

QP Briefing: Government defends \$5.5M budget for hydro bill relief ads

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Government defends \$5.5M budget for hydro bill relief ads

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Government ministers are defending a publicly funded ad campaign that tells Ontarians something they can learn just by opening their mail — that their hydro bills are going down.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath went after the government in question period on Monday over documents her party obtained that show the government allocated a budget of \$2.5 million in 2016-17 and another \$3 million in 2017-18 to advertise the Fair Hydro Plan. Through an HST rebate, the program reduces residential hydro bills by an average of 25 per cent. It does so by shifting the costs of some social support programs to the tax base and also through a massive borrowing scheme.

"Let's talk about using public dollars for partisan purposes," Horwath said in question period. "We know from the FOI documents on my desk right now that the reason for this ad campaign in the first place was 'negative media coverage' for the premier and her Liberal party. Has this premier not yet learned her lesson about these sneaky kinds of tactics and that Ontarians are fed up with this kind of behaviour by this Liberal government?"

The NDP documents include a brief to the Advertising Review Board for a television and pre-roll campaign to run from February to September 2017, which cites the "negative media coverage of rising electricity bills," saying, "Despite recent cost reduction actions the government has implemented, the overriding messaging from the media has been unreasonably high costs associated with electricity."

Many of the ads aired so far tell listeners and viewers little more than the fact that the government has taken action to lower hydro bills by 25 per cent on average and will hold increases to the level of inflation for four years.

Ontario's auditor general described them as "pat-on-the-back" advertising earlier this year.

Treasury Board President Liz Sandals defended the ads by telling reporters after question period that Ontarians "outside of the bubble" don't know as much as government policy as those who spend their days at Queen's Park.

"The hydro bills are very, very confusing in many cases, certainly that's the reaction I get from my constituents," she said. "We want to make sure that people actually know what is going on. Citizens are entitled to know what's going on. It might make them happier, it might make them less happy."

But was she suggesting that citizens aren't "with it" enough to notice changes to their bills?

"Absolutely not," Sandals said.

Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault, on the other hand, suggested just that. He said he doesn't know how a significant number of his constituents could have missed the fact that their electricity bills have fallen, but they have.

"That's a question you need to ask some of the people I'm talking to, but there are still people out there who have not noticed their bill has dropped by 25 per cent," Thibeault said.

"We've been hearing from them that they've had a hard time, as they've said before, choosing between heating, eating, and now, as we're moving forward into those winter months, they can plan for this," he said.

Thibeault also defended the ads as a way to let the public know they can sign up for government programs that reduce their bills, the Ontario Electricity Support Program (OESP) in particular.

"This is a program that has increased the refund that many families who qualify will get for it. We have prepared and have a budget to help 500,000 families through the OESP and we're nowhere near that number yet. We want to ensure that every single person who qualifies for this can sign up for this program," Thibeault said in question period. "We cannot rely on the opposition parties to talk about these programs, so we need to ensure that the government has its responsibility to raise awareness about these programs and services that are actually helping Ontarians."

However, none of the ads actually mentions the OESP. Colin Nekolaichuk, a spokesperson for Thibeault's office, confirmed this for QP Briefing, saying that the government decided to use the ads to point people to information about the OESP and other programs on a website instead.

He added that if the government advertised the fact that low-income Ontarians can sign up for the OESP, it would be obligated to also mention other electricity-related programs at the same time and it would be too complicated.

"So, to keep it as simple of a message as possible, they decided to point people to the website," Nekolaichuk said.

Thibeault said people are struggling with the complexity of the OESP, with 232,115 customers signed up so far — fewer than half the number the government has budgeted for.

He said that's because people aren't aware of the program and it's complicated to apply for, as the Canada Revenue Agency requires an ink signature from people to allow them to access the income-tested program.