

## Ontario's budget watchdog praises government for unleashing data

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## Ontario's budget watchdog praises government for unleashing data

Financial Accountability Officer Stephen LeClair had complained he was being stonewalled in his quest for information from provincial departments.

By [ROBERT BENZIE](#)

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Ontario's budget [watchdog](#) is wagging his tail after Premier Kathleen Wynne ordered all ministries to unleash documents and data.

Financial Accountability Officer Stephen LeClair, who had [complained in July that he was being stonewalled](#) in his quest for information from provincial departments, on Thursday praised the cabinet for passing an order in council forcing bureaucrats to co-operate.

"Cabinet's consent should significantly improve the FAO's access to information and make it considerably easier for the FAO to provide the Legislative Assembly with timely and relevant economic and financial analysis," LeClair said in a statement.

When he tabled his annual report last summer, he bemoaned the fact that "ministries have refused" to share figures needed to fulfil his mandate of overseeing the province's finances.

At the time, LeClair expressed frustration because government departments "overused" an exemption for cabinet records.

After he went public with his concerns, he entered into talks with officials, who blamed skittish bureaucrats for the roadblocks more than secretive political aides.

“The discussions were extremely successful. Cabinet has consented to the FAO having access to information contained in certain cabinet records.”

Finance Minister Charles Sousa said the order in council will grant LeClair “access to financial, economic or other information protected by the Cabinet Records Exemption of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.”

“This order in council reflects the government’s commitment to ensuring that the FAO has access to information needed to fulfil the statutory mandate,” said Sousa.

“Our government values the important role and contribution of the FAO in providing independent analysis on the state of the province’s finances to members of the Legislative Assembly,” the treasurer said. “We strongly believe in openness and transparency, which is why Ontario was the first and remains the only province in the country to establish this role,” he said.

“The premier and I have met with the financial accountability officer several times and communicated our commitment to working with his office to ensure he can access information to effectively support his work.”

At the same time as the government is pledging to work more closely with the FAO, there is an ongoing [dispute](#) with another independent legislative overseer.

The Liberals and Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk are at odds over an accounting change that — on paper — has cost the provincial treasury \$10.7 billion.

Lysyk recently surprised the Wynne government by saying it should no longer be allowed to book its share of two co-sponsored pension funds as assets — even though successive administrations have done so since 2001.

That means the deficit for last year was \$5 billion instead of \$3.5 billion and the province’s net debt is \$305.2 billion instead of \$294.5 billion.

Provincial bureaucrats and the Liberals disagree and Treasury Board President Liz [Sandals](#) is seeking actuarial advice from third-party experts in the coming weeks to resolve the situation.

Lysyk now believes any government cash in the Ontario Public Service Employees' Union Pension Plan or the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan assets should not be counted as an asset on the province's bottom line.