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Q P B R I E F I N G

January 22, 2018

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Click links below to view article:

Articles

- [1\). Wynne makes election-year pitch to rural municipalities](#)
- [2\). Finance minister promises 'advanced and open' spring budget ahead of election](#)
- [3\). PC party exec testifies under oath in controversial nomination civil case](#)

Articles

1). Wynne makes election-year pitch to rural municipalities

By: David Hains

Premier Kathleen Wynne made her pitch to politicians and stakeholders from Ontario municipalities on Monday morning ahead of an election that could be tough for the Liberals in big swaths of the province.

At the annual Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA) conference in a downtown Toronto hotel, the premier outlined what her government has done for rural Ontario. She focused on the theme of "fairness," and cited the recently increased minimum wage as a prime example.

"The economy is strong – but that rising tide is not lifting all boats. In these turbulent times, I believe it is even more important that government be that force for fairness — that agent for change," the premier said in remarks that opened the conference on Monday morning.

Wynne drew a contrast between the Liberals and PCs by saying that increasing the minimum wage to \$15, which is scheduled to be implemented on Jan. 1, 2019, "can't wait." When the premier stated that the minimum wage needs to be a living wage, she earned the only applause of her speech.

The PCs, who have promised they would not roll back the \$14 minimum wage, have proposed

a gradual increase to \$15 over four years.

While the premier added mentions of other trademark initiatives such as OHIP+, she also referenced more rural concerns to the ROMA crowd.

"We've made record-breaking investments in the roads and bridges and transit that connect us all . . . we announced more bus services for people in southwestern Ontario which builds on the increased bus service in the North, serving towns from Hearst to Red Lake."

Wynne also acknowledged grievances from ROMA members, including concerns over labour legislation and rural school closures. The premier said that where there were disagreements, she would do her best to listen in good faith.

"You have also been very frank about the need to protect the vital role schools play in your communities, I hear you," the premier said.

"So last June, we pressed pause on any new school closures."

But rural municipal leaders voiced their concerns about other issues from the open floor.

Top of mind was the increased minimum wage, which was asked about multiple times. As she has before, Wynne defended the big jump by arguing there's never a perfect time to do so, but it was done in the context of corporate profits at an all-time high.

But the concerns of rural municipalities aren't limited to high-profile issues such as the increased minimum wage.

Lynn Dollin, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario president and deputy mayor of Innisfil, spoke to the need for more respect from other orders of government, and the funding that comes along with it.

"If we were taken seriously, municipal governments would receive a bigger share of tax dollars, and we would have a bigger say in how our services are delivered," she said in a call for governance reform.

Dollin spoke for many members when she added that municipalities often "don't have a free hand to improve efficiency or control costs," especially with the property tax as the limited but predominant revenue tool to fund city services.

Patrick Brown and Andrea Horwath deliver their pitches to ROMA on Tuesday morning.

[Top](#)

2). Finance minister promises 'advanced and open' spring budget

By: Jessica Smith Cross

Finance Minister Charles Sousa acknowledged Monday his spring budget is subject to time constraints — and suggested it might be released in early spring.

Asked about the timing of the budget at a Monday morning media availability, Sousa said it will be a spring budget, and confirmed he plans to get it, and legislation that stems from it, passed before the house rises for the election.

There are nine sitting weeks scheduled before writ of election, set for May 9. Last year, the budget wasn't delivered until April 27. In 2016, it landed early, on Feb. 25.

Sousa also said his office is being open with independent officers of the legislature, the Auditor General and Financial Accountability Office (FAO), and intends to provide them as much information as possible, despite the "constrained" timeline posed by the election.

"I know we're going to be as advanced and open in terms of what we are doing for the benefit of the Auditor General and the (Financial Accountability Office)," Sousa said.

Under provincial law, the government is expected to give the auditor general a pre-election report on the state province's finances. Then, the auditor is expected to release a public statement on the report. When elections have been held in October, the province has delivered the pre-election report after the spring budget, leaving plenty of time for the auditor general.

However, auditor general Bonnie Lysyk raised concerns last month that her office won't have time to examine the pre-election report and issue a statement in time for the voting public to digest it if the government does not give it to her promptly.

Lysyk declined to comment on the issue Monday.

Meanwhile, the FAO typically releases an economic and fiscal outlook following the budget and will do so this year, subject to the timing of the budget relative to the election, said spokesperson Kismet Baun. She noted, however, that offices such as the FAO avoid releasing reports prior to an election.

Sousa said he wants the public, as well as the independent officers of the legislature, to see the province's fiscal plan.

"As we proceed forward, I want to make certain that we have a clear plan that's understood by the public, by investors," he said. "We have uncertainty in the marketplace, with the discussions around NAFTA, and trade negotiations, and we want to provide calm and understanding for the public as to what that means for Ontario as we move forward."

Sousa also said it will be important that the budget and government programs "enable us to weather any economic shocks that come around," acknowledging that the province — which only this fiscal year climbed out of deficit and balanced the first budget since the recession a decade ago — has suffered economic shocks before.

The minister didn't give away any other new priorities, saying only that the public will build on the work his government has already done.

On the hydro file, Sousa suggested major work has been done: He touted the 25-per-cent-off bills from the Fair Hydro Plan, and the investments the province has been made in hydro infrastructure, and said the province is working toward boosting capacity for localizing power generation.

He brushed off a question about focusing the budget on the re-election of the Liberal party, saying that every budget must be "long-term in scope."

"I look at a budget as more than just being a plan for the year, it's a plan for future generations," he said. "And part of that is for me to foster ways to improve our GDP and lower our overall debt-to-GDP, manage our expenses and find savings, to provide for efficiencies, while still providing support and measures that are progressive for the benefit of our society."

Sousa was hosting pre-budget consultations in Toronto on Monday. Consultations will follow over the coming weeks in Windsor, London, Thornhill, Etobicoke, Niagara region, Hamilton, Ottawa, Kingston, Oshawa, Brampton, Thunder Bay and Kitchener. The province is also planning pre-budget telephone town halls and accepting feedback sent by mail, email or fax to 416-325-0969, by Feb. 9.

[Top](#)

3). PC party exec testifies under oath in controversial nomination

By: Christopher Reynolds

The president of the Progressive Conservative party testified under oath Monday in Toronto in a civil case that concerns allegations of ballot-box stuffing and voter fraud at a PC nomination meeting.

Rick Dykstra arrived at the Bay Street office of a Toronto court reporting service to undergo an examination for discovery by a lawyer for spurned nomination candidate Vikram Singh, who

filed a lawsuit last June after coming in second in the Tory nomination race in Hamilton West-Ancaster-Dundas.

Dykstra did not respond when asked whether the civil suit, which claims multiple voting irregularities, could hurt the PCs in the June 7 election.

"They're about to go into testimony. They can't be talking beforehand," Mike Richmond, a lawyer for the PC party, told QP Briefing. "I'm not going to let them answer any questions before they go into testimony."

Logan Bugeja, a staffer for PC Leader Patrick Brown, had left the deposition by 10:30 a.m., Richmond said. PC executive director Bob Stanley, who was on hand Monday, is slated to testify Tuesday. All three are named in Singh's lawsuit, along with Dykstra and the PC Party of Ontario.

Patrick Brown @brownbarrie

With Chuck Konkol Bob Stanley and Maxime Bernier @ CHRV. #dayinthelife #FAQMP #cdnpoli
7:54 PM - Jun 8, 2013

The PC party said Brown can avail himself of parliamentary privilege to sidestep the examination for discovery.

"As Mr. Brown was not at the nomination meeting itself, he has nothing to add and there is no reason for him to testify," a party spokesperson said in a statement to QP Briefing. "In any case, the rules of privilege are well-known, well-settled, and have long been available to Mr. Singh. Of course we will uphold those longstanding rules."

In the past, Brown had called on Premier Kathleen Wynne to resist the option of parliamentary privilege in the Sudbury bribery trial. Wynne testified as a witness last September before a judge dismissed all charges against two former Liberal campaign senior staffers.

Brown was the only person named in the lawsuit who was absent from the meeting Monday morning.

The examination, referred to as a deposition in the United States, is pre-trial oral testimony given under oath by a party in response to questions from the other party's legal counsel. The examination aims to find out what someone knows and put it on the record.

"It's the questioning of a witness or a participant in a litigation matter, simple as that," said Robert Norris, who works at Victory Verbatim, the court reporting service that hosted the sit-down.

Court reporting companies record and transcribe sworn statements for submission to a judge or to work toward a settlement.

"The purpose of the discovery, as the name suggests, is for you to discover what evidence the party has," said Ottawa personal-injury lawyer Brenda Hollingsworth. "The whole point of it is that there's no ambush, the theory being the more you know about the other person's case, the more likely there is to be a settlement because you understand each other."

The PC testimony is the latest step in a legal confrontation that, since its launch last summer, has seen a second suit by another would-be candidate in the nomination dropped and a side battle over the transcript of a mysterious conversation between Singh and Brown's campaign director Walied Soliman.

"Regardless of whether Mr. Brown will be forced to release this information through the court's directive, it's in the public interest that our leaders are open with the people they are asking to vote for them," said NDP house leader Gilles Bisson in a statement Monday.

The nomination came under renewed scrutiny when Hamilton police launched a fraud investigation into the vote, which occurred at Ancaster High School on May 7.

Federal prosecutors recently took over the case from the provincial Ministry of the Attorney General, citing the political nature of the file.

Brown said Saturday he won't entertain "hypotheticals" around potential charges against party brass. He said he would address how to deal with PC executives if and when criminal charges are laid against them.

[Top](#)