

NDP calls for budget watchdog to examine Liberal cabinet hydro...

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NDP calls for budget watchdog to examine Liberal cabinet hydro documents (**>Ont<**-Hydro)
By Allison Jones

THE CANADIAN PRESS

TORONTO _ The NDP is calling on **>Ontario<***s budget watchdog to examine how the Liberal government's hydro relief plan will affect consumers' bills, particularly in light of leaked cabinet documents suggesting large increases after an initial drop.

New Democrat Peter Tabuns wrote to the financial accountability officer this week, asking him to assess the likely impact of the plan on electricity bills and compare that to what bills would be without the Liberal plan.

A Liberal cabinet document leaked to the Progressive Conservatives contains a projection that electricity bills will drop this year, rise slightly for four years while increases are held to the rate of inflation, then rise quickly after that.

It also shows that from about 2027 onward, when consumers would start paying off debt and interest associated with the hydro plan, consumers will be paying more than they would without the Liberal government's plan to cut costs in the short term.

The government dismissed the document as containing outdated projections, but wouldn't make public any of the various other projections it says went before cabinet.

Tabuns called Friday on the budget watchdog to examine all of those documents.

"I don't trust Liberal numbers," he said. "I would like to have the financial accountability officer do his assessment so we're making a somewhat more informed decision on what's before us."

It would ideally be done quickly, Tabuns said. The legislature has just eight sitting days left before it rises for the summer, which doesn't leave a lot of time for opposition review and debate, Tabuns said.

The legislation tabled this week would cut bills by an average of 17 per cent, lowering time-of-use rates for the next 10 years by removing from bills a portion of the global adjustment, a charge consumers pay for above-market rates to power producers. For the next 10 years, a new entity overseen by Ontario Power Generation will take on debt to pay that difference.

Then, the cost of paying back that debt with interest _ which the

government says will be up to \$28 billion _ will go back onto ratepayers' bills for the next 20 years as a ``Clean Energy Adjustment."

A spokeswoman for Financial Accountability Officer Stephen LeClair said Friday the office doesn't comment on politicians' requests, but said in March they had already been planning a report on the hydro plan.

LeClair received a full technical briefing last month and the government has responded to all follow-up requests for information, Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault said in a statement.

``We welcome and encourage the independent financial accountability officer to review Ontario's Fair Hydro Plan," Thibeault wrote.

``We expanded the FAO's oversight last fall, which improved his office's access to information, making it even easier to provide important analysis. These enhanced powers, combined with the technical briefing, will give the FAO access to the necessary information required."

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