Provincial News: 04/10/2016

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Date: Tue, 04 Oct 2016 08:48:16 -0400

--TBS on the Morning Issues Call--

Not thrown to on the call this morning.

--TBS FYIs—

1. 2015-16 Annual Report and Unaudited Consolidated Financial Statements (Public Accounts)

ISSUE:

- All major outlets reporting on Public Accounts.
  - Opposition:
    - Progressive Conservative finance critic Vic Fedeli accused the government of having an $11-billion budget hole and trying to do an "end-run" around the auditor to spin it.
    - NDP critic Catherine Fife said the government move sets a "dangerous precedent" of bypassing an independent officer of the legislature when disputes arise.
    -
  - Auditor:
    - "I'm disappointed that the government decided that this was the appropriate thing to do"
    - "This is the first time in the history of Ontario that the statements have been released without the audit opinion," Lysyk said. "As late as 10:30 a.m. this morning, we were still in discussions over an accounting issue that we brought to the government's attention in June of this year."

SOURCE:

- Ottawa Sun, Toronto Star, Globe & Mail, Waterloo Region Record, London Free Press, Ottawa Sun

KMs:

- The government has released its 2015-16 Annual Report and unaudited Consolidated Financial Statements to ensure transparency with respect to the province's financial position.
- To align with the Auditor General, a regulation has been filed to prescribe the accounting treatment for pension assets for the 2015-16 financial statements.
- The regulation resolves the outstanding accounting issue for this year in a manner that is consistent with the fiscal outcome proposed by the Auditor General.
- This marks the seventh year in a row that Ontario has beaten its deficit target.
- Ontario remains committed to balancing the budget in 2017-18, while continuing to invest in the priorities that matter to the people of Ontario, such as healthcare, education and infrastructure.

2. OSSTF Remedy Negotiation (Net Zero Issue for TBS)

ISSUE:

- Ongoing coverage of the OSSTF negotiations, with references to Net-Zero

SOURCE:

- National Post, Globe and Mail, London Free Press, Toronto Sun, Ottawa Citizen

KMs:
Net Zero KMs

- Let me start by saying that our government values the work and dedication of our public servants.
- We rely on their advice, professionalism and expertise to help us make Ontario the best place to live, work and do business.
- Whenever government starts to negotiate a new contract with a union, they always receive a bargaining mandate from the Treasury Board
- That mandate always tries to balance two ideals: we want to ensure that we can continue to attract talented people to public service, and we want to do the best job possible in managing public dollars responsibly.
- Our practice of Treasury Board setting bargaining mandates will continue, and those mandates will continue to be consistent with the fiscal plan, and balancing the budget in 2017-18.
- I should point out, that our settlements since 2012 have averaged less than our comparators.
- In fact, since 2012, the average annual negotiated wage increase has been 0.6 per cent – lower than the federal public sector in Ontario (1.7 per cent), Ontario's municipal public sector (1.8 per cent) and private sector in Ontario (1.9 per cent).

EDU KMs

- We are currently engaged in a number of conversations with all of our education partners.
- There's a conversation about potential changes that we are contemplating to the School Board Collective Bargaining Act, and there are the remedy discussions arising out of the ruling on Bill 115.
- Through these conversations, the issue of a potential extension of the contracts has been raised.
- Students deserve to have the adults involved in their schools all working together and focused on their learning.
- There is a lot of progress underway in Ontario's education system, and the system has been functioning well.
- We are focused on working with all of our partners on achieving the shared goals set out in the current collective agreement.
- When the sector can be focused solely on our students and the achievement of excellence, all parties involved – from educators to parents to our children – benefit.
- When we are focused together, we can implement the math strategy and see scores rise.
- When we remain focused on student well-being and strengthening the collaborative professionalism in our schools, our great educational institutions remain places of equity and inclusion.
- And when we remain focused on student success, we can see graduation rates rise across all demographics, including our First Nations, Metis and Inuit students.
- All options on the table are there to ensure our focus remains on what's best for our students.

3. Water Policy

ISSUE:

- The NDP publically announce that they believe the public should be consulted on ground water policy

SOURCE:

- Toronto Star

KMs:

- Water is a vital resource – one that is essential to the health and integrity of our ecosystems and communities
- We must ensure our rules around how water is permitted and used in the province protects our groundwater resources = particularly in the face of climate change and increasing demand due to population growth
- Ontario is helping ensure that our ground water remains protected – now and in the future
- Ontario is currently reviewing its rules around permit to take water

- Ontario is also reviewing the different options for water pricing in Ontario

--Articles--

My owe my; Ontario debt jumps $10.7B after feud with auditor general (SunMedia)

Ottawa Sun

Tue Oct 4 2016
Page: A9
Section: News
Byline: Shawn Jeffords
Source: Ottawa Sun

With the stroke of a pen, Ontario's debt jumped by $10.7 billion on Monday.

A standoff, quietly brewing behind the scenes for weeks between the province's auditor general and the Ministry of Finance, has ended with Kathleen Wynne's government grudgingly declaring the increase in net debt. The new numbers also mean Ontario's deficit increased $1.5 billion in 2015-16.

"The government believes it is in the public interest to release its financial information now since we are six days past the legislative deadline," Treasury Board President Liz Sandals said of the surprise move Monday, almost a week after it was to table audited financial statements for the previous fiscal year. The government blew the deadline last week to file the paperwork, raising questions from the opposition.

These new debt and deficit totals come as the Liberal government argues with auditor general Bonnie Lysyk over accounting rules surrounding two of Ontario's largest public pensions - the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan and the Ontario Public Service Employees Union Pension Plan. Since 2001, the government says, it has listed the fund assets in its yearend statements.

But the AG warned the government this year that she disagreed with the practice because it had no actual means to access the cash in each fund, and instructed it should no longer list the billions in each fund as assets. During a hastily arranged technical briefing and press conference Monday, the government said it will ask for an independent, third-party review of the accounting practice. But in the meantime, it released unaudited financial statements from 2015-16.

"The current auditor general has accepted this treatment for the last two years, resulting in unqualified or clean audit opinions," Sandals said.

In a statement Monday afternoon, Lysyk says she is "disappointed" the government released the financial statements without her opinion.

"This is the first time in the history of Ontario that the statements have been released without the audit opinion," she said.

Sandals and Finance Minister Charles Sousa met with Lysyk on Monday morning to discuss the issue but ducked questions about whether they had informed her that they were going public about the dispute.

"We told her we had an urgent need to get the information out," Sandals said.

Progressive Conservative finance critic Vic Fedeli accused the government of having an $11-billion budget hole and trying to do an "end-run" around the auditor to spin it. The press conference showed the Liberals are in "full-blown panic mode," he added.

"They've come up with one-time version of what they're allowed to do," Fedeli said. "That is unacceptable, unparalleled, and really tells you the true state of the finances here in the province of Ontario."

NDP critic Catherine Fife said the government move sets a "dangerous precedent" of bypassing an independent officer of the legislature when disputes arise.

sjeffords@postmedia.com

ONTARIO'S ACCOUNTING SQUABBLE BY THE NUMBERS

$10.7 billion: The amount added to the debt.

$1.5 billion: The amount added to the deficit in 2015-16.

14: The number of years the government says this accounting practice has been in place.

$8.5 billion: The projected deficit in the 2015-16 budget.

$5 billion: The deficit in the actual 2015-16 budget.

$305.2 billion: The total net debt.

Illustration:

• / (See hardcopy for photo)
• / Auditor general Bonnie Lysyk was 'disappointed' that Treasury Board President Liz Sandals, inset, and the finance minister released the financial statements.
• Kathleen Wynne /

Accounting spat leads to $1.5B discrepancy; Auditor general at odds with provincial government (TorStar)

Toronto Star

Tue Oct 4 2016
Page: A4
Section: News
Byline: Robert Benzie Toronto Star

Depending on whom you believe, Ontario's deficit last year was either $3.5 billion or $5 billion.
And the province's net debt was either $294.5 billion or $305.2 billion.
Finance Minister Charles Sousa and Treasury Board President Liz Sandals insist it's the former.
Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk says it's the latter.
That's because she no longer believes the government should include on its bottom line its share of assets from the teachers' and public servants' pension funds that it co-sponsors.
Against the backdrop of the accounting dispute, Sousa and Sandals on Monday released an unaudited version of the province's public accounts for the fiscal year that ended March 31.
"I'm disappointed that the government decided that this was the appropriate thing to do," Lysyk, an independent watchdog, said of the Liberals' extraordinary move. While the ministers agreed to her deficit and debt numbers for the time being, there will be an independent review by experts of accounting practices in coming months that could result in the lower figures being used.
Sousa stressed the province will balance the books in next year's budget regardless of the interpretation of the $10.7 billion in pension assets.
"The impact of this change resulted in our deficit number being $1.5 billion higher than it otherwise would have been in the 2015-16 had we used the same standards employed for the past 14 years," the finance minister said, noting the auditor general signed off on the pension assets in previous years.
"These standards have been consistently accepted by the past four auditors - including the current auditor general," he said.
"This year - two weeks before the Sept. 27 deadline for the tabling of public accounts - we learned in writing from the auditor general of her new interpretation of the accounting treatment for our jointly sponsored pension funds."
Asked what changed, Lysyk said her office took a closer look at the government's claim to the Ontario Public Service Employees' Union Pension Plan and the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan, which it co-sponsors.
"I had my staff review that asset much more than in past years," she told the Star, concluding that, because the government does not have ready access to the funds, they should not be considered assets.

Edition: ONT
Length: 362 words

Liberals and provincial Auditor-General clash over deficit disparity (G & M)

Globe and Mail

ADRIAN MORROW
Published Monday, Oct. 03, 2016 3:10PM EDT
Last updated Monday, Oct. 03, 2016 9:43PM EDT
The Ontario government is fighting with the Auditor-General over a $10.7-billion discrepancy in the province’s net debt and a $1.5-billion difference in last year’s deficit.

Auditor-General Bonnie Lysyk contends that the government must stop counting $10.7-billion in two provincial pension plans – one for teachers and one for Ontario Public Service Employees Union workers – as an asset on its books, since the government cannot gain access to the money.

Ms. Lysyk's accounting would add that amount to the province's net debt, pushing it to more than $305-billion last year. Meanwhile, the $1.5-billion the province contributed to the pension plans last year would count as part of the deficit, putting it at $5-billion instead of the $3.5-billion the government had hoped to announce.

The fight meant that the government missed its deadline last week to release its public accounts, which cannot be tabled without the Auditor's approval. Instead on Monday, the Liberals released an unaudited version of the books.

Finance Minister Charles Sousa and Treasury Board President Liz Sandals said they will temporarily accept Ms. Lysyk's interpretation of the pension math while the government consults other accounting experts to determine who is correct. They insisted that the extra debt would not affect borrowing costs or the plan to balance the books.

Debt and deficit are touchy subjects for the Liberals. The province is the most indebted subsovereign jurisdiction in the world, and balancing the books next year was a key campaign promise for the Grits in the past election campaign.

Mr. Sousa said the government learned of Ms. Lysyk's problem with the government's accounting methods only on Sept. 13. He floated the possibility that her office had leaked information to the Progressive Conservatives, based on questions from the Tories to the government on Monday in the legislature about the dispute before the books were released.

"Obviously, the Opposition had wind of the fact that there was a dispute," he said. "If there are discussions being taken by the Opposition with other offices of the legislature, that's unacceptable."

In an interview, Ms. Lysyk said her office actually first told the government of its concerns over the pension calculations in June, after some of her staff undertook a "deep dive" into the province's pension system. She said she wrote to the government again in September to discuss how they could resolve the disagreement.

Ms. Lysyk said she had been meeting with the government to discuss the issue as recently as Monday morning, and the Liberals gave her no indication that they were about to release the unaudited books. "I was kind of surprised that this happened," she said. "We do our job, and unfortunately sometimes what we have to say is not always what they want to hear."Ms. Lysyk pointed out that Ms. Sandals herself revealed the dispute between the government and the Auditor to the legislature last week.

She said she had not told the Opposition anything about the matter. "I was asked by members of the Opposition last Wednesday the reason for the delay and replied that I was not at liberty to discuss the situation," she said.

Liberals, auditor general in dispute (Waterloo Record)

Waterloo Region Record

Tue Oct 4 2016
Page: A3
Section: NEWS
Byline: Allison Jones
Source: The Canadian Press

Ontario's Liberal government is in a spat with the auditor general over accounting practices that would

affect the province's deficit by $1.5 billion.
Auditor general Bonnie Lysyk's office and public-sector accountants disagree about how pension numbers should appear on the books. Under her interpretation, Ontario's deficit for 2015-16 was $5 billion, but under the government's accounting the deficit would be $3.5 billion.
Ontario has been following the same pension accounting treatment for the past 14 years, said Treasury Board President Liz Sandals. "In fact, the current auditor general has accepted this treatment for the last two years."
The auditor sent the government written notice of this just two weeks before the deadline for the tabling of the public accounts, Finance Minister Charles Sousa said. The dispute between the auditor's office and the public-sector accountants means neither will sign off, he said.
Lysyk's team started a more in-depth look at pension assets, which was how the issue came to their attention, she said.
The issue is with the accounting of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union Pension Plan and the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan, which are jointly sponsored with the government.
They have a surplus, as they have had for the past 14 years, when the rules were last changed. The auditor general told the government it did not have a legally enforceable right to unilaterally access the assets, so they should not appear on the balance sheets.
That would mean the $10.7-billion pension surplus - including a $1.5-billion increase during the last fiscal year - would be written off with no value.
In addition to adding $1.5 billion to the deficit, the auditor general's accounting treatment adds $10.7 billion to the net debt.
The government said Monday it is tapping an expert panel to review the pension accounting standards.
October 3, 2016
Liberals at odds with auditor general over $1.5-billion discrepancy in deficit (QPB)
By Sabrina Nanji
At issue is $10.7-billion worth of jointly-sponsored pension assets.

The Ontario government and auditor general continue to butt heads over the province's financial books, particularly a $10.7-billion hike in the province's net debt and $1.5-billion increase to the annual deficit.

At issue was whether to include pension assets for the jointly-sponsored provincial pension plans (Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan and that of the Ontario Public Service Employees' Union), which were valued at $10.7 billion as of March 31. But because the government can't legally spend or access these funds unilaterally, Auditor General **Bonnie Lysyk** said it should not be included in the government's balance sheet and instead be added to the net debt and accumulated deficit.

Released Monday afternoon, nearly one week after the legal deadline, Ontario's unaudited public accounts also show a $1.5-billion discrepancy in the annual deficit, which came in at $5 billion for the last fiscal year, according to the auditor general's interpretation. The government's rubric would have shown a $3.5-billion deficit.

Finance Minister **Charles Sousa,** on the other hand, said the government has historically reported those pension assets, with no blowback from past auditors general, since 2001. Sousa reiterated that the government will come to balance as promised by the end of March 2018.

In order to release the public accounts, which were legally supposed to be tabled Sept. 27 (or 180 days from the close of the province's fiscal year, on March 31), the government filed a time-limited regulation that will go under review and allowed the unaudited financial statements be released.

The government said it was informed of the Auditor General's concern in writing on Sept. 13.

In a statement Monday, Lysyk said she was "disappointed" in the government's decision to release the public accounts sans her opinion and that the work to finalize the report is ongoing.

"This is the first time in the history of Ontario that the statements have been released without the audit opinion," Lysyk said. "As late as 10:30 a.m. this morning, we were still in discussions over an accounting issue that we brought to the government's attention in June of this year."

The Progressive Conservatives, who had been hammering the Liberals in question period over the delay -

and even alleged that internal Treasury Board bureaucrats accused the Auditor General of having a political agenda - said the government is in "full blown panic mode."

This is not the first time that the Liberal government and Lysyk have been at odds. The auditor general has criticized the government for amending her oversight of taxpayer-funded advertising, arguing that it turned her office into a "rubber stamp."[1]

The Liberals also disagreed with Lysyk's critique of their smart meter program, with former energy minister **Bob Chiarelli** taking heat[2] for remarks he made in the immediate aftermath.

Grits in accounting spat; Liberals, auditor general at odds over how pension numbers are reported (London Free Press)

London Free Press

Tue Oct 4 2016
Page: A4
Section: News
Byline: Allison Jones
Dateline: TORONTO
Source: The Canadian Press

Ontario ' s Liberal government is in a spat with the auditor general over accounting practices that would affect the province ' s deficit by $1.5 billion.

Auditor general Bonnie Lysyk ' s office and public-sector accountants disagree on how pension numbers should appear on the books. Under her interpretation, Ontario ' s deficit for 2015-16 was $5 billion, but under the government ' s accounting, the deficit would be $3.5 billion.

Ontario has followed the same pension accounting treatment for the last 14 years, said Treasury Board President Liz Sandals.

" In fact, the current auditor general has accepted this treatment for the last two years... (and) three previous auditors general have also accepted it ," she said. " There has been no change to the relevant accounting standard over the past 14 years ." The auditor sent the government written notice of this just two weeks before the deadline for tabling the public accounts, Finance Minister Charles Sousa said. The dispute between the auditor ' s office and the public-sector accountants means neither will sign off, he said. That meant the government missed the deadline of 180 days after the end of a fiscal year, which was Sept. 27, for the release of the 2015-16 information - so it released the unaudited financial statements Monday.

Lysyk was " disappointed " the government decided to release unaudited statements for the first time in Ontario ' s history, but " governments will do what governments will do ," she said.

Her office first raised the accounting issue with the government in June, she said, so her formal letter this month should not have caught them unaware.

Grit government has consistently made the fiscal file worse (SunMedia)

Ottawa Sun

Tue Oct 4 2016
Page: A9
Section: News
Byline: Anthony Furey
Source: Ottawa Sun

The Ontario Liberals are so lousy at budgeting that on Monday alone they increased the provincial debt by a whopping $10.7 billion. No, this time it wasn't cancelled gas plants. Or tossing billions at needless green schemes that only increase your energy bills.

A dispute between the government and provincial auditor general Bonnie Lysyk has ended up with the books suddenly worse than previously thought. The AG took issue with the fact that

the government was taking the surpluses from pension plans for both the teachers and OPSEU and including them on their balance sheets.
Lysyk reportedly told the Liberals to take them off because you can't claim money on your ledger that isn't yours to take. No kidding.
Now teachers and public workers know they're not just used as pawns during election time, but during the annual budget process too.
But the government countered that the practice had been going on their whole time in office, and for two years under the PC government. They were apparently working things out behind the scenes with the AG, when the Liberals suddenly released new and far-from-improved financial statements without Lysyk's input.
At a time when the Liberals' financial credibility can't go any lower, it's a reckless move.
Then again, they've been reckless about money matters since before they were in power. It all started back during the 2003 election when then opposition leader Dalton McGuinty signed the taxpayers pledge. No new taxes, he promised. Then he broke the promise that very term.
And do we really know to this day the extent of what happened at eHealth and Ornge? Will we ever really know what happened during the gas plants scandal? And how many more stories do we need to run about seniors and low-income Ontarians being driven into energy poverty by cynical partisan decisions? Since 2003, the Ontario Liberals have consistently made the fiscal file worse. The Liberals inherited a $65-billion budget from the PCs. Now it's at over $130 billion. And the debt was around $140 billion. Now it's crossing $300 billion.
It took from 1867 to 2003 to get to the figures the Liberals inherited. Yet the Liberals managed to double those numbers in a mere dozen years.
A Treasury Board statement released Monday says "the change in accounting treatment is not a reflection on the funding status of the plans, or the quality of financial reporting by the province." Really? It's hard to believe there's a single person left in this province who doesn't doubt the quality of financial management by the government.
Finance Minister Charles Sousa said in the legislature that despite this news, the budget will still be balanced by 2018. In the comedy of errors that is Ontario money matters, that's a good spot to cue the laugh track.
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Union peace, your money (PostMedia)

National Post

Tue Oct 4 2016
Page: A7
Section: Opinion
Source: National Post
When it comes to using the public purse to further partisan interests, it doesn't get much more brazen than the latest gambit by Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne. According to a report over the weekend, the Liberal government has quietly approached the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, seeking an extension to the current contract. The union notified members of the move and indicated it is considering the request.
You don't need to be a genius, or even have a high school education, to appreciate the implications of the Liberal entreaty. Secondary school teachers make up the most militant of the major teachers' unions. By securing an extension, the Liberals would be saved from the danger of contentious contract talks a while they are trying to win re-election.
Should union bosses agree, it goes without saying they will expect the province to make it worth their while. The mere fact of the approach underlines the Liberals' eagerness for a deal. That puts significant leverage in the hands of the union, which will surely use it to extract all the money and benefits it can.
The Liberals obviously understand this. Just last week, Wynne lifted the "net zero" requirement from provincial bargaining. "Net zero" stipulated that any gains in contracts had to be matched with savings elsewhere, to ensure no overall cost increase. Ending the requirement means the province can now offer richer deals to unions.
Taken together, the two actions mean the Liberals have made it clear that they are eager for a deal and are willing to use the public purse to pay for whatever demands the labour bosses may make. Treasury Board President Liz Sandals was careful to claim the Liberals will still do their best to keep a tight control

on costs - "I didn't say we were going to make it rain," she insisted - but accepting her assurance would demand considerable trust in a government that is struggling just to keep its head above water. The Liberals have lost three by-elections in a row, polls indicate Wynne is the least popular premier in the country, and the extension request demonstrates just how worried the party is about its chances of retaining power.

It's no surprise that Wynne would turn to the teachers for help. Teachers unions have spent millions in recent elections to keep the Liberals in office, and have been rewarded with reciprocal generosity. One of Wynne's earliest actions as premier was to reopen contracts with upset unions and award them an extra $468 million in pay and benefits. Her government also paid millions to three of the four big unions to cover their bargaining costs in the latest round of talks. Though still cozy, the relationship suffered a blow when public anger forced Wynne to curtail Liberal fundraising methods. Legislation promised by the government after a series of embarrassing revelations will reduce the unions' ability to spend heavily on advertising supporting the Liberals and battering the opposition.

The teachers could do the government a significant favour by agreeing to an extension. The next election is scheduled for Oct. 4, 2018. The teachers' contract expires in August 2017. It took more than a year to reach the 2015 deal, meaning Wynne would have faced the prospect of dealing with angry teachers in the final months leading to an election. A confrontation might mean ugly public scenes, classroom disruptions or a refusal by the unions to supply their usual organizing assistance. On the other hand, agreeing to a generous contract might antagonize Ontarians upset at the widening gap between publicservice pay and the private sector.

Even under "net zero," the secondary school union boasted that its agreement "was reached without a single concession."

Wynne said lifting the cap is possible because the government is on track to balance the budget for the first time in a decade. But Stephen LeClair, Ontario's financial accountability officer, said in May that while the budget may be balanced in time for the election, it will likely balloon again once the voting is over. Ontario's debt, which has doubled under the Liberals and now stands at $300 billion, could reach $350 billion over the next five years, despite the one-year balancing that's conveniently timed to coincide with the Liberal reelection run.

Only higher than expected growth, or tougher spending restraint, would prevent a new deficit spurt, according to LeClair. Wynne's search for "labour peace" at public expense shows the Liberals have had enough of restraint, especially when it endangers their own interests.

Ontario Liberals offer contact extensions to teachers' unions (G & M)

The Globe and Mail

Tue Oct 4 2016
Page: A4
Section: News
Byline: ADRIAN MORROW, CAROLINE ALPHONSO

Ontario's Liberal government has secretly offered contract extensions to almost all of the key education unions in a move that would buy the ruling party support from teachers and a degree of labour peace during an election.

Extensions would mean opening the treasury to ensure most public high school teachers, elementary teachers and education workers do not strike before the vote expected in the spring of 2018. The province is even willing to consider rewriting the law that governs bargaining to extend the contract.

Premier Kathleen Wynne and Education Minister Mitzie Hunter dodged questions about the possible extensions on Monday.

Last week, The Globe and Mail revealed that the Liberals had offered the extension to the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation. Asked on Monday how many other unions had received similar offers, the Premier said she did not know.

"I can't tell you chapter-and verse exactly who has had which conversations, but there are conversations going on with many public-sector employees," she said at an unrelated announcement.

Ms. Hunter said she did not know how many unions had received offers, and suggested reporters should ask the unions.

Neither explained why they did not know.

"That information I don't have.

You can talk to the other labour partners about that," Ms. Hunter said. In a later statement to The Globe and Mail, she said contract extensions have been raised with unions. Ms. Hunter's spokesman also

confirmed contract extensions have been offered to all unions that were part of a lawsuit against the government over Bill 115, a 2012 piece of legislation that imposed contracts on education unions and suspended their right to strike.
OSSTF, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario and the Canadian Union of Public Employees, among others, won a court ruling earlier this year and the law was deemed unconstitutional. These unions are discussing compensation with the province; the contract extension is one option. The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association was not part of the lawsuit, and a spokesperson said on Monday it has not been offered an extension.
A memo sent to OSSTF members on Friday, a copy of which was obtained by The Globe, said the government approached the union about an extension, and that the union planned to draw up a brief on issues that should be pursued. OSSTF president Paul Elliott confirmed the union was "exploring the possibility" of an extension.
A spokeswoman for ETFO reached on Monday declined to comment on the discussions.
Andrea Addario, a spokeswoman for CUPE, said the union was approached about an extension and is reviewing its options.
All collective agreements with education workers in the province expire next August.
During the previous round of bargaining, the province insisted all labour deals be "net zero," meaning something had to offset the cost of raises. That led to tough negotiations during which the OSSTF unleashed strikes in the Toronto area and Northern Ontario, and the government legislated the teachers back to work.
Last week, Ms. Wynne said she is ready to loosen the purse strings for the next round of talks with public-sector unions. Education observers point out that the school boards' collective bargaining legislation does not allow contracts to be extended.
Ms. Hunter said in a statement the parties are talking about potential changes to the legislation. School boards say they have not been contacted.
Laurie French, president of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, said extending the contract requires input and ratification from her group.
"Now that there is clarity of the unions' interest in exploring an extension of the collective agreement, OPSBA and the other school board associations have an expectation that they be contacted by the government to be included in the discussions," Ms. French said.

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Length: 616 words
Tone: Neutral
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Grits, teachers reach deal (London Free Press)

London Free Press

Tue Oct 4 2016
Page: A4
Section: News
Column: Ontario Briefs
Dateline: TORONTO
Source: London Free Press

Ontario ' s Liberal government is looking at extending some teachers ' contracts, which could ensure there would be no contentious education bargaining in the leadup to the 2018 election. Premier Kathleen Wynne says the issue arose as part of discussions with education-sector unions over a court ruling this year that said the government violated their collective bargaining rights.

Edition: Final
Story Type: Brief
Length: 58 words
Tone: Negative
Ad Value: $340 Circulation: 70,995

Province may try to extend contracts with teachers (TorSun)

Toronto Sun

Tue Oct 4 2016
Page: A9
Section: News
Byline: Allison Jones
Source: The Canadian Press

Ontario's Liberal government is looking at extending teachers' contracts, which could ensure there would be no contentious education bargaining in the lead-up to the 2018 election.

Premier Kathleen Wynne said the issue arose as part of discussions with educationsector unions over a court ruling earlier this year that said the government violated their collective bargaining rights.

Legislation in 2012, known as Bill 115, imposed contracts on teachers that froze some of their wages and limited their ability to strike, so five unions took the government to court. The judge sided with them, but left the question of a remedy up to the government and unions to decide.

In the course of those talks and while looking at possible changes to the School Board Collective Bargaining Act, the government raised the idea of contract extensions.

Teacher and education worker contracts currently expire Aug. 31, 2017 and bargaining for the next deals had been likely to start in the spring, about a year before the next provincial election is expected.

When Education Minister Mitzie Hunter was asked if contract extensions are an option for each of the unions, she said she didn't know.

Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation president Paul Elliott said the government broached the subject with his union, but it's very preliminary right now.

"We went to our leaders and we've been given a green light to enter into those discussions," he said.

Elliott said the government hadn't yet proposed a length for contract extensions.

"If nothing comes of it then we're back to giving our usual notice to bargain in April," he said.

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario would not comment.

The last set of teacher and education worker contracts expired in 2014 and what followed was an unusually long round of talks due to the new legislation.

The length of bargaining led to controversy for the Liberal government, after it was revealed that three unions were promised $2.5 million to cover their negotiation costs.

Illustration:

• Cherylbrowne, Postmedia Network / Education Minister Mitzie Hunter doesn't know if each of the unions are interested in contract extensions.

Contract Extensions Possible (Post Media)

Ottawa Citizen

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The Ontario government is looking at extending some teachers' contracts, which could ensure there'd be no contentious education bargaining in the lead-up to the 2018 election.

Premier Kathleen Wynne says the issue arose as part of discussions with education sector unions over a court ruling earlier this year that said the government violated their collective bargaining rights.

Legislation in 2012, known as Bill 115, imposed contracts on teachers that froze some of their wages and limited their ability to strike; five unions took the government to court.

The judge sided with them but left the question of a remedy up to the government and unions to decide.

Wynne says the idea of potential contract extensions is part of ongoing discussions.

Teacher and education worker contracts expire Aug. 31, 2017. Bargaining is likely to start in the spring.

Bottlers aren't the only bogeymen

Toronto Star
Byline : Martin Regg Cohn
Section : News
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Reach : 361323

The furor over bottled water in Ontario shows that the ground rules for our groundwater are decades out of date.

A recent column about Nestlé - the foreign multinational that is digging itself into a hole by dipping into local wells - prompted more questions from readers about how a private company profits from a public resource for which it pays a pittance.

It makes no sense for Nestlé to harvest so much water for so little money - a mere $3.71 per million litres, or roughly what it costs for couple of half-litre bottles at a corner store. That's a remarkably generous profit ratio, even after production costs, for a company that can extract up to 4.7 million litres of water daily in Ontario.

The token fees paid by bottlers such as Nestlé don't even cover the government's costs of husbanding our water resources. Ontario's water commissioner has called the payments "a drop in the bucket."

Full cost recovery would, at the least, encourage conservation of scarce resources by raising prices for both producers and consumers. In neighbouring Quebec, bottlers are charged nearly 20 times more - paying $70 per million litres.

In the weeks since my last column, Nestlé has used its financial muscle to outmanoeuvre a municipality trying to protect its water supply: The multinational matched a bid by the township of Centre Wellington to secure a local well, guaranteeing Nestlé future water rights. Ontario's Environment Ministry told The Canadian Press it couldn't interfere in a"private transaction" under existing rules.

Those rules don't hold water. The public's interest must prevail over private self-interest. Our municipalities shouldn't have to enter bidding wars with global powerhouses merely to ensure access to safe drinking water.

Mindful of grassroots protests, Premier Kathleen Wynne has woken up to water bottling. For decades, governments ignored water rights, just as they allowed the breweries to gain an iron grip over beer sales in the province. Now, Wynne has ordered the Environment Ministry to review existing rules and scrutinize a bid by Nestlé to renew its recently expired permit in Aberfoyle, just outside Guelph.

So far, so straightforward. But it's too easy to make a bogeyman of bottled water - the product people love to drink yet love to hate (personally, I avoid it at all costs).

Among Nestlé's critics are local petitioners and international activists who oppose the profit motive as a matter of principle, insisting that water must never be bottled by private firms.

"Water should be for life, not for profit," is a popular slogan from the Wellington Water Watchers group.

All well and good for water, but what about beer? People who want to banish Nestlé would also have to bar the big breweries - foreign-owned as they are - from harvesting our water. Not to mention multinationals like Coca-Cola and Pepsi who sell sugar water (and also own bottled water brands).

What is it about water that drives people to drink? Why single out bottlers like Nestlé while giving a free pass to soft drink makers who add sugar and caffeine, or brewers who add barley and hops?

Wasteful though the packaging may be, the water itself isn't going to waste. Bottled water isn't being used for car washes or golf courses.

No less than tap water, it still quenches people's thirst and is a better alternative than sugared water or alcohol.

Let's not lapse into anti-hydration hysteria. If the goal is to discourage wasteful packaging, we should demand the return of public water fountains (giving people an incentive to bring their own water bottles, not buy bottled water).

The real test of water conservation isn't whether it comes out of a bottle or a tap. A better question is whether it comes from a vulnerable water table or the abundant supply of ourGreat Lakes.

We have every right and obligation to protect scarce groundwater, but we needn't be paranoid about ample lake waters. As the provincial government grapples with an outdated system that imperils our groundwater, we need a level playing field. It would be tunnel vision to penalize water bottlers while letting soda pop occupy the moral high ground.

Ontario should better manage the water supply by raising the rates on all producers and users - not just Nestlé, but Coke and Labatt too. Not just bottlers but all industrial users. Let them, in turn, pass the costs on to consumers.

But don't blame the bottlers alone. Demonize the drinkers, too.

Martin Regg Cohn's political column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. mcohn@thestar.ca,

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