

QP Briefing: January 4, 2018

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Q P B R I E F I N G

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Articles

1). Cold snap sends a chill through Queen's Park over response to shelter crisis

By: Christopher Reynolds

The cold snap has permeated the drafty doors of Queen's Park.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath issued a frosty rebuke to Premier Kathleen Wynne and the governing Liberals on Thursday for keeping "silent" about Toronto's packed homeless shelter system amidst an ongoing cold spell.

Horwath said it is "inexcusable" and "abhorrent" that the premier and Housing Minister Peter Milczyn "sit idly by" during what Mayor John Tory on Wednesday deemed a "crisis," as people without a permanent residence struggle to find sanctuary from the brutal winter weather.

"I haven't heard anything from the premier yet. We have families, little children, some of the most vulnerable people in our communities, looking for a place to stay warm overnight," Horwath said in a phone interview. "It might not be a problem that Kathleen Wynne has to worry about, but holy smokes, lots of folks are in a very bad spot."

"The Wynne government had a hand in creating this mess in the first place, through years of cuts and freezes, ranging from eliminating Toronto's Pooling Compensation, to underfunding

social housing, to ending demand-based shelter funding, to failing those living with addictions or mental health issues," Horwath added in a statement.

She also said the funding cap on a provincial housing program, the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative, hampers municipalities trying to respond to surges in shelter demand.

Horwath reiterated her party's pledge to fund one-third of the cost of repairs to affordable and social housing units in partnership with municipalities and Ottawa. Last year the NDP incorporated a standalone Ministry of Mental Health and Addiction services into its budding platform.

The government responded that Milczyn and Health Minister Eric Hoskins plan to sit down with Tory following a request from the mayor. "A time is being arranged for this to occur in the very near future," said Milczyn's spokesperson Myriam Denis on Thursday.

Denis defended the ministry's homeless prevention plan, launched in 2012. She said it helped 32,300 households find a home in 2016-17, and enabled 125,500 households at risk of homelessness to stay in their homes.

Funding for the initiative went up by \$15 million this year, with plans for \$15 million more in each of the next two years for a total annual investment of \$339 million by 2019-20, Denis noted. In Toronto, which gets roughly one-third of the cash each year, the commitment has amounted to more than \$681 million since 2012, she said in an email.

"We remain committed to helping the city ensure that the homeless are safe and have access to the services they need," Denis said.

Facing mounting pressure, Tory announced Wednesday he was in talks with officials at the national defence department to open the Moss Park Armoury as a makeshift shelter for homeless Torontonians amid weeks of extreme cold. He had voted against the idea in early December, when a motion came before council.

Advocates for the homeless community and some city councillors have long pushed to use the armouries at Moss Park and Fort York as emergency shelters when local drop-in centres threaten to overflow. Past mayors have helped fling open the doors to the military facilities, initially in 1996, and most recently in 2004.

Tory admitted Wednesday to recent "mistakes," which included city staff erroneously telling frontline workers that shelter space for homeless people had run out across the board, despite empty cots at a facility in Exhibition Place.

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2). CEO of Hydro One will earn more by end of week than aver

By: Christopher Reynolds

Hydro One CEO Mayo Schmidt will have raked in more cash by week's end than the typical Ontario family will all year.

So launched the Progressive Conservatives' opening round in the war of attrition that will characterize 2018 in the lead-up to election day on June 7.

Recharged and reloaded, the party caucus fired off a shot Thursday aimed at executive compensation in the electricity field.

"Hydro disconnections are reaching new record highs every year in Ontario," said PC energy critic Todd Smith in a statement. "At the same time, Ontario electricity customers are still funding millionaire Hydro One executives because Kathleen Wynne has decided to put Liberal insiders ahead of the people."

By lunchtime on Friday, Schmidt will have earned \$75,000, according to Tory calculations, an amount equal to the province's median family income, according to Statistics Canada.

Hydro One's head earned \$4.5 million last year. The PC arithmetic divides that figure by the typical number of working hours in a year — about 2,000 — then adds up how long it would take for a salary that yields about \$2,250 per hour to hit \$75,000 in a given 40-hour work week. The apparent answer: about 33 hours, or a little more than four working days.

Smith called out skyrocketing hydro prices in recent years and "a lack of transparency," though he did not directly reference the government's Fair Hydro Plan, which brings down electricity rates in the short term at longer-term cost.

Hydro One, Ontario's largest electricity transmitter, is no longer a public utility owned by the province, but a publicly traded company in which the province currently holds slightly less than a 50-per-cent share. The board of directors controls matters such as executive compensation.

Colin Nekolaichuk, a spokesperson for Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault, said in an email that since its initial public offering in 2015, Hydro One has been "providing better service and better value, both to its customers and to the province."

Nekolaichuk highlighted a freshly designed hydro bill, better customer service and, heaviest of all, a voluntary moratorium on household power shutdowns during winter months for customers who owe money, so no one is left in the cold. The province later made the program mandatory for other companies.

"They've managed to do this while achieving \$60 million in cost savings in their first year as a public company," he said.

In spite of its efforts, Hydro One has repeatedly been caught in the political crossfire at Queen's Park. The opposition parties frequently criticize the CEO's salary as well as the company's Ontario Energy Board application to increase transmission rates. The NDP have harped on the company's request to implement prepaid hydro meters. The PCs, in their latest attack, criticized it for its proposed \$6.4-billion purchase of Avista, a Washington-based energy company that claims partial ownership of a large coal plant.

The Tory release pledged again to rein in "exorbitant executive salaries" at Hydro One and Ontario Power Generation. The Ontario Energy Board partially blocked OPG's application to raise rates, ruling recently that the Crown corporation must make \$500 million in cost adjustments over the next five years, including \$150 million related to "excessive" pension and benefits compensation.

The energy regulator did approve an OPG rate increase in order to pay for costs related to refurbishing the Darlington and Pickering nuclear plants. Ratepayers won't see the immediate consequences of that hike, however, thanks to the Fair Hydro Plan's effective deferral of additional energy costs to take place between 2028 and 2045, to help deliver a 25-per-cent cost reduction over the next few years.

The PCs, if they form the next government, have promised to bar any new energy contracts, repeal the Green Energy Act, nix the smart meter charges and rebate the government's portion of Hydro One's dividend directly to ratepayers on their bills.

- With files from David Hains

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3). In Brief: Homeless shelters and prisons

By: Christopher Reynolds

In the wake of criticism over its response to near-bursting homeless shelters during a prolonged cold snap, the city of Toronto announced it would open two 24/7 warming centres starting Thursday at 7 p.m.

The overnight centres, open to homeless Torontonians and their pets, are located at Metro Hall and the Regent Park Community Centre, which sit in the downtown area. The centres will remain open until the current extreme cold weather alert ends, according to a city release.

"We continue to explore all options and opportunities to protect our city's most vulnerable residents," Mayor John Tory said in a statement Thursday. The day before, he'd acknowledged "mistakes" around a miscommunication where city staff incorrectly told frontline workers that shelter space for homeless people had run out across the board, despite empty cots at a facility in Exhibition Place.

The Liberals drew fire Thursday from the NDP for the government's apparent silence on the "crisis," a term used by both the New Democrats and the mayor.

Correctional and youth justice workers from across Ontario will dive into community fundraising on Jan. 8, for a soft sell of union demands at an event dubbed, "Corrections cares about community safety."

The day was proposed by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) correctional bargaining team, an OPSEU release stated. That team is engaged in ongoing collective bargaining talks with the provincial government, with the Dec. 31 deadline of the collective agreement for provincial correctional workers' having come and gone.

"We work in volatile and violent workplaces," said bargaining team chair Chris Jackel in a release. "We find that giving back to the community is an effective means to cope with the daily stress we face. Correctional staff will also use the day to raise awareness of the "crisis" in the correctional system, the release added.

Top of mind for the negotiators are prison overcrowding, staffing levels, mental health treatment programs for workers, inmates and parolees, improved compensation and benefits and more effective training for staff dealing with offenders with addiction and mental health issues, said Monte Vieselmeyer, co-chair of OPSEU's employee relations committee.

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