

MEDIA SCAN: HYDRO RATE REDUCTION PLAN

March 13, 2017

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PUBLICATION: Sudbury Star

PAGE: A4

DATE: 2017.03.13

SECTION: News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Gord Young

SOURCE: Postmedia Network

KEYWORDS: steele, fighting, losing, battle, against, rising

ILLUSTRATION: Gord Young, Postmedia Network / Joe Steele looks through his Hydro One bills at his kitchen table at his home in Powassan.;

WORD COUNT: 429

SUDBURY STAR: 'CLEAN, MODERN' - AND COSTLY; RETIRED HYDRO ONE EMPLOYEE'S BILLS AVERAGE NEARLY \$900 IN WINTER (A4)

Joe Steele has been fighting a losing battle against the rising cost to heat his home in Powassan.

Steele, 85, has tried his best to conserve energy by keeping the thermostat down in certain rooms and wearing sweaters on a daily basis.

But his efforts have had little effect on his Hydro One bills, which have - in recent years - averaged nearly \$900 during the coldest winter months.

Steele thought installing electric radiant heating in the ceilings was the way to go when he built his modest three-bedroom bungalow a little more than 50 years ago. But Steele, a widower who lives alone, firmly regrets that decision today.

"It was the 'safe, clean, modern' way," he says, recalling how electric heat was marketed at the time.

Ironically, Steele is a retired Hydro One (formerly Ontario Hydro) employee of more than 35 years, most of which were spent in customer service.

"I dealt with a lot of complaints during that time," he says, proud to have been able to leave customers satisfied more often than not.

"I don't know how I would answer their questions now. I wouldn't want to even attempt it."

Steele says he can't imagine how high his hydro bills would be if he didn't live alone.

He plans to stay in his home as long as he can. But Steele worries that when it comes time to sell, electric heating won't be much of a selling point.

The Liberal government's promise of hydro relief this summer comes as cold comfort for Steele, who expects his electricity bills will still likely top \$700 next winter even with a 17-percent reduction.

Not only that, he doesn't care much for the plan, which would slash bills largely by paying the costs of electricity generation contracts over longer periods.

"My grandchildren will be paying for it," says Steele.

He likes the NDP's proposal of buying back assets of Hydro One and doing away with time-of-use pricing, which also hasn't helped to put a dent in his bills. And Steele says he's still waiting to hear how the Tories plan to cut hydro rates.

In the meantime, he's purchased a \$4,000 wood pellet stove to try to take the sting out of his home heating bills. Steele hopes to have it installed in the coming days.

A natural gas line runs past his house, but without ducts installing a furnace was an even more expensive proposition.

"I'm trying to conserve as best I can," he says, hopeful that the new pellet stove will make a difference. sud.editorial@sunmedia.ca

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PUBLICATION: Waterloo Region Record
PAGE: A8
DATE: 2017.03.13
SECTION: EDITORIAL
EDITION: First
KEYWORDS: provincial,election,called,hydro,course,issues
WORD COUNT: 491

WATERLOO REGION RECORD: ALL PARTIES SHOULD LAY OUT THEIR PLAN FOR HYDRO (A8)

Next year's provincial election could be called the hydro vote. Of course there other issues - the length of the Liberal party's rule, the economy, and others. But nothing resonates with Ontarians right now like hydro rates.

It's understandable, even though some of the hyperbole being bandied about is over the top. So is laying all the blame at the feet of the Liberals when the Progressive Conservatives also played a role in setting the table.

But whether you agree with the weight being attached to energy as an election issue or not, it is what people are talking about. That's why the Liberals have finally moved on plans to reduce bills. According to Alectra Utilities, Hamilton ratepayers will get a bigger than average break on their bills, with residential fees set to drop 27 per cent, and small-business rates 28 per cent. That's not insignificant.

The Liberal plan, though, is something like remortgaging your house. The money will be paid back over a longer period of time, so the resulting interest payments will end up costing more. Does that really matter to people if their bills go down? We'll see.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath won't be outshone. She has put forward a plan she says will save up to 30 per cent on bills and doesn't involve remortgaging the house. The plan would allow consumers to opt out of time-of-use pricing, cap profits for private power producers supplying the grid and return Hydro One to full public ownership by buying back shares. This plan will appeal to many, especially since the partial privatization of Hydro One is widely opposed.

But wait, say the Liberals and other skeptics. The money from privatization is being used to fund health and education among other key areas. If that money is used to buy back shares, it will be at the expense of those other priorities. Now the NDP plan doesn't sound quite so solid.

At least the two parties are putting out (relatively) clear messages. And by getting her party's oar in the water on the most significant issue of the election, Horwath automatically positions the NDP as a credible alternative, on this matter at least.

Patrick Brown, come out, come out, wherever you are. The Progressive Conservatives have yet to outline in detail what they'll do on energy. Perhaps because there is still a lot of time left. Perhaps because it's a sticky issue for them, too. After all, it was Brown's party that initiated the last attempt to privatize, which blew up in its face. And it's going to be difficult for a party that believes in privatization to argue for making Hydro One public again. Then again, who would have predicted that the PCs would favour a carbon tax and support a modernized sex education

curriculum. So who knows what they might have up their sleeve? They'd be smart to get at least some cards on the table soon though.

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