of course. There's been a history of school closures."

"I actually got up in the legislature this week. I read (Wynne) quotes from when she first entered politics. She said she was getting into politics to stop (former Ontario premier) Mike Harris's school closures, and 'Mike the Knife,' she called him. She has now closed 100 more schools than Mike Harris and (another former PC premier) Ernie Eves combined, and there are 300 more on the chopping block. So, how hypocritical and disingenuous, and there's no help in this budget."

The 2017 budget also includes previous announcements, such as the 25% cut in hydro rates by this summer.

Wynne said this is not early campaigning ahead of the 2018 Ontario election.

"For a couple of years, we've been trying to find ways to help people with their electricity bills," she said, using the Ontario Electricity Support Program, to help low-income Ontarians, as an example. "We realized that wasn't enough."

Wynne said she is used to hearing critics claim this is premature electioneering, but "that can't stop me ... from doing the things that are right."

Brown disagreed.

"Most likely, the next budget will be a glorified platform," he said. "I think this one is their election budget."

The PC boss said there need to be structural changes to hydro - stop selling Hydro One shares, rein in executive salaries right now, stop over-generating water power and having to give it away, and stop signing new generation contracts.

"I will have a more elaborate discussion of hydro in the (election) platform," he said. "What I did put out, the structural changes, I didn't pick a number out of thin air like the NDP or Liberals did, but changes I asked the government to do would result in lower hydro rates."

Wynne said she's unaware of a Tory hydro plan, however.

"We've seen no evidence of a plan (from the PCs)," she said. "If Patrick Brown has a good idea, he should be telling the people of Ontario what that is."

The Liberals' plan to find savings so it can cut rates by 25 per cent is to finance the costs of electricity-generation contracts during longer periods of time.

"The Liberal plan is not a plan; it simply borrows money. Borrowing money is not a plan," Brown said. "I want to make sure that what I present to Ontarians is not some number out of thin air - it's actually based on reasoned evidence."

The next Ontario election is expected to be held in June 2018.

With files from By Bob Bruton, Nathan Taylor, Postmedia

. . . .

Is this a good budget? Share your thoughts with sud.letters@sunmedia.ca

***JOURNAL PIONEER: COLUMN: ONE-HANDED APPLAUSE FOR ONTARIO'S YOUTH
PHARMACARE PLAN***

by Thomas Walkom

Published on April 29, 2017

Give one cheer for the Liberals. Kathleen Wynne's Ontario government has finally bit the bullet on publicly funded pharmacare.

Advertisement

Their scheme to provide those under 25 with free prescription drugs isn't comprehensive. Nor, in spite of Finance Minister Charles Sousa's boast, is it exactly path-breaking. Saskatchewan already offers a similar, albeit less generous, drug plan to children 14 and under.

But it is a start.

The plan, announced in Thursday's budget, would allow any Ontarian age 24 and under who needs prescription drugs for medical purposes to receive them at no cost.

Unlike the province's drug plan for seniors, there would be no co-payment and no deductible. Unlike the drug plan for welfare recipients, there would be no means test.

Rather, like medicare, it would be universally available and cover the entire cost of roughly 4,400 drugs.

Experts can argue whether the Liberal pharmacare plan is better or worse than that pitched by Andrea Horwath's Ontario New Democrats. The NDP proposes a scheme that would cover everyone under 65, but only for 125 commonly prescribed drugs.

But the Liberals have the advantage of being in power right now. If they follow through on their promise, their truncated pharmacare plan will come into effect next January.

I suspect they will follow through, because this idea is likely to be popular. And once a popular pharmacare scheme is in place, it will be politically difficult for any government to kill it.

Fiscally, the Liberal drug plan has the advantage of being cheap - largely because younger people tend to be in good health. Officials say it will cost roughly \$465 million a year, a relatively small amount for a government that spends more than \$140 billion annually.

Politically, the drug scheme is a classic pre-election Liberal feint to the left. After years of foundering and with an election due in 2018, Wynne has rediscovered the virtue of activist government.

Health-care spending, in particular, is being boosted. The government kept the lid screwed tight. It is loosening it.

The average annual rate of growth in total health spending is rising from 1.8 to 3.3 per cent - with a big chunk of that new spending going to hospitals.

If re-elected, the Liberals may return to their tight-fisted ways. They have done so before. Their surprise decision to authorize the sale of Hydro One demonstrates that the Wynne Liberals are infinitely flexible.

But they will find it politically difficult to reverse themselves on pharmacare. It is the missing piece of medicare. Voters understand that.

Voters also understand that employee health benefit plans are in decline. Employers find them too expensive. Precarious workers rarely, if ever, qualify for them.

For these reasons, any move toward universal publicly funded pharmacare is welcome and probably irreversible. Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown told reporters Thursday that he would prefer a scheme that is means-tested. But Ontario already has a drug benefit program for the poor.

What is useful about this scheme is precisely what Brown doesn't like about it: It is a step on the road to universal pharmacare.

Sousa told reporters that he hopes Ontario's move will persuade Ottawa and other provinces to act.

Perhaps it will.

But if that doesn't happen, this budget at least commits Ontario to something. It makes no sense to exclude out-of-hospital drug therapy from public health insurance. It never has.

There is much in this budget that is unsatisfactory. Welfare rates adjusted for inflation remain flat. The problems faced by seniors trying to get long-term care are not really addressed. As NDP Leader Horwath noted, even the pharmacare proposals have a haphazard air about them.

But at least the government has promised something positive. I don't know whether this will be enough to give the Liberals a victory in the next election. I don't know whether the Liberals deserve a victory in the next election.

However, if they manage to get this thing going in January, they do deserve, at the very least, a round of one-handed applause.

TAGLINE:

Thomas Walkom is a national affairs columnist whose columns are distributed through Torstar Syndication Services. Journal Pioneer

TORONTO SUN: NO 'ELECTION GOODIES' FOR T.O. IN LIBERALS' SLEIGHT OF HAND BUDGET

James Jamie Wallace BY JAMES WALLACE, V-P, EDITORIAL, SUNS
FIRST POSTED: FRIDAY, APRIL 28, 2017 09:53 PM EDT | UPDATED: FRIDAY, APRIL 28, 2017 10:11 PM EDT

Ontario's Liberal government has for years excelled at casting failure and self-interest as accomplishment and public service.

For example, government mismanagement that led to devastating electricity rate hikes across the province was addressed with billions in new debt and marketed as "Ontario's Fair Hydro Plan."

The government's new cap and trade energy program "designed to help fight climate change" does nothing to actually address climate change, but does put billions of dollars into the Liberal government's pocket by creating a new tax that raises the cost of living for all Ontarians.

And this week, the Liberals unveiled a budget that boasted about "balancing" the provinces books for the first time in a decade, though did that through ill-advised asset sales and accounting sleight of hand.

Reality will see more and record debt piled onto Ontarians to bankroll a budget focused on election goodies intended bolster an unpopular government facing electoral ruin.

Meanwhile, for the desperately-needed meat and potatoes spending on transit and public housing, there was nada, or next to it, in Finance Minister Charles Sousa's budget.

Which is what prompted Mayor John Tory to fume (or as close to Tory gets to that) about the "decades of inaction on transit" from successive provincial governments that have undermined badly needed improvements to both transit and public housing.

And for anyone who hasn't noticed, both are a disgrace.

Chronic gridlock in Toronto and across the GTA costs billions in lost productivity and locks working people in cars, subways and buses needlessly for uncounted hours.

Public housing is a scandal. Buildings are falling apart. Some projects are riddled with crime and the province looks on indifferently while residents live in fear and the waiting lists for those who are vulnerable and in need can stretch to a decade.

These are broken public programs.

This issue isn't, as Premier Kathleen Wynne suggested, about how much the province has done for Toronto in the past.

It's about what's needed to fix things. At some point over the past 14 years, the Liberals ought to have made sustainable funding for transit and public transit a real priority.

Fixing Toronto's transit and social housing problems will require "continuous investment" from Queen's Park, Tory suggested.

And surely, the Liberals can't deny that?

In opposition, when Mike Harris was in power, they were quick to take that view.

And as Tory suggested, with the federal Liberals dangling some \$5 billion for Toronto in new transit and housing spending over the next 11 years, the failure of the provincial Liberals to come to the table as a partner makes no sense whatsoever.

As a consequence, without matching provincial funding, Toronto's desperately needed downtown subway relief line won't be built. The waterfront transit line won't be built. Public housing units will sit vacant in disrepair.

Instead, the city will get a great, catchy, new slogan to make things better.

Something with the word "fair" in it. SUN

**WAWA NEWS: OUT-OF-TOUCH WYNNE BUDGET SILENT ON GRASSY NARROWS
CONTAMINATION**

Apr 29, 2017 @ 10:30

“Once again, we’re seeing that the Wynne Liberals have no plan in place to clean up the English-Wabigoon River. Wynne has no intention of offering anything at all to Ontario’s First Nations to clean up the river, according to her budget.

“The Wynne Liberal government has ignored and downplayed the mercury contamination affecting the Grassy Narrows and Wabaseemoong First Nations for years, and the fact that it wasn’t even mentioned in the budget at all just shows how out of touch Kathleen Wynne is with the issues affecting Ontarians.

“Water is life. Ontario’s First Nations deserve clean drinking water, and a government that actually cares about helping them. This budget doesn’t even begin to address decades of damage that has already been done, let alone help these communities rebuild and plan for the future.” Wawa News

TORONTO STAR: PROVINCE SHOULDN'T SHORTCHANGE TORONTO: EDITORIAL

The Wynne government's budget falls short in one vital area – meeting the needs of the province's largest city.

By STAR EDITORIAL BOARD

Sat., April 29, 2017

There was a lot to like in this week's Ontario budget: free prescription drugs for young people; more money for the healthcare system; thousands more affordable childcare places.

But the Wynne government has fallen short in one vital area – meeting the needs of the province's largest city.

The budget contains no significant new money for Toronto's biggest priority: transit. And, most strikingly, it failed to come through with the province's expected share of funding to fix the city's dilapidated stock of social housing.

Mayor John Tory has been pressing Queen's Park for months to do more for the city, especially after Premier Kathleen Wynne vetoed his plan to raise money for transit by tolling two major expressways.

This budget certainly won't ease tensions between the city and the province. On Friday the mayor accused the government of "turning their backs" on Toronto, and even allowing for the usual hyperbole he had a strong case to make.

The most obvious omission in the budget involves public housing. The province failed to live up to a commitment it made three years ago to fund one-third of the \$2.6 billion repair bill faced by Toronto Community Housing.

The province's share amounts to \$864 million over 10 years – but it was nowhere in Finance Minister Charles Sousa's budget. Without it, TCH will be forced to close 1,000 housing units by the end of next year because they are unfit for habitation. It predicts that number will reach 7,500 over the next eight years.

That's unconscionable while 181,000 Torontonians languish on the waiting list for subsidized housing. While they wait, some are forced to pay rents so high they can't afford to buy enough food or take transit. Others are homeless.

The provincial and federal governments must step up and provide much-needed money for the repairs if this debacle is to be prevented.

On transit, there was also disappointment for Toronto. Transportation Minister Steven Del Duca argues the province is already investing billions of dollars in Toronto transit, including money to build the Eglinton Crosstown and Finch West LRT lines, and to expand GO Transit service.

All that is true, but as Tory pointed out Queen's Park must continue to add funding to make up for "decades of inaction."

Not getting additional money from the province threatens the planned downtown relief line, Waterfront transit, and the Eglinton East LRT projects.

The case for funding Toronto's key priorities is overwhelming. The city is the economic engine of the province. Yet its growth and attractiveness for investors is being undercut by traffic congestion made even worse by the failure of governments to fund and build transit alternatives.

The cost of gridlock in the region, for example, was estimated way back in 2006 to amount to \$6 billion a year in lost worker productivity, slower commutes, higher accident rates and insurance costs, as well as air pollution.

All this is well-known, so it's all the more disappointing to see the province come up short on funding. Tory admits that without provincial money the city won't be able to complete its priority projects.

The budget doesn't have to be the last word from the province on funding for Toronto. On housing and transit, in particular, the government still has a way to go.

Read more about: John Tory, Kathleen Wynne

SUDBURY STAR: PROVINCIAL DEBT WORRIES SUDBURY, ONTARIO CHAMBERS

By Sudbury Star Staff

Saturday, April 29, 2017 1:23:18 EDT AM

The Greater Sudbury Chamber of Commerce says it likes the fact the Liberal government on Thursday tabled a provincial budget that was balanced for first time since 2008.

However, in a statement issued jointly with the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, officials expressed concern Friday "that there is no clear path for long-term fiscal prudence" and no plan to reduce the province's total debt. "This will place tremendous fiscal burden on future generations and considerable pressure on future economic planning," the chambers said.

Local officials are also concerned the budget does little to help Greater Sudbury and the rest of Northern Ontario. While it was encouraging to see the budget expand funding for co-op positions and adult education opportunities, for this funding to be truly effective it will have to target regions most affected by skills shortages, the chambers said.

"Businesses in Greater Sudbury have greater difficulty finding skilled workers than those in southern Ontario," Tracy Nutt, chair of the board of the Greater Sudbury Chamber of Commerce, said. "Greater Sudbury and all of Northern Ontario faces a significant skills shortage that limits businesses' ability to grow; without regionally targeted funding for skills development, businesses may not be able to overcome that shortage."

Neither does the budget provide funding to help Greater Sudbury's businesses develop new technologies required to meet Ontario's CO2 emissions targets. Without this funding to develop new technologies, large emitters may not be able to make the necessary transition to a low-carbon economy, Nutt said.

Provincially, the chambers noted the province is relying heavily on a strong economy to meet its numbers. "Budget 2017 demonstrates that much of Ontario's fiscal outlook will depend on the prosperity of our private sector," Richard Koroscil, interim president and CEO of the OCC, said. "The government acknowledged that business investment spending slowed in 2016, though it expects firms to increase investment by 3.1 per cent, annually, to 2020 - an amount that would outpace growth in real GDP and household spending.

"These assumptions depend on business confidence, which has fallen precipitously in recent years according to the Ontario Economic Report, and U.S. demand, which is subject to considerable risk given recent comments by President Donald Trump."

Ontario's revenues rely on the level and pace of economic activity of the province, but the 2017 budget offers limited vision for how to ensure that private-sector economic growth will continue to rise.

Promised corporate income tax rate relief, which the government paused following the economic downturn, was not reinstated. In the 2009 budget, the province pledged to reduce the corporate income tax (CIT) rate to 10 per cent by 2013. Within 10 years it was estimated that the value of this CIT reduction would see Ontario benefit by increased capital investment of \$47

billion, increased annual incomes of \$29.4 billion and an estimated 591,000 net new jobs. However, the CIT reduction promise was halted in 2012 in light of the province's deteriorating fiscal situation, and so the CIT rate remained at 11.5 per cent.

One bright spot was the details provided around the clear commitment by Ontario's private sector to providing job growth for the province. The budget suggests that 98 per cent of all new jobs since the recession in Ontario have been full-time, and 78 per cent in above-average wage industries. This positive economic activity by Ontario's private sector demonstrates a clear commitment to good, quality jobs throughout the province, the chambers said.

"Government must listen to its own budget document on the consistent creation of high-quality jobs when they consider the final report of the changing workplaces review, expected in the coming weeks," Koroscil said. "While Premier (Kathleen) Wynne and others have recently spoken about the rise of part-time work and concern over precarious work more generally, Budget 2017 states that the majority of the jobs created since the recession were in industries that pay above-average wages, in the private sector and in full-time positions."

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GLOBE AND MAIL: APRIL 29: BUDGET, IN WORDS AND DEEDS. PLUS OTHER LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Saturday, Apr. 29, 2017 6:00AM EDT

Last updated Saturday, Apr. 29, 2017 6:00AM EDT

0 Comments Print

Letters to the Editor should be exclusive to The Globe and Mail. Include your name, address and daytime phone number. Try to keep letters to fewer than 150 words. Letters may be edited for length and clarity. To submit a letter by e-mail, click here: letters@globeandmail.com

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Budget, in words and deeds

Re Ontario Bets Strong Economy Will Keep Budget Balanced (April 28): One reason I have little respect for most politicians at all levels is their desecration of the English language. In their unwillingness to call a spade a spade, they fall back on what can at best be called euphemistic spin and at worst outright lying. Their current favourite is referring to all spending, even the most wasteful and self-serving, as “investing.”

But Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne hit an all-time high (or low, depending on your point of view) during an interview after Thursday’s provincial budget when she referred to the sell-off of Hydro One as “broadening of the ownership.” Egad.

Lyman MacInnis, Toronto

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Many of those who cannot afford necessary prescription medications are people with chronic diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease (Ontario Liberals Unveil Major Boost To Health-Care Spending, Free Prescription Drugs For Youth In Budget – Folio, April 28). Providing the chronically ill with free medication would not only improve their health significantly, but result in savings that range from preventing complications that must be treated to the reduced costs inherent in bulk buying.

But I guess there are more uncommitted voters to be had by targeting the under-24s.

Suleman Remtulla, Mississauga

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Feel-good feels good

Re We Are Canada Is Just Bafflingly Bad TV (Life & Arts, April 27): Why is John Doyle so down on the CBC and We Are Canada? What’s wrong with reflecting feel-good Canadian values, such as people with limitations doing remarkable things or do-gooders making the world a better place? I far prefer that to the dark values in some of the U.S. series Mr. Doyle praises. Can’t we just relax in front of the television and feel good about ourselves for a change?

Sandra Heft, Waverley, N.S.

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Confidence in top court at stake

Your editorial Supreme Hope (April 27) is correct in saying that a reasonable ruling in the James Cody case which is now before the high court could “protect the reputation of the justice system.” As well, it could restore the public’s confidence in the Supreme Court itself, which should have been able to foresee the chaos that has resulted from its decision on delays in the R. v. Jordan case.

Peter Tobin, Ottawa

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Embrace ‘free, prior, informed’

GUELPH TODAY: NEW OHIP+ TO PAY FOR PRESCRIPTION MEDS FOR KIDS

Plans will ensure that all children and youth get access to the medications they need 0
about 5 hours ago by: Rob O'Flanagan

Guelph MPP and Treasury Board President Liz Sandals promoted the new OHIP+ program at the Rexall Pharma Plus on Eramosa Road Friday morning. She was joined by Rexall officials, from left, Mike Gatto, regional director of operations, Rola Barakat, regional director of pharmacies, and Mustafa Kurdi, the manager of the pharmacy. Rob O'Flanagan/GuelphToday First thing Friday morning, the day after provincial budget day, Treasury Board President and Guelph MPP Liz Sandals was back in Guelph promoting what she called the budget's most significant measure.

Finance Minister Charles Sousa's budget, the first balanced one in nearly ten years, included \$465 million annually for OHIP+: Children and Youth Pharmacare Program. It makes prescription medication free for all young people in the province 24-years-old and under.

Sandals visited the Rexall Pharma Plus on Eramosa Road, where pharmacy officials joined her as she talked about the new drug plan.

Sandals said OHIP+ has been in the works for some time, and is the right thing to do for families who may not be able to afford costly medications for their children.

OHIP+ will have to be approved in June when the budget is voted on, and is scheduled to take effect on Jan. 1, 2018. It will cover the cost of 4,400 different medications, including drugs to treat cancers and rare diseases.

In a Friday press release, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne called the new plan "a watershed moment for healthcare in Ontario," and said it makes the province the first in Canada to introduce universal pharmacare for children and youth.

Sandals said the provinces and territories have been frustrated for many years by a lack of federal government action on a pharmacare plan for youth and children.

A national program, she said, would help lower drug prices in the country, since it would be the government negotiating with drug companies for better prices. Ontario decided the time was right for such a plan of its own.

With growth in provincial revenues from a growing economy, the government now has the ability to make new investments, Sandals said Friday morning.

"Where we've really focused this year is on healthcare," she said. "The biggest investment is in what we are calling OHIP+, which is a universal pharmacare plan for children and youth."

Provincially funded drug plans in the province currently only cover the cost of drugs for seniors, and those on Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program.

"So the average Ontario family doesn't get any support with drugs, unless they are lucky enough to work for an employer who has a drug benefit program," she said.

She said many families in the province are prescribed medications for their sick child but are unable to afford to pay for them.

“That child is going to go untreated,” she said. “Pharmacare is expensive, so when we thought about where to start, we said let’s make sure that all the children in the province are covered. So that if a child gets sick, their parents will be able to afford it.”

She added that the United Nations defines children and youth as anyone 24 or under. The government used that definition as its guide.

Rola Barakat, Rexall’s regional director of pharmacies, called the plan “great news for every person in Ontario.”

Sandals suggested that OHIP+ may lead to reduced premiums on the drug plans employers in the province offer their employees, given that drugs for children and youth will be covered by the province.

She said once the plan is in place it is unlikely it would be discontinued. It is not the sort of plan that another political party would promise to get rid of during an election campaign, she indicated. Guelph Today

***CBC NEWS: HOW ONTARIO'S PROPOSED PHARMACARE PLAN COULD IMPROVE
EMPLOYEE BENEFITS***

CBC.CA News

Sat Apr 29 2017, 5:00am ET

Section: Toronto

Byline: CBC News

Ontario's insurance industry says "significant changes" could be coming to employee benefit programs if the province's youth pharmacare plan is implemented.

The proposed program would provide Ontarians 24 and under with free access to approximately 4,400 prescription drugs.

- Duelling drug plans set stage for pharmacare election in Ontario

If the 2017 budget is approved, the plan could relieve insurance providers from covering those drugs in benefit plans, potentially resulting in lower premiums, expanded coverage or both.

"I can't think of any analogous policy initiative that would have as much of an impact as this would have," said Frank Swedlove, president and CEO of the Canadian Life and Health Insurance Association.

"There are some significant possibilities for savings here," he added, explaining that it remains too early to tell exactly how extensive those savings might be.

Ontario expecting consumer savings

Ontario estimates the program will cost \$465 million per year, resulting in significant savings for insurance companies and employers offering benefit plans.

Health Minister Eric Hoskins said discussions will soon begin to make sure that relief does not go to waste.

"We will be setting up a process ? a table, with insurers, with employers, with employees, other stakeholders ? to ensure that those savings are passed on," Hoskins said to reporters at a Toronto recreation centre.

Hoskins said that employers pay the upfront cost of medication in around two-thirds of Ontario benefit plans, as well as additional administrative fees to process those purchases.

The introduction of a youth pharmacare program would be most acutely felt in those cases, he said, and the program would essentially eliminate the current overhead costs for those transactions.

"By taking that cost out of the cost of their benefit plan, they will see a reduction," Hoskins said.

To save or expand?

If the savings do materialize, insurers and employers will have to decide what to do with the extra money.

Some are already arguing that the savings should be directed toward new areas of health coverage.

"The savings, in my opinion, is going to be extremely high for these companies, and in turn they should open up access for further services," said Danielle Xavier, president of Conceivable Dreams.

Her organization is advocating for an expansion in access to fertility treatments.

Currently, the province provides help for an initial round of in vitro fertilization (IVF), but Xavier said employers and insurers would be wise to improve access to those treatments, since one in six Ontarians deals with infertility at some point.

"In this circumstance, it would be the employers and benefit providers who could do this and really make a substantial difference," she said.

The Canadian Life and Health Insurance Association said those decisions will ultimately lie with those employers and providers, though given Ontario's competitive insurance marketplace, the potential changes will likely be widespread.

"I would expect essentially all supplementary health plans in Ontario would be affected by this," said Swedlove.

CBC NEWS: PREMIER KATHLEEN WYNNE HINTS AT EXPANDING PHARMACARE TO ALL AGES IN ONTARIO ? EVENTUALLY

News

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A day after promising free prescription drugs for children and young adults in the Ontario's 2017 budget, Premier Kathleen Wynne is hinting she would like to expand the new pharmacare program to cover all ages.

The province announced the expanded drug coverage in Thursday's annual budget, a move it projects will cost \$465 million per year.

But as for the feasibility of a pharmacare program for all Ontarians, as well as when one could be rolled out, Wynne is making no promises.

"Do I believe there should be universal pharmacare for all ages in Ontario? Yes. I think that that is an absolutely important goal. Do I have a timeline on when that can happen? No, I don't," the premier said.

"But what I will say to you is it will happen much more quickly if we have a federal government that is working on a national pharmacare plan."

If approved, the Liberals drug plan for people aged 24 and under would roll out Jan. 1, 2018. It would cover 4,400 drugs for the province's four million children and young adults.

"Our vision, ultimately in this province, is this type of program for all Ontarians," said Ontario Health Minister Eric Hoskins. "We need to start with this step."

Both Wynne and Hoskins refused to comment on a specific timeline. Hoskins said the government's job is to first successfully roll out the expanded drug coverage and make it a success for four million young Ontarians..

"I think that's going to then illustrate or illuminate what the next steps could be."

With files from Laura Fraser and Mike Crawley

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