QP BRIEFING

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ARTICLES

1). LIBERALS REVEAL 25% RELIEF PACKAGE FOR ELECTRICITY CUSTOMERS — INCLUDING $25B IN INTEREST PAYMENTS

By: Geoff Zochodne

The Liberal government delivered a long-promised relief package for beleaguered electricity customers Thursday morning, boasting they will immediately save consumers 25 per cent by delaying costs and hitting up taxpayers to shoulder more of the load.

With voter outrage rising with their hydro costs, Premier Kathleen Wynne was realistic about the Liberals' plan, which the government says will require electricity customers to make $25 billion in interest payments over 30 years.

"I don't expect a celebration," Wynne told reporters shortly after the release of the plan.

But the proposed changes, which the Liberals have named “Ontario’s Fair Hydro Plan,” aim to lower electricity bills by an average of 25 per cent by this summer, capping rate hikes at the rate of inflation over four years. After that, rates could rise at a greater clip.

The plan includes the government’s existing 8-per-cent rebate, and comes with about $1.83 billion in upfront costs this year, including the $1-billion cost of the refund. More expenses would come later, including $25 billion in interest payments that electricity customers will make over 30 years.

Even with the new expenditures, the government says its new plan won’t stop it from tabling balanced budget this year. The Liberals claim it will produce these hydro savings by deferring costs tied to generating electricity and by pumping tax dollars into new and existing assistance programs.

“For too long, governments – my own included – have made mistakes in the way we’ve structured Ontario’s electricity system,” said Wynne. “That has resulted in rates that are unfairly high. It’s time to fix those mistakes. In ways that work for today – and for the future.”

As part of its plan, the government is proposing to “refinance” investments made in the electricity grid, kicking some expenses down the road, but shaving costs for consumers right now. It will do so by delaying a portion of the global adjustment charge all electricity customers currently pay.

The government says $50 billion has been spent on the electricity system between 2005 and 2015, $35 billion of which was on the generation side of the business, including 20-year contracts with certain power plant owners. These generation costs are paid for in part by the global adjustment fee, which cost approximately $10 billion in 2015, about half the total annual cost to the system and ratepayers. The fee is paid by all electricity customers, and covers the cost of power that's above the market price (and much of it is), as well as funding conservation programs.

Noting that some electricity infrastructure can be used for longer than initially anticipated, the government intends to spread out the global adjustment in a way that would reduce the expense by an average of about $2.5 billion annually over the first 10 years, with the refinancing expected to last about 30 years. Interest payments on those deferred costs are to be held at no more than $1.4 billion a year, over the 30 years, to be managed by Ontario Power Generation in a new holding company of sorts. The interest payments will be covered by electricity customers, with the government expecting the interest rate to be somewhere in the area of 5 per cent.

“That 30-year time period makes much more sense," said Wynne. “Remortgaging the system in effect and spreading those costs over 30 years is a much fairer way of approaching this.”

The Liberals, likening the move to refinancing one's mortgage, are looking to have the changes to the global adjustment charge take effect this summer.

But the opposition parties were immediately in attack mode following the announcement. PC Leader Patrick Brown, who called the plan a "shell game," pegged the interest payments at $42 billion, charging during question period that "the Premier just signed off on $42 billion in interest payments alone to pay for this government’s mistakes."

"I don’t know where the member got $42 billion," responded Wynne. "It’s $25 billion over 30 years so that people across those 30 years will share the costs of those investments that had to be made."

Brown, whose energy critic said they hadn't been planning on publishing a hydro plan until after the Tory policy convention in November, said that was no longer the case. "We do plan to roll out more details on some of the fixes that we see," he told reporters.

Deputy NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh doubted the Liberals would keep their word.

"She promised to lower auto insurance rates by 15 per cent before an election," he said during question period. "But after she got re-elected, guess what? That turned out to be a stretch goal."

The Grits may have been feeling some added pressure this week, as the NDP unveiled an electricity assistance package on Monday that proposed repurchasing Hydro One shares and capping profits for private power producers. The NDP say their plan could be worth as much as 30 per cent in savings for customers, but the Liberals immediately attacked it, alleging a Hydro One share buy-back wouldn’t reduce electricity costs.

Both the NDP and PCs have either slammed the Liberals for not renegotiating or scrapping costly contracts with private power producers. Wynne said the Liberals had looked at this, but said it could have created a "chill" in the business climate. Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault said Wednesday that the cost of doing so would have been steep

"Our plan provides fast, substantial, widespread and long-lasting relief," Thibeault said. "I know the PCs are struggling to agree with one another on their own schemes. On their biggest idea, of ripping up those energy contracts, let me be clear: This will lead to increased rates, lawsuits and penalties."

The other plank of the government’s plan is shifting a slate of assistance programs off the backs of ratepayers and on to the more numerous backs of taxpayers. The cost will be $2.5 billion over the next three years, or about $830 million annually. This would be funded through the government's revenues.

The province’s Rural or Remote Rate Protection program, which subsidizes bills in those areas, would be one of those programs now being funded by tax dollars. Rather than just being offered to Hydro One's customers, the program would be extended to seven other local utilities that have high distribution charges. As a result, the RRRP would serve about 800,000 customers, up from its current level of 350,000. Savings for individual consumers could reach as high as $75 a month.

Also being expanded is the Ontario Electricity Support Program, which gives low-income customers a monthly credit on their bills. In addition to putting the cost of the OESP on tax bills, not hydro bills, the government is also going to increase the monthly credits by 50 per cent, for a maximum savings of $113 a month. The Liberals also say they will try to increase uptake in the program to as near as total as possible.

Furthermore, the government is also creating a special rate for on-reserve First Nations electricity customers, who would have their delivery charge eliminated entirely. This would save qualifying customers about $85 a month. It would also be picked up by the taxpayer,

A new “affordability fund” would be created as well, for customers who can’t qualify for other low-income conservation programs. This would come from provincial revenues too.

All of this will be shown on a customer's bill. A mock-up of a hydro bill provided to reporters show there will be a line trumpeting how much the Ontario government had reduced the cost.

Other tricks up the Liberals' sleeves include increasing eligibility for an industrial conservation program and encouraging the Independent Electricity System Operator to continue its work in reforming Ontario's electricity market.

Electricity prices have become the preeminent issue in Ontario politics, and the Liberals have been especially vocal about providing consumers with more assistance since the Grits’ loss in last summer’s Scarborough-Rouge River byelection.

Wynne was actually asked Thursday if she would still lead the Liberals into the next election. She said she would.

2). *Wynne: Hydro plan will make Ontario's budgets 'a lot harder' to balance*

By: Jessica Smith Cross

When Premier Kathleen Wynne announced her government's hydro relief plan Thursday morning, she made the frank admission that it will make it much harder for the government to balance its budgets in the coming years.

"And frankly, if we're going to bring our budget into balance, what better place to direct better, newfound financial strength than giving households a break in the high price they pay for electricity," said Wynne. "It is absolutely worth it."

The cost to the treasury in the next three years is approximately $5.5 billion, with $2.5 billion of that coming from moving the cost of the newly beefed-up social programs the province maintains for those struggling to pay their hydro bills off of the province's collective hydro bills onto the general tax base. In addition, it will cost $1 billion in each of those three years to provide the 8 per cent rebate the government announced last year.

That, of course, does not count the $25 billion in long-term interest costs associated with the refinancing power contracts at the heart of the plan — that cost will remain on the rate base.

Wynne maintained the province can afford that $5.5 billion and keep its balanced budget promise — but not easily. The full impact of the new fiscal pressure of the hydro rate relief costs will be outlined in the spring budget.

"Now, thanks to a provincial economy that's leading all of Canada in growth, we can make this change and stay on track for a balanced budget this year and the years to follow, but it's going to be a lot harder and we'll remain a lot closer to the line," she said. "But let me just say this: it is worth it. It's worth it for a true structural fix that will be long-lasting. Not just another short-term stopgap, but something that's sound and sustainable. And that's exactly what we've done."

There are other needs and Wynne's government has made no secret of the growing expense demand on the health-care system, even as it maintained fiscal restraint in health spending for years. She recently said that weighing the priorities of hydro relief and health-care spending went to the heart of the challenge of her job.

But Health Minister Eric Hoskins said he saw the hydro announcement as "great news" for Ontarians and he's confident that the coming budget will also include significant investment in health care.

"For me, it's not an either, or," he said. "But it's important to respond to what is obvious to all of us, that electricity prices have become a burden for many, many Ontarians, particularly those who are struggling at the lower socio-economic end of things. This relief is especially important to them."

The Progressive Conservatives have slammed the plan as a "shell game" and warned the plan will be taxpayers' expense in the end. In the words of Patrick Brown, it is "simply robbing Peter to pay Paul, but in this case, both Peter and Paul are taxpayers."

But Brown wouldn’t weigh-in on whether those $5.5 billion tax dollars could be better spent, saying that he does think there needs to be hydro relief. The PCs are yet to release their hydro plan.

NDP Deputy Leader Jagmeet Singh also didn’t have an answer on whether the government should dig into the tax base to provide hydro rate relief programs as it has proposed, but said it shouldn’t have sold-off Hydro One (the proceeds of which are going to fund transit) and should have used the extra revenue it would have generated over time to fund education and health care.

3). NDP MPP *TABLES NOT-FOR-PROFIT CHILD CARE BILL*

By: Jessica Smith Cross

NDP MPP Catherine Fife tabled a private member's bill Thursday that would restrict all new provincial funding to not-for-profit child care centres.

The provincial government is embarking on a plan to build 100,000 new licensed child care spaces over the next five years, at a cost of up to $3.75 billion — and Fife wants to see all of that growth come from not-for-profit child care organizations.

She held a press conference at Queen's Park Thursday, which included experts in the child care field who argue that not-for-profit care is of higher quality than for-profit care.

Brooke Richardson, a professor at Ryerson University and a PhD candidate in child care policy, said her forthcoming research shows for-profit centres in Canada have higher rates of regulatory violations than not-for-profit centres.

Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris said Thursday allowing for-profit centres is necessary to make sure the new spaces become available — and to ensure that parents have a choice in the kind of care they choose. Harris said she can't, "in good conscience" support the bill, but the government's funding policy will prioritize not-for-profit child care.

"We need to give families in the north and in remote areas the options that they need," she said. "Sometimes some of these areas only have for-profit centres. We need to ensure that we're creating those spaces there. We also need to ensure that we're creating spaces and the support in urban areas. All Ontarians will be getting the child care that they need."

"Bottom line, this bill is narrow in focus and over-simplified," she said.

Carolyn Ferns, a government relations co-ordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, who appeared with Fife at her press conference, did not accept her position.

"I would take issue with her claim that in rural areas it's mostly for-profit child care. That's simply not true," she said. "Where you see the for-profit chains really operating and growing is in the GTA, where they're making a lot of money."

Richardson argued that without large for-profit child care chains, small non-profit child care centres would be better able to compete and expand in Ontario.

According to Fife, the bill is only one part in the NDP's child care plans.

"For the NDP, this is the first step to ensuring that every dollar is invested in quality and building a system, with a move toward universality," she said. "In order to have enough money for subsidies, and have enough money for expansion and equality, then every dollar needs to count and it needs to go to children and families, not the profit-margins of large commercial firms."

4). *Here's how Premier Wynne plans to reduce hydro bills by 25%*

By: Geoff Zochodne

Ontario's Liberal government has said it will reduce electricity bills by an average of 25 per cent starting this summer.

How the Grits propose to do so is an adventure in accounting. What follows is QP Briefing's best explanation of how that savings-sausage gets made, drawn from Thursday morning's technical briefing and a scrum with Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault.

First, there's the 8-per-cent rebate the Liberals announced last September, which actually started being refunded to consumers in January. This rebate is costing the provincial treasury about $1 billion annually.

More savings will come from the Liberals' move to shift the cost of electricity assistance programs off hydro bills and onto tax bills. Those programs will also be increased, providing more savings for people. Over three years, this is expected to cost the government $2.5 billion. This will be paid for, again, by tax dollars.

But the backbone of the 25-per-cent plan is the Liberal government's move to "refinance" the global adjustment charge, which cost consumers about $10 billion in 2015.

All hydro customers pay the charge, which is the difference between Ontario's hourly electricity price and the one guaranteed to electricity generators. So if a company's contract says it is to be paid $100 for some electricity, and the market price is $75, hydro customers are forking over the missing $25 (this applies to contracts for all sorts of power: nuclear, gas, solar, wind). The fee also covers the cost of conservation programs.

With this in mind, the Liberals are going to reduce the global adjustment costs by about $2.5 billion per year over the first 10 years of a 30-year refinancing period. This is anticipated to begin as early as this summer.

The government's thinking is that the province has signed 20-year contracts with some generators, but the power plants will keep producing electricity past the end date of their contracts. Therefore, the government says, not so much of the cost needs to be up front. The Liberals like comparing this idea to remortgaging one's home.

But how does one make $2.5 billion disappear from hydro bills?

The government's answer is, essentially, to just collect less money from consumers. At the same time, the province will keep paying electricity generators the same amount they're always paid, creating immediate savings for electricity customers, but a gap as well.

Enter the whipping boy.

In short, the difference between the now-lower consumer payments and the standard generator payments will be plugged using debt. A single entity will be responsible for this burden.

First, the Independent Electricity System Operator, which runs Ontario's power grid and market, will define and create an "asset" that represents the gap between the reduced amount customers are paying and what the electricity generators are owed. The gap, the debt needed to fill the gap, and the interest payments on that debt filling the gap make up the "asset." Ontario Power Generation, the provincially owned power company, would then acquire the asset from the IESO and create a company to carry the load.

The company really only exists to accrue and service the debt, which, remember, is being used to shore up the gap between the reduced customer payments and the same-as-usual generator payments.

So the whole scheme means hydro customers will pay less money to their local electricity company, which will pay an average of about $2.5 billion less annually to the IESO as a result. OPG and the holding company will then send $2.5 billion to the IESO, which OPG and the company borrowed from banks. The IESO then pays electricity generators exactly what they're owed.

Got that?

Oh, but while the holding company will take on the debt needed to reduce the global adjustment charge, interest on that debt will also build up over time (thus completing the "asset").

Electricity customers will be responsible for starting to pay interest on that debt in about 10 or so years. And over 30 years, the Liberal government expects ratepayers will cough up $25 billion in interest payments in order to "refinance" the global adjustment charge.

The government says these payments shouldn't be higher than $1.4 billion in any given year over the next 30 years, which is based off a projected interest rate of 5 per cent. But those interest payments will flow from the customers, to the utilities, to the IESO, to OPG's holding company, which is servicing the "asset."

And, lest we forget, fluctuating interest rates and electricity prices could render all of the numbers above entirely incorrect. Fun!

Anyway, to pull all this off, the government is going to need to pass some legislation. But since the Liberals still have a majority in the legislature, it shouldn't be a problem.

As Minister Thibeault told reporters Thursday: "If there would have been an easier way to do this, we would have done it."

5). *TREASURY BOARD PRESIDENT HOPES ONTARIO'S AUDITOR GENERAL DOESN'T GIVE UP DETAILS OF ONTARIO'S CYBER SECURITY*

By: Jessica Smith Cross

Treasury Board President Liz Sandals says Ontarians have nothing to worry about concerning the provincial government's state of cyber security, but she isn't going to get into the details.

When asked by QP Briefing about the government's response to concerns raised by Ontario's auditor general about the security of some of the province's aging IT systems, Sandals said it would be better not to talk about it.

"Quite frankly, we would not refer to it in detail, and I would hope the auditor not refer to it in detail, because when you set up a security system, the last thing you need is somebody running around dissecting it," said Sandals.

In her 2016 annual report, Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk included a section on Information and Information Technology (I&IT) General Controls, and looked specifically at three major government systems: the Ministry of the Attorney General's Integrated Court Offences Network, the Ministry of Finance's Tax Administration System and the Ministry of Transportation's Licensing Control System.

She noted that, "I&IT general controls are the first level of defence against threats such as hacking, viruses, sabotage, theft and unauthorized access to information and data," and found, "all three systems needed improvement with implementing controls to prevent unauthorized access to confidential information."

Lysyk found the systems are old — the licensing system is 48 years old and the court system is 27 years old — and "noted concerns specific to the lack of continuous training and knowledge transfer, maintenance being limited, and functionalities issues."

The court system, in particular, suffers from a lack of personnel who understand its programming. Lysyk said there is "one staff member and one consultant who is not as proficient in the Court System programming."

Lysyk said this audit was the first by her newly established information technology team and it will form the basis for future work in this area.

Sandals, however, said she hopes the auditor's future work doesn't disclose too many details.

"This is an area where you do not want to discuss the details because when you discuss the details, what you're really doing is helping people who want to breach your system," said Sandals. "Revealing details actually plays into the hands of the people who want to breach."

Sandals said the province has a central cyber security operations unit and that it responds immediately to attempts to breach security, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"Any of the information I have indicates that I think Ontario can have a good degree of confidence and the unit is doing its job," she said.

Asked about how to balance the need for the Auditor General and the media to hold the government accountable on this issue, and the government's desire to keep the details secret, Sandals said the public should trust that their information is secure.

However, she acknowledge that cyber security is an important issue today.

"We're a huge enterprise in terms of the amount of data that we hold and any government that is being responsible has to be concerned about security," Sandals said.

"I think it's pretty clear, just in the world that we live in, that there are hackers and some of the hackers are quite proficient, so that is why we have actually said that we do recognize this is a serious issue, and, therefore, we have set up the central cyber security operations group," she continued.

Ontario named Ray Boisvert, former assistant director of intelligence and director general of the counter-terrorism CSIS, its first provincial security adviser about two months ago. Boisvert said the province has shown him every sign it is taking cyber security seriously, and it needs to — because it "faces a daily onslaught of cyber attacks."

"We get millions of probes on our censors every day," he said.

What that means, he said, is that hackers are using many different ways to target Ontario's networks, including both human attacks — some more skilled than others — and attacks from bots and automatic tools, "that go around constantly like a marching army all through the Internet looking for weaknesses in various areas, as a survey, to see if they can get into any weakened part of a network."

Boisvert said he isn't yet familiar with the concerns raised in the auditor general's report, but he believes the province has the fundamentals right — including being aware of the threats and being on constant alert.

Asked about how to balance transparency and accountability of the government on this issue, with the need to keep something secret to be secure, Boisvert said the government should answer fair questions about what it's spending on cyber security, if it has a resilient plan in place and if it's recruiting top talent — but it should keep quiet about its specific cyber security architecture and layers of defence.

In Ontario's case, he's confident the government has "a healthy organizational culture" concerning cyber security — and if he didn't see that, he'd be happy to say so publicly.

6). SEEN: EDUCATION BARGAINING BILL SPED THROUGH TO COMMITTEE AFTER BRIEF PROCEDURAL KERFUFFLE

By: Sabrina Nanji

A bill that would, among other things, make it legal for collective agreements with education unions to be extended, was sped through the house and sent to be studied by a committee Thursday, following a brief procedural kerfuffle.

Government House Leader Yasir Naqvi had tabled a motion to time allocate Bill 92, An Act to amend the School Boards Collective Bargaining Act, following second-reading debate Wednesday. It carried Thursday morning, 52-38, with the opposition parties voting against – as they are wont to do.

The confusion appeared to occur when the New Democrats weren't sure if they were voting yay or nay on Naqvi's motion.

Speaker Dave Levac explained the confusion thusly:

"I will provide you with some clarity. The clarity was, when it was asked, 'All those in favour,' one of the members that initiated the continuation [of the vote] indicated that we are in favour. When it was signalled to me that someone said, 'Am I opposed?' I just said, 'It's your choice.'"

NDP house leader Gilles Bisson had raised a point of order to further explain his party has a proud tradition of shooting down time-allocation motions.

"Since when did New Democrats vote in favour of time allocation?" he said.

Naqvi backed Bisson, saying "clearly there was a misunderstanding" because "I think we do understand where usually [the] opposition votes on time allocation matters."

Levac gave all three parties two options – re-do the vote, or record the vote in which it was understood – i.e. mark the PCs and NDP opposed, and the Liberals in favour.

The parties agreed to the latter, and the bill was sent to the standing committee on general government. Public hearings are slated for March 8 and 9, and the political parties have until noon on March 13, to propose amendments. Clause-by-clause consideration is scheduled for March 20, and the bill is due back to the house for third reading March 21.

In the meantime, the government has been inking contract extensions with education unions.

The members of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) ratified their two-year contract extension, the union announced Thursday.

"Our bargaining team believed this agreement was in the best interests of Catholic teachers and their students - that's why we brought it forward to our members," said Ann Hawkins, OECTA president, in a press release. "In particular, the additional staffing provided in the extension agreement will help to address a number of concerns that we have heard from our members, such as violence in the classroom and more dedicated support for at-risk students or those with special education needs."

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has already ratified an agreement to extend its education workers contracts by two years and the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO) has ratified a new two-year agreement.

The government has also reached tentative agreements with the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), the Ontario Council of Educational Workers (OCEW), the Education Workers' Alliance of Ontario (EWAO) and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) to extend their respective agreements for two years.

Below, is Hansard's record of Thursday's vote.

The Speaker (Hon. Dave Levac): I recognize a point of order.

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Dave Levac): Please be seated. To bring clarity, I cannot interrupt a vote with a point of order. However, I will provide you with some clarity. The clarity was, when it was asked, "All those in favour," one of the members that initiated the continuation indicated that we are in favour. When it was signalled to me that someone said, "Am I opposed?" I just said, "It's your choice."

Interjections.

Mr. Gilles Bisson: Point of order.

The Speaker (Hon. Dave Levac): Order, please. I will entertain the member from Timmins–James Bay in ensuring that this vote is done appropriately.

The member from Timmins–James Bay.

Mr. Gilles Bisson: On numerous occasions, as that was happening, I was yelling to the table and to you, "Is this opposed? Are we voting in opposition?" I got a nod from you in the way that I understood it.

The second point I would make: Since when did New Democrats vote in favour of time allocation?

Mr. John Yakabuski: On that point of order —

The Speaker (Hon. Dave Levac): We'll get this settled, just relax. I'll come to everybody.

To the member's point: When you asked, I said yes. I normally do not participate in this process. You should not ask the Speaker how to vote. That is not the tradition of this place.

I will entertain the government House leader.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Speaker—

The Speaker (Hon. Dave Levac): I'm coming to everybody.

Government House leader.

Hon. Yasir Naqvi: Speaker, clearly there was a misunderstanding. I respectfully argue that we do a new vote on this matter. This is a time allocation vote. I think we do understand where usually opposition votes on time allocation matters. I think this was a misunderstanding. If there is a way with the table's help to redo the vote, I urge you to do that.

The Speaker (Hon. Dave Levac): As I committed, I will defer to the member from Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke — if he is in his chair — to hear. I have a concept, I have an idea, of how we can navigate this; but I'll defer to the member.

Mr. John Yakabuski: If the House leader's proposal is accepted, we have no reason to speak to the point of order, Speaker. We believe that that is the right thing to do. We appreciate their gesture.

The Speaker (Hon. Dave Levac): There are two ways in which we can handle this. I'll leave it to the House again and I'll look to the House leaders and their leaders to give me the nod on that. One would be to do a revote or that I will interpret this and instruct the table to simply reverse the vote in — which it was understood.

Therefore, I will ask the Clerk to announce the count in the way in which I just described for the members.

Mr. Gilles Bisson: Agreed.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Agreed. Reverse the vote — it's fine.

The Clerk of the Assembly (Mr. Todd Decker): The ayes are 52; the nays are 38.

The Speaker (Hon. Dave Levac): Before I read the outcome I would also reinforce this: Regardless of the emotional outburst that took place in my ruling, the Speaker does not participate in the vote. If I get asked one way or another, I do not make that comment. I was trying to be helpful when the member did express — about opposition, I did shake my head. But I'm going to leave it at that to say that this was corrected, but don't ever think that the Speaker is responsible for anyone's vote in this House.

The Speaker (Hon. Dave Levac): I declare the motion carried.

Motion agreed to.

7). ‘No doubt that investment will be required’: Howard Sapers to hand in segregation review any day now

By: Sabrina Nanji

Ontario Corrections Minister Marie-France Lalonde said Thursday she will ask the Premier to pour additional funding into the prison system if independent adviser Howard Sapers’ segregation review comes with recommendations that require it, as is expected.

“If it means an investment, I will certainly advocate on that behalf,” Lalonde said after question period.

Sapers’ report is expected to land on Lalonde’s desk any day now – the former federal Correctional Investigator of Canada was asked to accelerate an independent review of Ontario’s segregation policy within 60 days of his taking office on Jan. 1. A broader review of the provincial prison system is due later this spring.

Sapers told QP Briefing he is currently in the final draft stages.

“It’s going to be a substantive piece of work,” the independent adviser added.

Sapers isn’t revealing much about his report and recommendations before it’s made public – which probably won’t happen for some weeks as the government prepares it for distribution.

For instance, he couldn't say whether the report will recommend a hard cap on indefinite "administrative" segregation. Currently regulations are loose, the reason why, overwhelmingly, Ontario inmates are held in solitary confinement. "Disciplinary" segregation, on the other hand, was recently limited to 15 days.

What is certain is that some of those recommendations will come with a price tag, Sapers said.

“There is no doubt that investment will be required. But it’s not all about money,” he said. “That really then becomes very much a process of competing priorities, and making both political and policy decisions.”

Lalonde said she is prepared to make the investment, and she isn’t worried that such an investment will make it more difficult to balance the books in fiscal 2017-18, as promised.

“I anticipate that some of his recommendations may come with some financial component, so I am prepared for that,” Lalonde said.

Sapers’ appointment and the government’s review came amid public outrage over the Adam Capay case – a young indigenous man awaiting trial for the alleged murder of another inmate at the Thunder Bay jail had languished in solitary confinement in a Plexiglass cell under artificial light for four years.

When asked whether he had unearthed similar situations in the course of his work over the past two months, Sapers said only that he if he had, he would have alerted the Human Rights Commissioner, Ombudsman or Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services.

“Whenever I go into a prison, jail, or correctional centre, I attract a certain amount of attention, and so people want to bring things to my attention,” he said.

Sapers added he will be tackling recommendations for information and data management as part of the broader review after coming up against challenges during his preliminary investigation.

“I will say that information management is a challenge that needs to be addressed,” he said.

Weeks before he exited provincial politics last December, then-minister David Orazietti announced $33 million in funding for mental health care to improve conditions for those in solitary confinement and particularly for vulnerable inmates.

The Ministry also said it would begin hiring 239 staff (above and beyond a pledge to hire 2,000 correctional officers over three years), including 24 correctional officers, 22 nurses, 22 mental health nurses, 22 social workers, 32 recreational staff, eight psychologists and 46 institutional managers.

Several organizations, including Ontario’s Human Rights Commissioner and Ombudsman have called on the province to put a 15-day hard cap on solitary confinement in any scenario, and that it never be used for inmates with mental health concerns. The United Nations defines solitary confinement longer than 15 days as “torture.”

Ombudsman Paul Dubé is also conducting a separate investigation into segregation policy.

8). LIBERALS LEAD IN TORONTO BUT COULD LOSE SEATS OUTSIDE DOWNTOWN CORE, POLL SUGGESTS

By: Sabrina Nanji

Premier Kathleen Wynne may be running through the six with some woes in 2018, according to a new poll that suggests the Grits stand to lose Toronto seats in the next election because their support is concentrated downtown.

The Mainstreet Research/Postmedia poll, released Thursday, showed the Liberals are leading among decided and leaning voters in Toronto with 42 per cent support.

But because that support is strongest in the downtown ridings, the other parties may be able to steal seats in neighbourhoods such as Etobicoke, where the PCs lead the Liberals, 45 per cent to 32 per cent, and in Scarborough, where the race is tighter but the Liberals, with 29 per cent support, trail the NDP with 31 per cent, and the Tories with 33 per cent. In North York, the Liberals have a slight lead with 42 per cent, followed closely by the PCs with 37 per cent, and the New Democrats bringing up the rear with 16 per cent.

“All signs point right now to significant losses in Toronto for the Wynne Liberals if an election were held today,” said Quito Maggi, president of Mainstreet Research, in a release.

The loss has the potential to cost the governing Liberals the 2018 election, Maggi added.

“Every single seat will count in the next provincial election and the provincial Liberals will need to hold on to most if not all of their Toronto caucus if they are once again to form government,” he said.

Downtown Toronto is another story, in stark contrast to a slew of recent public opinion polls that show the unpopular Liberals trailing well behind the PCs. The Liberals boast 57 per cent support among decided and leaning downtown voters polled by Mainstreet, which could give them an edge for seats they don’t currently hold.

The poll points to another “bright spot” for the Liberals — there are more undecided voters in areas where they are lagging, such as in Etobicoke where 22 per cent said they didn’t know who to vote for. While that could present an opportunity for the PCs and NDP to seize, the poll notes the undecided rate downtown, where the Liberals lead, is significantly lower at 15 per cent.

Citywide, 30 per cent of decided and leaning voters in Toronto would cast a ballot for the PCs led by Patrick Brown, 23 per cent would choose the NDP led by Andrea Horwath, and 5 per cent said they would support the Green Party led by Mike Schreiner.

Downtown, support for the PCs clocked in at a scant 13 per cent, and at 25 per cent for the NDP.

The Liberals currently reign supreme in the 416 — they represent every riding, including the Premier herself in Don Valley West, with the exception of Toronto-Danforth and Parkdale-High Park, represented by NDP MPPs Peter Tabuns and Cheri DiNovo, respectively. MPP Raymond Cho, former Ward 42 councillor, holds the only Tory seat in Scarborough-Rouge River.

The 2018 ticket in Toronto may have some other contenders with a City Hall connection — York West Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti is considering making a bid for the PCs, and his close political ally, former Etobicoke councillor Doug Ford, is still waffling over a provincial or municipal run. Councillor Shelley Carroll made her intent to seek the Liberal nomination in the newly mapped riding of Don Valley North official last fall.

Meanwhile, the Grits' cousins in Ottawa are enjoying much Toronto love citywide.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberals won 60 per cent support among decided and leaning federal voters polled by Mainstreet. Broken down by neighbourhood, that is 53 per cent support in Etobicoke, 56 per cent support in Scarborough, 54 per cent support in North York, and 73 per cent support downtown.

Of those surveyed, 26 per cent said they would vote for the Conservatives led by Rona Ambrose in a federal election, while 8 per cent said they would vote for the NDP helmed by Tom Mulcair — which isn't enough to win a single seat in the city, Maggi noted. The Green Party and Elizabeth May followed with 6 per cent support.

"The Trudeau Liberals currently hold every seat in the city and with these numbers we would expect they would hold onto every single one of them," Maggi said.

Mainstreet surveyed 2,103 Torontonians on Feb. 21, 2017 using land lines and cell phones, and the poll is considered accurate within 2.14 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.