Good afternoon Premier,

Happy St. Patrick's Day! We have a few items we would like to update you on from media coverage we have seen while you were on vacation:

- Fair Hydro Plan Ad
- Rent Control Reform
- Andrea Horwath Press Conference
- Ethnic and Chinese Media Update

Fair Hydro Plan Ad

There has been significant media coverage, from the gallery and mainstream media, today following the release of a government funded radio ad highlighting Ontario's Fair Hydro Plan. The ad tells listeners that people will receive an average of 25 per cent off their hydro bills this summer and rate increases are being held to inflation for four years.

The auditor general, Bonnie Lysyk, claims these ads could be considered partisan. She further claims the ad likely wouldn't have passed under previous rules about government advertising.

Patrick Brown has written a letter to Liz Sandals, saying the government has "no authority to be spending hard-earned taxpayer dollars on partisan" ads to promote a plan that hasn't passed the legislature or even been tabled.

In response, Minister Thibeault's office has issued a reactive statement to media. Minister Sandals' office is also drafting a letter in response to Patrick Brown.

We have included Energy's statement below for your reference:

The Ontario government has a responsibility to raise awareness and communicate information about programs and services that affect Ontarians. This includes informing Ontarians of changes to their electricity bills so that they can use this information to plan for the future as they manage their household budgets. The government is communicating these changes over a variety of channels, including these informational advertisements which drive Ontarians to a dedicated website (www.Ontario.ca/fairhydroplan) where Ontarians can learn more about what these changes mean to them. We have committed to both radio and social media campaigns to inform Ontarians on these important changes.

Our government also strengthened legislation to provide a clearer definition of partisan advertising, requiring the government to submit a preliminary version of the ad to the Auditor General for review, and reinforce rules around government advertising during general elections. Under the legislation, a government ad can't include the name, voice or image of a member of the Executive Council or a member of the Assembly, include the name or logo of a party, or directly identify and criticize a recognized party or member of the assembly.

As of this afternoon we have seen online coverage from the Canadian Press, CTV News and Global News. Global also ran a segment on their noon broadcast. We have included Allison's story below for your reference:

Government ads about hydro bill reductions a 'pat on the back': By Allison Jones

New taxpayer-funded ads from the Ontario Liberal government about its plan to cut hydro bills could be considered partisan, the auditor general said Friday.

The two ads, running on radio stations across the province, tell listeners that people will receive an average of 25 per cent off their hydro bills this summer and rate increases are being held to inflation for four years.

“Ontario has made important investments in clean, reliable energy,” the narrator says in one ad. “This has led to hydro bills that have become harder to pay. We've heard you and we're taking action with the fair hydro plan.”

The Progressive Conservatives say the purpose of the ads appear to be to raise the government's standing in the eyes of voters, at a time when anger over rising electricity costs has contributed to their decline in the polls.

The ads likely wouldn't have been approved under old government advertising rules, said auditor general Bonnie Lysyk, who has said changes the Liberals enacted in 2015 reduced her office to a rubber stamp.

“Under the previous legislation it would likely not have passed because it does convey a positive impression of the current government and it's more like a pat-on-the-back type of advertisement,” she said.

A spokesman for Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault said the ads inform people and direct them to a website where they can learn more about the upcoming changes.

“The Ontario government has a responsibility to raise awareness and communicate information about programs and services that affect Ontarians,” Colin Nekolaichuk said in a statement. “This includes informing Ontarians of changes to their electricity bills so that they can use this information to plan for the future as they manage their household budgets.”

Lysyk said in her last annual report that she had cautioned the government that changing the rules would end up giving taxpayers the bill for millions of dollars in partisan advertising.

“Sure enough, the government walked right through that open door,” she said.

The old rules banned ads as partisan if the intent was to foster a positive impression of government or a negative impression of its critics, but the new rules say an ad is partisan only if it uses an elected member's picture, name or voice, the colour or logo associated with the political party, or directly criticizes a party or member of the legislature.

Of the approximately $50 million in government ads during the 2015-16 fiscal year, Lysyk said she would have flagged several under the old rules as misleading or self-congratulatory.

Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown wrote Friday to the president of the Treasury Board, the department that controls the government purse strings, about the ads.

"Your government has no authority to be spending hard-earned taxpayer dollars on partisan radio and social media ads to promote a plan that has not yet been tabled, debated, and voted on in the legislature," Brown wrote to Liz Sandals.

"I am concerned that these ads serve a partisan purpose that aim to improve the government's standing among the public using taxpayer dollars."

Brown called on Sandals to release the cost of the ad buy.

The NDP said it was filing Freedom of Information requests to learn the cost.

"Not one dime has come off people's sky-rocketing hydro bills and Premier Kathleen Wynne hasn't tabled legislation, or even a credible plan to save us money, yet she's spending more of people's hard-earned dollars on ads claiming the problem is solved," energy critic Peter Tabuns said in a statement.

Rent Control Reform

The Canadian Press reported on Thursday that Ontario is developing "substantive rent control reform," according to the province's housing minister. Minister Ballard told reporters it's "unacceptable" that many Ontarians are seeing dramatically increasing housing costs. "My staff are already developing a plan to address unfair rises in rental costs by delivering substantive rent control reform in Ontario as part of an ongoing review of the Residential Tenancies Act."

MPP Peter Tabuns plans to introduce a private member's bill Monday that would eliminate the exemption on rent control that applies to units built after 1991 – he is pushing for tenants in newer units to have the same protections as all other renters. This year the rent for those tenants that currently have the protection, may be increased by up to 1.5 per cent without the landlord applying to the Landlord and Tenant Board. "A lot of renters are near their breaking point," said Tabuns.

CIBC said Wednesday that the average rent in the GTA has risen by nearly 12 per cent in 2016 to a record high of $2.77 per square foot. Also, Ken Hale with the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario estimated there are about 150,000 rental households built after 1991 and therefore not subject to rent controls.

Minister Ballard's comments have received significant media coverage. We have included a story by Laura Fraser of CBC below for your reference:

Ontario housing minister vows to boost rent control after CBC Toronto tenancy series

Minister Chris Ballard says he's 'absolutely' open to revisiting so-called 1991 loophole
By Laura Fraser, CBC News Posted: Mar 16, 2017 5:58 PM ET Last Updated: Mar 16, 2017 5:58 PM ET

The Ontario housing minister vows that the province will soon unveil new "rental controls" to address the skyrocketing cost to lease a home in and around Toronto.

Minister Chris Ballard spoke about the upcoming changes on Thursday, following the announcement of a NDP private member's bill promising much the same thing — and a ***CBC Toronto series*** *focusing on the fallout the limited safety net for renters has created for young professionals in this city.*

"It's absolutely unacceptable that renters are facing the pressure that they're facing today," Ballard told CBC Toronto in an interview. "So we'll be bringing forward legislation that expands on the rent controls that are currently in place."

Staff within the housing ministry have been consulting with tenants and landlords across the province since Ballard took over the portfolio last spring, the minister said in an interview.

He couldn't commit as to when the changes to the Residential Tenancy Act could be tabled in the legislature, saying only that he's pushing his staff to have it ready shortly.

Ballard's comments come a few hours after NDP MPP Peter Tabuns said he would table a private member's bill that calls for an end to the so-called 1991 rule, which exempts property built after Nov. 1, 1991 from provincial rent control.

Former premier Mike Harris's Tory government made the loophole law in 1997, saying that it would spark developers to create more apartments to address what was considered a stagnating rental supply.

But tenancy advocates argue that the move didn't spur the necessary level of rental property development — and Ballard told CBC Toronto that he agrees.

The minister said that he's "absolutely" open to revisiting that particular segment of the law.

"With the number of people we have moving to Toronto and the GTHA every year, clearly it's not working," he said. "There's such pressure for people looking for a good place to call home."

Earlier Thursday, Jim Murphy, president and CEO of the Federation of Rental Housing Providers, said that rental regulations help to maintain some security for investors, and changing the rules will create uncertainty.

"Now is not the time to make changes that would adversely impact investor confidence," he said in a telephone interview.

Andrea Horwath Press Conference

Andrea Horwath held a press conference in the Media Studio on Wednesday and called on the government to table legislation for its hydro bill reduction plan on Monday.

Horwath told reporters Ontarians need to see the details as soon as possible, so the plan should be tabled on the next sitting day. She went on to say the details of Ontario's Fair Hydro Plan aren't clear and all the government has put forward is "a press release and a bunch of spin," and legislation should be tabled immediately so there is plenty of time for debate before the legislature breaks for the summer June 1.

Following the press conference Minister Thibeault's office issued the following statement:

Much like the NDP's hydro scheme, Andrea Horwath's press conference today was short on details and long on hollow promises. Many of her proposals rely on a vague and yet-to-be-determined "expert panel" that will be convened in the future, as well as pie-in-the-sky negotiations with the federal government. These offer little to Ontarians in the short-term, compared to the real and meaningful relief our government's Fair Hydro Plan will provide to everyone.

Unlike the NDP, our plan was presented at a comprehensive technical briefing, with experts including the CEO of Ontario Power Generation, Deputy Minister of Energy and accounting specialists available to answer questions. A wide range of third-party experts and stakeholders have since endorsed our plan, with Alectra Utilities calculating their customers will save 27 to 28 per cent because of it.

The NDP's most expensive idea – buying back more than $4-billion in shares of Hydro One – will not take one cent off electricity bills. What it will do is send billions to the stock market instead of making much needed infrastructure investments in communities across Ontario.

Through Ontario's Fair Hydro Plan, our government is cutting electricity bills by 25 per cent on average for all families, with 8 per cent cut already and the rest to follow this summer. It is the single largest rate reduction in the province's history, helping families along with about half a million farms and small businesses. The Liberal plan will also keep rates consistent, holding them to inflation over the next four years. We will introduce legislation this session, with time for debate and public hearings at committee, ensuring real relief for Ontarians and a way to ensure greater fairness in our electricity system this summer. The NDP hydro proposal offers nothing practical or substantial when it comes to reduced electricity costs for Ontario families and small businesses.

Ethnic Media Update

There has been significant coverage of the Brampton and Milton universities. Punjab Star and Des Pardes Radio reported that Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Development Deb Matthews has confirmed that Ryerson University, in association with Sheridan College, has submitted an Expression of Interest in expanding to Brampton. Wilfrid Laurier University has submitted an Expression of Interest to expand to Milton.

Tamil media, including East FM and CMR Tamil Radio, reports that "Ontario NDP Leader Andrea Horwath stepped up her attack on the Liberals' hydro plan, challenging Premier Kathleen Wynne to release the details of her scheme to slash rates." Horwath said she wants to see details of the plan on Monday, the day the legislature resumes from the March break. The report highlights that the government needs to table legislation so that Ontarians know what they are getting into, "especially the amount of debt they will be taking on in order to achieve immediate rate relief," said Horwath.

An article in Khabarnama newspaper reports that the Ontario Sikhs and Gurdwara Council (OSGC) is considering banning the Liberal government from attending the Khalsa Day parade in

Toronto. General Secretary Balkaranjit Singh Gill said, “We are not inviting any leader of Ontario’s Liberal party this year as they are not serious about Sikh issues.” Chairman Bhupinder Singh Ubhi, however, does not agree with Gill’s views. Chairman Ubhi and General Secretary Gill also said a delegation of the organization will try to meet the Premier in coming days.

Chinese Media Update

The province will announce in the next few days measures to rein in “unfair rent increases,” headlined Ming Pao in its top news today. Reporting from a statement by Housing Minister Chris Ballard, the paper said new rent controls would be put in place as part of the reforms to the Residential Tenancies Act so much so that Ontarians can afford their dream homes wherever they are in the province.

FYI – CBC reports two big banks, BMO and TD, are waving red flags about Toronto housing prices, calling them “simply unsustainable” and a “bubble” in separate reports.

FYI – Mainstream media, including CP24, have been reporting all day about President Donald Trump’s meeting with German chancellor Angela Merkel. Topics of discussion included trade, immigration and NATO.

FYI – CBC Toronto reports senator Don Meredith said he is not ready to resign despite pressure from his colleagues to do so after violating the Red Chamber ethics code for having alleged sexual relations with a minor.

FYI – On Thursday the Canadian Press reported a judge has quashed a wrongful dismissal lawsuit by Ontario's former ombudsman against the legislature and his former office. Andre Marin was not reappointed in 2015 after serving two five-year terms and alleged in a lawsuit that he was fired without cause and without notice. He said a two-year notice period would have been reasonable.

FYI – On Thursday CBC Toronto reported Toronto was named the 16th best place in the world to launch a company, with start-ups in the area leading to more than $7 billion in economic activity.

FYI – On Wednesday CFRA, AM 640, CFRB reported a new Mainstreet Research poll revealed that nearly 47 per cent of those asked approve of Ontario’s new fair hydro plan.

As always, let us know if you have any questions.

Kate, Jenn, Gurvinder and Ronan