Evening Media Scan: Hydro Rate Reduction Plan - April 26, 2017

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Evening Media Scan: April 26, 2017

MEDIA SCAN: HYDRO RATE REDUCTION PLAN

April 26, 2017

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Online Coverage

Hamilton Spectator: Sousa set to balance provincial budget with no

thespec.com
Wed Apr 26 2017
Section: News

Finance Minister Charles Sousa is tabling a balanced budget with no tax hikes for Ontarians in hopes of tilting the scales for Premier Kathleen Wynne's re-election next spring.

On the eve of Thursday's financial blueprint, Wynne said eliminating the annual deficit means voters can expect more help from Queen's Park in their daily lives.

"We now, with a balanced budget, have a responsibility to make sure we tackle the needs people are confronting in this globally uncertain economy," the premier told the legislature Wednesday.

Her government has already promised to reduce electricity prices an average of 17 per cent starting in June, on top of the 8-per-cent rebate of the provincial HST on hydro bills that took effect in January.

That 25 per cent total, which she has been touting since it was unveiled last month, is part of a charm offensive to prove the Liberals understand that people are feeling pinched.

With an election on June 7, 2018, Wynne has been languishing in public-opinion polls behind Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown and NDP Leader Andrea Horwath.

That's why last week the premier announced a 16-point plan to make housing more affordable in south Ontario - with a 15-per-cent foreign buyers tax to cool down the real estate market, and new rent controls limiting hikes to inflation on all buildings.

In the first balanced budget in the province since 2008, Sousa is promising new funding for child care, health care, affordable housing and respite care, among other measures.

However, Liberal sources stressed that a full-scale NDP-style pharmacare plan to help cover the costs of 125 commonly prescribed drugs is far more expensive than the New Democrats' estimate of $475 million annually.

Still, Sousa boasted that the government has stanched the flow of red ink for the foreseeable future, crediting Ontario's growing economy.

"We're balancing the books tomorrow. We're balancing the books next year. We're balancing the books the year after that, and we're investing in the people of Ontario," he said.

But Brown said the Liberal hype around the budget is more about the fact Ontario voters will be heading to the polls in just over 13 months.

"It certainly smells like a lot of electioneering," the PC leader told reporters, casting doubt on Sousa's promise to end annual deficits.

"They're trying to prop up an artificial balance."

Deputy NDP leader Jagmeet Singh said the Wynne administration appears to be playing catch-up given the flurry of prebudget announcements about balancing the books, child care and other issues.

"The government's had 14 years to make change, they've had 14 years to address the problems we've seen in this province and they're now scrambling last minute to save their own political skin," said Singh.

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Hamilton Spectator *Ontario announcing new spending in first balan*
thespec.com
Wed Apr 26 2017
Section: News

TORONTO - Ontario's Liberal government will release its first balanced budget in a decade on Thursday, with a host of new spending measures focused on pocketbook issues that it hopes will resonate with voters heading into an election year.

Premier Kathleen Wynne has in the past few years focused on big-picture plans for the province, such as tackling climate change, massive infrastructure spending and pension reform. But as her party and personal popularity have tanked in the polls, her message has shifted to that of fairness and everyday affordability.

She recently unveiled a "Fair Hydro Plan" and a "Fair Housing Plan" and in a speech Monday to announce details of a basic income pilot project, fairness was a theme she often returned to.

"In this time of turmoil, we must work harder than ever to build and preserve a fair society," she said. "We must make sure that hard work is rewarded with a decent paycheque. We must make sure that the opportunities available to our people and especially our young people not only endure, but grow."

By eliminating the deficit, Ontario is in a position to do those things, she said.

"My plan builds on the action we have taken and the investments we have made over the past five years," Wynne said. "It takes dead aim at the challenges that confront us in this new, uncertain world. It puts fairness at the heart of all we do and all we aspire to achieve for the people of Ontario."

Wynne said her approach is not to "cut back on public services, reduce taxes, slash regulations on corporations and let the results trickle down."

That wouldn't help people who are struggling, Wynne said, adding that the three main elements to her plan are creating a "fair economy," a "fair future for Ontario workers," and education.

Ontario's finance minister has already announced that the budget will contain new spending to benefit seniors, students, parents, caregivers and patients.

"I'm balancing the budget and I'm proud of that, but that's not an end in itself," Charles Sousa told The Canadian Press in a recent interview. "It's what are we doing as a result of the balance."

Sousa has announced the budget will include a public transit tax credit for seniors 65 years and older.

He has also promised a "booster shot" for health care, specifically funding to deal with the problem of overcrowded hospitals, which forces patients to be placed in hallways and other unconventional spaces.

On Tuesday, ministers also announced $20 million will go to funding to increase the available respite services for unpaid caregivers who help friends and family members.

The government is also launching an initiative to create 40,000 job training placements and internships over three years for students of all ages and recent graduates, as part of a $190-million Career Kick-Start Strategy.

In a recent speech, Sousa highlighted investments the government has made in the innovation sector, saying more of that can be expected in the budget as the government embraces, "new, potentially disruptive technologies."

Sousa has said the budget will refer to the recent housing affordability measures the government announced. However, Sousa's office said there is "no line in the budget" attributed to a newly announced 15 per cent foreign buyer tax. It's expected to be revenue neutral, as any money coming in should offset a decrease in revenue from land transfer tax.

Cuts to hydro bills will add nearly $2 billion to the budget. An eight per cent rebate that took effect Jan. 1 is estimated to cost $1 billion a year, and more measures announced last month to help low-income and rural residents will cost taxpayers about $833 million a year.

Even with a balanced budget this year, Ontario will still have debt of more than $300 billion. In 2016-17, interest on debt was the province's fourth-largest spending area, with $11.4 billion of interest on approximately $317 billion of debt.

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Chronicle Journal: Northern Ontario MPP has advice on budget

Posted: Wednesday, April 26, 2017 12:03 pm
Letter To The Editor | 2 comments

http://www.chroniclejournal.com/opinion/northern-ontario-mpp-has-advice-on-budget/article_e14b6ef8-2a99-11e7-b7c7-4725425971a7.html

Open letter to Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa

Life is harder for the people of Northern Ontario. My constituents are working harder, paying more, but getting less. They can't afford to be left behind by yet another Liberal budget.

Which is why, today, I'm writing to share some of the areas the upcoming provincial budget (Thursday) will need to address for Northern Ontario.

1. Take action on Ontario's growing debt: Interest payments on our province's debt are beginning to crowd out the services the people in Northern Ontario depend on. This is perhaps most evident in the cuts to our health care services. We've seen cuts at the Atikokan general Hospital, Espanola Regional Hospital and Health Centre, Lake of the Woods Hospital, Temiskaming Hospital, North Bay Regional Health Centre, Sault Area Hospital, St. Joseph's Care Group, and the Timmins and District Hospital. Your government must commit to immediately paying down the province's debt, and lay out a long-term plan to get the debt under control in the 2017 budget.

2. End Ontario's hydro crisis: I know of countless examples of families, businesses, and public institutions in Northern Ontario who are suffering every day from unaffordable hydro rates. Your government must take immediate action to address the root of the problem, which includes: stop signing contracts for power we don't need, dismantle the Green Energy Act, stop the fire sale of Hydro One, and rein in exorbitant executive compensation in the energy sector.

3. Make cap-and-trade revenue neutral: Your government's cap-and-trade scheme is little more than a tax grab disguised as an effort to address climate change. This system is driving businesses out of the province and hurting Ontario's families. Even RBC's Craig Wright, a part of your own deputation, stated during pre-budget consultations, "What I typically think of successful carbon pricing agreements is that they have to be transparent, predictable, gradual and, most importantly, they have to be revenue-neutral. If it's just about the government grabbing more money and then reallocating it, that's less than ideal, especially in the context of a more competitive environment." Your government needs to put in place a revenue-neutral system that isn't a cash grab, where any money generated is put back into the pockets of families and businesses.

4. Save our schools: After 14 years of scandal, waste, and mismanagement, your government is trying to balance the books on the backs of our students by fast-tracking school closures. In Nipissing, our community has been torn in two over the possible consolidation of three high schools. This upcoming budget must include an immediate moratorium on school closures, and an immediate review of the flawed Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline that determines these closures.

I trust that you will seriously consider all of these recommendations. The people of Ontario, who are tired of nearly 14 years of failed Liberal policies, are demanding it.

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St. Catharines Standard: Hospital funding on Gates budget wish list

By: Allan Benner, The Standard
Wednesday, April 26, 2017 8:54:22 EDT AM

http://www.stcatharinesstandard.ca/2017/04/26/hospital-funding-on-gates-budget-wish-list

After years of waiting for a new Niagara Falls hospital, MPP Wayne Gates hopes the province will finally ante up the dough to make it happen.

With the provincial budget set to be unveiled on Thursday, Gates said he has formally written to both the Finance Minister Charles Sousa and Health Minister Dr. Eric Hoskins, asking them to "include the necessary resources to begin building a new hospital in Niagara Falls."

"We need the new hospital built and this will also help to put local people back to work," the New Democrat said.

"We need to address the hospital issue in Niagara Falls, while also being mindful to ensure communities like Niagara-on-the-Lake and Fort Erie have the necessary health care resources to provide urgent care services to their residents."

Gates said he also hopes to see increased funding for health care resources including mental health services, as well as long-term care space and gaps in home care.

Meanwhile, Gates said he remains concerned about the high cost of hydro bills.

"Lack of affordability in Ontario is having serious negative impacts on seniors, families and single parents," he said.

"Whether it's hydro bills, housing or prescription drugs — affordability is a major issue that needs to be addressed."

While the provincial government has announced that GO train services would be coming to Niagara by 2021, Gates said he'd like to see an improved timeline on that plan, as well as additional gaming opportunities for the Fort Erie race track.

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St. Thomas-Elgin Weekly News: OEB hydro disconnect moratorium set

By: Mike Maloney
Apr 25, 2017 08:00

https://www.theweeklynews.ca/news-story/7258534-oeb-hydro-disconnect-moratorium-set-to-end-april-30/

The high costs of electricity has proven to be more than just a bone of contention for many people and businesses across the province. So much so that the Ontario government was forced to do something about it.

On April 20, the Ontario Energy Board (OEB) officially announced a rate cut that would see the cost of electricity go down as much as 17 percent for typical residential consumers.

While this is good news for many people, there are still those out there that have trouble paying their hydro bill, and customers with outstanding accounts continue to be an issue for the local electricity provider, St. Thomas Energy Inc. (STEI), said Duane Orth, manager of customer service with the utility.

In February, the OEB issued an order to hydro utilities across the province banning winter disconnections of residential customers until April 30.

Now that the warmer weather is here, as of May 1, that order is no longer in effect and customers with outstanding unpaid bills are once again subject to disconnection.

"It's business as usual," explained Orth. "The OEB put a temporary stop on it and are going to reassess it, but we are following our regulator's rules."

That doesn't mean the local utility is going to be heading out that day and cutting off anyone with unpaid bills he said.

He did add, though, that as per normal business practice, notifications of pending disconnection would be going out. ”We’re trying to be co-operative, just to let them know we’re coming at some point.”

In February, the OEB noted there were 930 residential premises across Ontario that had been disconnected at that time and roughly another 3,000 that had load limiting devices installed. As to the exact number of local customers currently subject to disconnection, Orth wasn’t able to say as that number can fluctuate.

“The number could be a 100 people right now that owe us money, and 75 of them could pay by then so the number is so subjective. In fact, I have no number,” said Orth.

TV Transcripts

None