

Morning Media Scan: Provincial Budget 2017 - April 27, 2017

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MEDIA SCAN PROVINCIAL BUDGET 2017

April 27, 2017

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[London Free Press: Still in flux? No BRT bucks; A1 / Front; 2017.04.27](#)

Print Coverage

Toronto Star: Basic income could be clarity in uncertainty; A8; 2017.04.27

PUBLICATION: Toronto Star
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BYLINE: Martin Regg Cohn
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Basic income could be clarity in uncertainty

Free money can be a hard sell.

People in need will surely take it in.

People of means, however, may not like the idea of giving it out - not at their expense.

Thursday's budget will formalize an ambitious pilot program for 4,000 eligible volunteers to be guaranteed an annual income of \$17,000 by the government over three years.

If you qualify, the money flows whether or not you work, which works in your favour - in good times and bad, for better or worse.

If you don't know what to make of the guaranteed giveaway, you're not alone. The concept has confounded social policy analysts, politicians, economists and ideologues of the left and right for decades. It's a bold idea, but not overly original. In the early 1970s, Manitoba briefly experimented with a minimum income before giving up on the idea for lack of interest and support.

But our world has changed, and Ontario's economy along with it. The go-go growth of four decades ago was not an ideal incubator for an idealistic income support program.

Critics might have said back then (if not now): Get a job.

People on the right or left might well have argued whether a guaranteed income could discourage people from working hard - or looking hard. All these years later, we know that economic progress can also be precarious for employment.

Today it's possible to get a job, but harder to keep a job, because jobs for life turned out to be short-lived. Even the most energetic full-time multitasker of part-time jobs can only fantasize about a forever factory job in a manufacturing heartland that has rapidly deindustrialized.

Pick your poison: globalization, automation, artificial intelligence or information technology. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to know that jobs for rocket scientists - and the rest of us (and our children) - aren't what they once were.

Against that backdrop, the guaranteed minimum payout has been rebranded a basic income. And updated to take account of income levels and, increasingly, uneven incomes - which is to say, incomes that come and go over the years.

It is still minimal - \$17,000 a year won't buy you a life of easy survivability, let alone affordability. It is 75 per cent of Ontario's low-income measure (a quasi-poverty line) of about \$22,653 - calculated as half the median income in the province.

But it has the incalculable advantage of clarity, efficiency and humanity. It is an alternative to the dehumanizing bureaucracy of welfare, with all its necessary checks and unnecessary balances. Not just for the poor, nor the working poor, not even the well-off working class of the past. Consider the middle class of today and tomorrow, watching their paycheques go up and down as work comes and goes from one year to the next, wondering if they'll qualify for unemployment benefits and marvelling at the workplace benefits their parents counted on for prescription and dental bills. That's why the current economic context counts for so much in any consideration of a basic income. Weighing the costs and benefits, it's also worth waiting for the facts to come in from this three-year trial before prejudging human behaviour and economic outcomes. The only certainty is that it is far from a sure thing. The Liberal government deserves credit for launching an experiment that could easily fail, just as its previous proposals to streamline an outdated welfare system quickly lost momentum. In the same week that Premier Kathleen Wynne unveiled her basic income experiment, NDP Leader Andrea Horwath called for a provincial pharmacare program, trying to put the Liberals on the spot. Both proposals could prove life-saving, but they are distinctly different. A basic income pilot is more abstract and hence harder for voters to imagine benefiting them. Universal pharmacare is easy to understand because it offers tangible benefits up front (saving money and lives through bulk-buying and a single-payer system). First promised in last year's budget, the basic income plan is a centrepiece of Thursday's budget and will form a major plank in next year's Liberal election platform. As Wynne argued this week, it goes to the core of what governments can do amid economic and employment volatility - but the same argument applies to pharmacare, which (like the basic income) attracts support from both left and right. Free money for some versus free drugs for all? A good government would give us both. Martin Regg Cohn's political column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. mcohn@thestar.ca, Twitter: @reggcohn

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Toronto Star: Sousa's balanced budget may boost Wynne in next election; Eliminated deficit means more help for Ontarians from province, premier says; A8; 2017.04.27

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Sousa's balanced budget may boost Wynne in next election; Eliminated deficit means more help for Ontarians from province, premier says

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 and new rent controls limiting hikes to inflation. 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.

"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.

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Toronto Star: Liberals promise \$200M for daycare; A8; 2017.04.27

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BYLINE: Laurie Monsebraaten Toronto Star

KEYWORDS: provincial,budget,invest,million,create,spaces

ILLUSTRATION: Amanda Munday and her two children, Everett, 8 months, and Fiona, 2, have been on daycare wait-lists for years. Andrew Francis Wallace/Toronto Star

WORD COUNT: 347

Liberals promise \$200M for daycare

Thursday's provincial budget will invest more than \$200 million to help create 24,000 more child-care spaces this year, says Finance Minister Charles Sousa.

And about 60 per cent of the new spots - about 16,000 - will be subsidized for low- to moderate-income families, he said Wednesday at a YMCA daycare in downtown Toronto. The new spaces are part of the Liberals' promise last fall to create 100,000 licensed spots over the next five years, a move aimed at doubling the supply for infants, toddlers and preschoolers across the province. Currently, just 20 per cent of Ontario children under age 4 have access to licensed daycare.

"Raising a family can be stressful, especially when looking for child care that is affordable and close to home," said Sousa, who made the announcement with Indira Naidoo-Harris, the minister responsible for early learning and child care.

Ontario has the highest child-care fees in the country, with Toronto families paying as much as \$20,000 a year for a spot. For a family earning about \$40,000, a fee subsidy would cut the average daily cost of child care in the city from \$83 to under \$8, Naidoo-Harris said.

Toronto usually receives one-quarter to one-third of any new provincial funding, meaning the city could get up to 8,000 new spaces this year.

"This investment in operating funding will increase dramatically the number of families receiving subsidies, reduce wait-lists, reduce fees, help with recruiting and training staff, and help municipalities increase access to child care," Naidoo-Harris said.

Amanda Munday, who works for a tech start-up, said she is pleased child care is getting a funding boost, but she is anxious to hear how it will help families that don't qualify for fee subsidies. And she wants to know how governments plan to address high-demand areas such as Toronto's east end, where she and other families sit on wait-lists for years to get a spot.

"I'm set to return to work in September and I still don't have quality, licensed, full-time child care for my two children," Munday said.

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Toronto Star: Stop closing TCHC units; A16; 2017.04.27

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Stop closing TCHC units

Toronto's social-housing crisis continues to fester, with no remedy in sight.

Take the latest developments at Toronto Community Housing Corp., the city's wholly owned non-profit housing agency.

TCHC recently announced that it will be closing about 400 units next year because it doesn't have enough money to repair them. That's on top of 600 units already slated to be shut down this year.

These closures represent a devastating step backward. The city is currently grappling with a pressing shortage of social housing, with some 181,000 people now on the waiting list.

The needed repairs aren't simple things like broken faucets or chipped paint, but rather big-ticket items like roof repairs, plumbing problems, broken elevators and other issues that make these units uninhabitable.

To deal with these issues, the TCHC has a decade-long, \$2.6-billion repair plan. But that's where things get sticky.

That plan envisions about \$440 million being spent next year, but TCHC says it can only access about \$82 million. So once again the city is looking to the province and to Ottawa to do their part.

Premier Kathleen Wynne has recently talked a big game about the need for joint co-operation among the three levels of government on the housing file, but on social housing the province was largely mute when its Fair Housing Plan was announced last week.

That plan was more focused on efforts to dampen housing speculation, and cool the red-hot real-estate market in Toronto and its surrounding region.

Now the city is hoping there will be money for social housing fix-ups in the provincial budget Thursday, though Toronto Mayor John Tory said he's heard no whispers from the province on this front.

As for the feds, Ottawa promised \$11 billion for housing over 11 years in its 2017 budget, but officials have up to now been coy about how and when the money will be released, and what it will go toward. (The details of Ottawa's National Housing Strategy won't be revealed until later this year.)

So there's no indication any of this will save the 1,000 TCHC homes set to close. And thousands more homes could be shut down in the coming years if things don't turn around, TCHC warns.

Last week, former Toronto mayor John Sewell lambasted the city at an executive committee meeting, saying that rather than closing down social housing units it should try to partner with private sector developers and build new units on land the city owns. Market units could be built on the same land to finance the plan, Sewell argued, similar to projects like the redevelopment in Regent Park and Don Mount. Whatever the merits of that idea, it's a whole lot better than closing down units while pinning the city's hopes on money that may or may not be forthcoming from upper levels of government.

Investing in social housing isn't sexy. It's certainly not as headline-grabbing as efforts to address Toronto's overheated real-estate market. Nevertheless, politicians at all levels of government must make public housing in Toronto and other parts of the country a top priority. Everyone deserves a roof over their heads and to live in dignity.

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Toronto Sun: Tory leader has his doubts; A8; 2017.04.27

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SOURCE: Toronto Sun
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ILLUSTRATION: / PATRICK BROWN;
WORD COUNT: 247

Tory leader has his doubts

Will Ontario's budget be a "recipe for success" or a taste of financial disaster? With the Liberals poised to unveil their budget Thursday, Progressive Conservatives were questioning the ingredients in Finance Minister Charles Sousa's spending package.

Tory leader Patrick Brown clashed with the minister in Question Period Wednesday where he dubbed him "Chef Sousa" and accused the Mississauga MPP of "cooking the books" in order to balance this year's budget ahead of the 2018 election.

"There are a lot of reasons Ontarians are led to believe this is a false balance," Brown said. "It's Chef Sousa cooking the books to look good in an election year."

Brown accused the government of "electioneering" with the budget as Premier Kathleen Wynne's approvals hover around 12% in the polls.

Sousa shot back that his budget will be a "recipe for success" for the province. He stressed, as he has in recent weeks, that the government will balance its budget as promised and hinted that spending will increase.

On Wednesday, the minister announced \$200 million will be included in the budget to open up 24,000 more child care spaces across the province.

"We're balancing the budget," he said.

"And because we're balancing the budget we're able to do a number of things. Ontarians, the people of Ontario, have worked hard to get through the recession and have maintained and struggled through the recovery. We've been very disciplined. We've taken a very balanced approach throughout as opposed to making across-the-board cuts."

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National Post: Ontario to reveal new spending in budget; Balanced ledger, initiatives meant to assuage voters; A8; 2017.04.27

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BYLINE: Allison Jones And Jessica Smith Cross
SOURCE: The Canadian Press
KEYWORDS: liberal,government,release,first,balanced,budget
ILLUSTRATION: Veronica Henri, Postmedia Network / Ontario's Finance Minister Charles

Sousa has already announced that the budget will contain new spending to benefit seniors and students, among others.;

IMAGES: Veronica Henri, Postmedia Network / Ontario's Finance Minister Charles Sousa has already announced that the budget will contain new spending to benefit seniors and students, among others.
[NTNP_20170427_National_A8_02_I001.jpg];

DATELINE: TORONTO

WORD COUNT: 371

Ontario to reveal new spending in budget; Balanced ledger, initiatives meant to assuage voters

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 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 plummeted in the polls, her message has shifted to that of fairness and everyday affordability.

Wynne recently unveiled a "Fair Hydro Plan" and a "Fair Housing Plan," and in a speech on Monday to announce details of a basic income pilot project, fairness was a theme she 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 pay cheque. We must make sure that the opportunities available to our people and especially our young people not only endure, but grow."

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 said. "It's what are we doing as a result of the balance."

Sousa says 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 overcrowding in hospitals, which forces patients to be placed in hallways and other unconventional spaces.

On Tuesday, ministers also announced \$20 million in 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.

Additionally, \$200 million will go toward creating 24,000 childcare spaces and subsidies for families for about 60 per cent of those spots - as part of the government's promise last year to create 100,000 more licensed spaces.

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Toronto Sun: 'Chef Sousa'prank expands; A8; 2017.04.27

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ILLUSTRATION: / (See hardcopy for photo);
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'Chef Sousa'prank expands

Pranksters in Ontario's Progressive Conservative caucus cooked up a gag at Finance Minister Charles Sousa's expense.

On the eve of Ontario's budget launch, the PC party caucus has produced a commemorative "Chef Sousa" bobblehead.

Clad in a chef's jacket and hat, the 16-cm tall statute is grinning ear-to-ear. The collectable is the latest in a series of "Chef Sousa" gags. The Tories are accusing the government of "cooking the books" to balance the budget.

Sousa said Wednesday he was "flattered."

"The fact that they take the time to, over that last number of weeks, establish a website," he said. "They've now printed pamphlets. They're advertising a balanced budget tomorrow. Of course, I responded by saying, 'We have a great recipe for success.'" The PCs started their campaign when Sousa announced the budget date in an speech a few weeks ago, calling it his official "cook book launch."

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Ottawa Citizen: A Budget built to give wynne her best shot; After years of restraint, renewed spending is expected in last blueprint before election; A1 / Front; 2017.04.27

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KEYWORDS: provincial,budget,finance,minister,charles,sousa

ILLUSTRATION: Chris Donovan / Activist Liberalism is both Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne's guiding philosophy and an election strategy, writes David Reevely.; / Patrick Brown; / Andrea Horwath;

COLUMN: David Reevely

IMAGES: Chris Donovan / Activist Liberalism is both Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne's guiding philosophy and an election strategy, writes David Reevely.
[OTCT_20170427_Early_A1_09_I001.jpg]; / Patrick Brown
[OTCT_20170427_Early_A1_09_I002.jpg]; / Andrea Horwath
[OTCT_20170427_Early_A1_09_I003.jpg];

WORD COUNT: 780

A Budget built to give wynne her best shot; After years of restraint, renewed spending is expected in last blueprint before election

The provincial budget Finance Minister Charles Sousa presents Thursday afternoon will be the first of the new Kathleen Wynne era. Also possibly the last.

It's the payoff for years of restraint, following a big-spending budget that got them elected to a majority government in 2014. It's a budget that will set a tone for the next year in a long, long lead-up to the next campaign in 2018, the one that will determine whether the Liberals have a shot in that election or if it's a lost cause.

It's a budget that will spend money.

Last week, Wynne turned a relatively small announcement in Hamilton about an experimental welfare program into a major philosophical declaration about the future of her government.

"I believe it is the responsibility of government to take a stand, play a role and do what it can, do all it can, to ensure that the people of Ontario are given every chance to thrive and achieve their potential during this period of change," the premier said.

After years of promising to close the province's deficit, and years of financial updates showing they weren't quite on pace to do it, the Liberals swear they've made it. Ontario's economy isn't roaring and sudden American protectionism could be devastating, but we're in a better place than nearly everybody we trade with. More people are working and paying taxes. A dangerously hot housing market in Toronto has helped, pitching billions of dollars in land-transfer taxes into the province's pot, so partly the government's been lucky. But whatever gets you there - it still counts.

There remains the possibility that they'll balance the budget with trickery, by saying they'll sell some big provincial asset without saying what it is or by booking unspecified efficiencies and cuts as if they've already been executed. On Wednesday, the Progressive Conservatives handed out bobbleheads of Sousa in a chef's hat, pre-emptively accusing him of cooking the books, oh-ho-ho.

If the Liberals really are that dishonest, and stupid, they'll deserve all the abuse they'll get. The budget papers will tell.

The idea that Wynne governs from "the activist centre" isn't new but her restatement of the principle now is important.

"In the days and weeks and months to come, our government will reveal more details of our plan," she said. "We will lay out how these policies will help our people and our province confront the challenges of today and tomorrow. Just as we did with pension reform, we will be focused on providing help in areas where employers have withdrawn from their traditional role."

She wants to pursue "ideas that will actively confront and diminish the uncertainty of this new era," she said. "We have an opportunity before us, and we cannot afford to wait."

Conveniently, activist Liberalism is both Wynne's guiding philosophy and an election strategy.

Tory Leader Patrick Brown's policies remain a cipher, defined entirely by his opposition to Wynne's. The Liberals can say he wants to end practically any government activity and - so far - there's no way to say they're wrong. He's trying so hard to be an inoffensive alternative to Wynne that it's impossible to know what he stands for. An expansive Liberal budget will just add to the list of things Brown might go after if he's elected.

Wynne has even pre-spent some money she doesn't have yet: The Liberals have pledged to give cities more transit money from Ontario's gas-tax revenues, for instance, but not until after the next election.

They've promised 100,000 new licensed daycare spaces (on Wednesday, behind a BUDGET 2017 placard, Sousa and Child Care Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris re-announced funding for the next 24,000 of them). They've promised billions of unspent dollars for transit and transportation more generally. Years and years worth of spending is promised but not finished.

In 2014, full-day kindergarten was the big thing they had in mid-rollout. For a month before they released the budget that ultimately brought down their minority government, Liberal ministers traipsed around the province promising new programs, raises for public-sector workers, better this, more that. The budget itself was an anticlimax.

New Democrat Leader Andrea Horwath said she wouldn't vote for it, Wynne called an election and ran a campaign as if all the stuff she'd promised was already in place and the Tim Hudak Tories were going to kill it if they won (which they mostly were, and said so). Horwath flopped around and Wynne walked away with a majority.

The Liberals think they have the provincial finances in hand. They've done the really dirty work and now it's time to use the government the way they want to. Starting Thursday. dreevely@postmedia.com

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Ottawa Citizen: 'Fair society' expected as focus of budget; Ontario Liberals Balanced first time in decade; N4; 2017.04.27

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ILLUSTRATION: Veronica Henri, Toronto Sun, Postmedia Network / Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa is expected to reveal a balanced budget on Thursday.;
IMAGES: Veronica Henri, Toronto Sun, Postmedia Network / Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa is expected to reveal a balanced budget on Thursday. [OTCT_20170427_Early_N4_03_I001.jpg];
DATELINE: TORONTO
WORD COUNT: 519

'Fair society'expected as focus of budget; Ontario Liberals Balanced first time in decade

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 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 plummeted in the polls, her message has shifted to that of fairness and everyday affordability.

Wynne recently unveiled a "Fair Hydro Plan" and a "Fair Housing Plan," and in a speech on Monday to announce details of a basic income pilot project, fairness was a theme she 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 pay cheque. 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.

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 overcrowding in hospitals, which forces patients to be placed in hallways and other unconventional spaces.

On Tuesday, ministers also announced \$20 million in 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 also 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."

Additionally, \$200 million will go toward creating 24,000 child-care spaces and subsidies for families for about 60 per cent of those spots - as part of the government's promise last year to create 100,000 more licensed spaces.

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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Ottawa Citizen: Ontario budget to address problem of patients in hospital hallways: minister; A11; 2017.04.27

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KEYWORDS: finance,minister,budget,contain,funding,problem
DATELINE: TORONTO
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Ontario budget to address problem of patients in hospital hallways: minister

Ontario's finance minister says Thursday's budget will contain funding to deal with the problem of overcrowded hospitals, a situation that has patients being placed in hallways, boardrooms and even cafeterias.

In a recent interview with The Canadian Press, Charles Sousa spoke specifically about the case of Jamie-Lee Ball, whose treatment at Brampton Civic Hospital made headlines and sparked debate at the legislature.

Ball was admitted to hospital March 25 and spent five days on a stretcher in hallways, suffering internal bleeding as the hospital experienced a level of overcrowding it calls "Code Gridlock" - when it has more patients than hospital beds.

"We have to find a better way of dealing with that, and that's what we're doing in the upcoming budget," Sousa said. "We don't want people to be in hallways."

The government knows that capacity has been a problem at hospitals all around the province, Sousa said, and wants people properly cared for.

The Brampton hospital has needed to put patients in hallways when its 608 provincially-funded beds and extra surge beds are full, said Dr. Naveed Mohammad, vicepresident of medical affairs with the William Osler Health System, which includes Brampton Civic Hospital.

"Every large hospital in the GTA has had to put patients in unconventional places," Mohammad said. "One of our peer hospitals has had to put patients in their boardroom and in the cafeteria."

Being in a hallway with only a hanging sheet for privacy left Ball feeling exposed, depressed, discouraged and sleep-deprived, she said.

Ball and her mother have since launched a petition calling for more hospital funding.

"It's one thing to look at the health care system and determine the most cost-effective budget and another to look at the health care system and realize what funding is needed to ensure Canadians receive the best care possible in the shortest time frame," Ball said.

According to the CEO of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario in Ottawa, the problem of patients in hallways comes down to the government's constriction of hospital funding over past five years.

"It's a basic math problem," Alex Munter said. "If you've got increasing demand and population growth, but diminishing resources, then something's got to give - and what ends up giving is capacity."

Over the past five years, Ontario hospital operating funding has averaged less than one-per cent growth, while inflation and population growth mean that has effectively been a funding cut year after year, said Munter.

The Ontario Hospital Association is calling for a 4.9 per cent increase to hospital funding in the budget. Average bed occupancy rates in Ontario hospitals have risen to 92 per cent - and there is a greater likelihood of risk to patients when the average rate exceeds about 85 per cent, according to the association.

"During flu season, in particular, many hospitals will experience occupancy of up to 130 per cent," the association wrote in its budget request to the government.

Sousa said he knows hospitals suffered capacity problems in the recent flu season and that played a role in Ball's case.

Another part of the capacity problem is beds continue to be used by patients who no longer need to be in hospital but are waiting for more appropriate care to be available elsewhere - such in long-term care homes and mental health facilities in their community.

They're referred to as "alternate level of care" patients and, according to the OHA's budget request, they make up about 15.5 per cent of patients in Ontario hospitals.

Ontario has been implementing a plan dubbed Patients First to move patients out of hospitals, into less expensive community and home care.

The province has been increasing funding in those areas - including, mostly recently, \$20 million announced Tuesday that will go to funding respite for unpaid caregivers who help friends and family members stay at home.

While the hospital association supports the plan to transition more patients out of hospitals, it says the number of alternate-level-of-care patients in hospitals has grown despite those efforts.

"Immediate and concerted action is needed to allow hospitals to meet the growing needs of these complex patients while they remain in their care, and to minimize the impact these patients have on the ability of hospitals to admit patients in need of acute care," the OHA said.

Fixing the capacity problem requires both operating funding, to lower wait times and fund more beds, as well as capital costs for new construction, according to the OHA.

At a recent event at CHEO, Munter and other hospital administrators questioned Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne about how much financial support her government will provide in the budget.

Tammy DeGiovanni, Director of Ambulatory Care at CHEO, told Wynne that recent years have been tough on the hospital and it has found all the efficiencies it can find - right down to saving on postage.

Wynne said the province has heard those concerns clearly.

"We know that we need to support you," she said. "We know that you need resources in order to do that."

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Ottawa Sun: Budget battle lines; Liberal fiscal plan will set stage for provincial election; A10; 2017.04.27

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SOURCE: Ottawa Sun

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ILLUSTRATION:/ ANDREA HORWATH; / (See hardcopy for photo); / PATRICK BROWN;

WORD COUNT: 781

Budget battle lines; Liberal fiscal plan will set stage for provincial election

The provincial budget Finance Minister Charles Sousa presents Thursday afternoon will be the first of the new Kathleen Wynne era. Also possibly the last.

It's the payoff for years of restraint, following a bigspending budget that got them elected to a majority government in 2014. It's a budget that will set a tone for the next year in a long, long lead-up to the next campaign in 2018, the one that will determine whether the Liberals have a shot in that election or if it's a lost cause.

It's a budget that will spend money.

Last week, Wynne turned a relatively small announcement in Hamilton about an experimental welfare program into a major philosophical declaration about the future of her government.

"I believe it is the responsibility of government to take a stand, play a role and do what it can, do all it can, to ensure that the people of Ontario are given every chance to thrive and achieve their potential during this period of change," the premier said.

After years of promising to close the province's deficit, and years of financial updates showing they weren't quite on pace to do it, the Liberals swear they've made it. Ontario's economy isn't roaring and sudden American protectionism could be devastating, but we're in a better place than nearly everybody we trade with. More people are working and paying taxes. A dangerously hot housing market in Toronto has helped, pitching billions of dollars in landtransfer taxes into the province's pot, so partly the government's been lucky. But whatever gets you there - it still counts.

(There remains the possibility that they'll balance the budget with trickery, by saying they'll sell some big provincial asset without saying what it is or by booking unspecified efficiencies and cuts as if they've already been executed. On Wednesday, the Progressive Conservatives handed out bobbleheads of Sousa in a chef's hat, pre-emptively accusing him of cooking the books, oh-ho-ho. If the Liberals really are that dishonest, and stupid, they'll deserve all the abuse they'll get. The budget papers will tell.)

The idea that Wynne governs from "the activist centre" isn't new but her restatement of the principle now is important.

"In the days and weeks and months to come, our government will reveal more details of our plan," she said. "We will lay out how these policies will help our people and our province confront the challenges of today and tomorrow. Just as we did with pension reform, we will be focused on providing help in areas where employers have withdrawn from their traditional role."

She wants to pursue "ideas that will actively confront and diminish the uncertainty of this new era," she said. "We have an opportunity before us, and we cannot afford to wait."

Conveniently, activist Liberalism is both Wynne's guiding philosophy and an election strategy.

Tory leader Patrick Brown's policies remain cipherous, defined entirely by his opposition to Wynne's. The Liberals can say he wants to end practically any government activity and - so far - there's no way to say they're wrong. He's trying so hard to be an inoffensive alternative to Wynne that it's impossible to know what he stands for. An expansive Liberal budget will just add to the list of things Brown might go after if he's elected.

Wynne's even pre-spent some money she doesn't have yet: The Liberals have pledged to give cities more transit money from Ontario's gas-tax revenues, for instance, but not until after the next election. They've promised 100,000 new licensed daycare spaces (on Wednesday, behind a BUDGET 2017 placard, Sousa and Child Care Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris re-announced funding for the next 24,000 of them). They've promised billions of unspent dollars for transit and transportation more generally. Years and years worth of spending is promised but not finished.

In 2014, full-day kindergarten was the big thing they had in midrollout. For a month before they released the budget that ultimately brought down their minority government, Liberal ministers traipsed around the province promising new programs, raises for public-sector workers, better this, more that. The budget itself was an anticlimax.

New Democrat leader Andrea Horwath said she wouldn't vote for it, Wynne called an election and ran a campaign as if all the stuff she'd promised was already in place and the Tim Hudak Tories were going to kill it if they won (which they mostly were, and said so). Horwath flopped around and Wynne walked away with a majority.

The Liberals think they have the provincial finances in hand. They've done the really dirty work and now it's time to use the government the way they want to. Starting Thursday. dreevely@postmedia.com
twitter.com/davidreevely

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Waterloo Region Record: Budget to address hospital crowding; A10; 2017.04.27

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SOURCE: The Canadian Press
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WORD COUNT: 518

Budget to address hospital crowding: minister

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"We have to find a better way of dealing with that, and that's what we're doing in the upcoming budget," Sousa said. "We don't want people to be in hallways."

The government knows that capacity has been a problem at hospitals all around the province, Sousa said, and wants people properly cared for.

The Brampton hospital has needed to put patients in hallways when its 806 provincially-funded beds and extra surge beds are full, said Dr. Naveed Mohammad, vice-president of medical affairs with the William Osler Health System, which includes Brampton Civic Hospital.

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The province has been increasing funding in those areas - including, mostly recently, \$20 million announced Tuesday that will go to funding respite for unpaid caregivers who help friends and family members stay at home.

While the hospital association supports the plan to transition more patients out of hospitals, it says the number of alternate-level-of-care patients in hospitals has grown despite those efforts.

Fixing the capacity problem requires both operating funding, to lower wait times and fund more beds, as well as capital costs for new construction, according to the OHA.

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The Chronicle Journal: Ontario budget to address problem; 2017.04.27

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[Ont-Hospital-Budget code:2 INDEX: Health, Ontario, Politics HL:Ontario budget to address problem]

Ont-Hospital-Budget
code:2

INDEX: Health, Ontario, Politics

HL:Ontario budget to address problem of patients in hospital hallways: minister

By Jessica Smith Cross

THE CANADIAN PRESS

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London Free Press: Budget targets overcrowding in hospitals; A6; 2017.04.27

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Windsor Star: Budget to address hospital crowding; A10; 2017.04.27

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Sousa said he knows that capacity has been a problem at hospitals all around the province.

Windsor Regional Hospital has been over capacity for most of the last four months, forcing the cancellation of some non-urgent surgeries as staff scrambled to find places for a surge of sick patients.

At the peak of flu season the hospital was operating at 115 per cent capacity on average in its medicine, surgery and critical care units, according to hospital CEO David Musyj. He said in WRH's case some private rooms were turned to semi-privates and some semis were converted to wards. Some patient rooms that had been put out of commission were reintroduced as patient rooms. Musyj said conditions in many of the rooms were inconveniently tight. The extra patients were spread throughout the hospital's two campuses.

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Waterloo Region Record: Ontario's first balanced budget in 10 years heavy on spending; A10; 2017.04.27

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EDITION: First

BYLINE: Allison Jones and Jessica Smith Cross

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,release,first,balanced,budget

ILLUSTRATION: Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa, left, delivers the 2016 Ontario budget next to Premier Kathleen Wynne, right, in February of last year.Nathan Denette, The Canadian Press

WORD COUNT: 654

Ontario's first balanced budget in 10 years heavy on spending

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.

The Hamilton Spectator: Budget balanced, Ontario ready to spend; A12; 2017.04.27**PUBLICATION:** The Hamilton Spectator**PAGE:** A12**DATE:** 2017.04.27**SECTION:** Canada / World**EDITION:** First**BYLINE:** Allison Jones and Jessica Smith Cross The Canadian Press**KEYWORDS:** liberal,government,release,first,balanced,budget**ILLUSTRATION:** Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa, left, said he's proud of balancing the budget, but 'that's not an end in itself.'Nathan Denette, The Canadian Press**WORD COUNT:** 480

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"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 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.

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Sudbury Star: Ont. announcing new spending in first balanced budget in a decade; A5; 2017.04.27

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WORD COUNT: 689

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The official opposition maintains the Liberals will only achieve "fake" balance in the budget as a political ploy ahead of the 2018 election. The Progressive Conservatives have even created a "Chef Charles Sousa" online caricature who talks about "cooking the books."

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Welland Tribune: Ontario announcing new spending in first balanced budget; B2;
2017.04.27

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SECTION: News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Allison Jones and Jessica Smith Cross

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,release,first,balanced,budget

ILLUSTRATION: Nathan Denette, The Canadian Press / Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa, left, delivers the Ontario 2016 budget next to Premier Kathleen Wynne, right, at Queen's Park in Toronto on Feb. 25, 2016. Ontario's Liberal government will release its first balanced budget in a decade on Thursday, with a host of new spending measures.;

DATELINE: TORONTO

WORD COUNT: 689

Ontario announcing new spending in first balanced budget

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Premier Kathleen Wynne has in the past few years focused on bigpicture 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.

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"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 pay cheque. We must make sure that the opportunities available to our people and especially our young people not only endure, but grow."

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"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."

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The Sault Star: Ont. announcing new spending in balanced budget; Allison Jones And Jessica Smith Cross; A2; 2017.04.27

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SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,release,first,balanced,budget

ILLUSTRATION: Nathan Denette, The Canadian Press / Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa, left, delivers the Ontario 2016 budget at Queen's Park in Toronto on Feb. 25, 2016. Ontario's Liberal government will release its first balanced budget in a decade on Thursday, with a host of new spending measures.;

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KEYWORDS: liberal,government,release,first,balanced,budget
ILLUSTRATION: Nathan Denette, The Canadian Press / Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa, left, delivers the Ontario 2016 budget next to Premier Kathleen Wynne, right, at Queen's Park in Toronto on Feb. 25, 2016.;
DATELINE: TORONTO
WORD COUNT: 689

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The Belleville Intelligencer: Ontario announcing new spending in first balanced budget in a decade; B2; 2017.04.27

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DATE: 2017.04.27

SECTION: News

EDITION: Final

BYLINE: Allison Jones And Jessica Smith Cross

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

KEYWORDS: liberal,government,release,first,balanced,budget

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DATELINE: TORONTO

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The Barrie Examiner: Ontario announcing new spending in first balanced budget in a decade; A8; 2017.04.27

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BYLINE: Allison Jones And Jessica Smith Cross
SOURCE: The Canadian Press
KEYWORDS: liberal,government,release,first,balanced,budget
ILLUSTRATION: Nathan Denette, The Canadian Press / Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa, left, delivers the Ontario 2016 budget next to Premier Kathleen Wynne, right, at Queen's Park in Toronto on Feb. 25, 2016. Ontario's Liberal government will release its first balanced budget in a decade on Thursday, with a host of new spending measures.;
DATeline: TORONTO
WORD COUNT: 689

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London Free Press: A balanced budget, with benefits; Ontario Liberals focus on affordability issues, while opposition questions their math; A6; 2017.04.27

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DATE: 2017.04.27
SECTION: Ontario
EDITION: Final
BYLINE: Allison Jones And Jessica Smith Cross
SOURCE: The Canadian Press
KEYWORDS: liberal,government,release,first,balanced,budget
ILLUSTRATION: Canadian Press File / Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa presents his budget today at Queen's Park, as he did last February, above, next to Premier Kathleen Wynne. The Liberals are pledging to balance the books, despite new spending.;
DATELINE: TORONTO
WORD COUNT: 889

A balanced budget, with benefits; Ontario Liberals focus on affordability issues, while opposition questions their math

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No further such housing measures will be unveiled in the budget, Sousa said Wednesday, but there will be measures on social housing for low-income residents.

Additionally, \$200 million will go toward creating 24,000 childcare spaces and subsidies for families for

about 60 per cent of those spots, as part of the government's promise last year to create 100,000 more licensed spaces.

Cuts to electricity 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 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.

The official opposition maintains the Liberals will achieve only "fake" balance in the budget as a political ploy ahead of the 2018 election. The Progressive Conservatives have even created a "Chef Charles Sousa" online caricature who talks about "cooking the books." PC Leader Patrick Brown said he believes the Liberals can only balance the budget by dramatically cutting services or raising taxes, or by using accounting "tricks." He's watching out for two such tricks: counting public pension surpluses as assets, against the advice of the province's auditor general, and counting revenue from the partial sale of Hydro One against the deficit, when the money is intended for a separate trust for infrastructure projects.

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Ontario's NDP also sees politics in the budget.

"The government's had 14 years to address the problems that we've seen in this province, and they're now scrambling at the last minute to save their own political skin, as opposed to really being concerned about the realities of life for Ontarians," said Deputy Leader Jagmeet Singh.

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Lake of the Woods Enterprise: Workers rally; Call for provincial government to stop cuts and increase funding for hospitals; A3; 2017.04.27

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BYLINE: Kathleen Charlebois

SOURCE: Lake Of The Woods Enterprise

KEYWORDS: slush,spring,storm,deter,hospital,workers

ILLUSTRATION: Kathleen Charlebois, For The Enterprise / CUPE National President Mark Hancock (right) addresses the rally in front of the Lake of the Woods Hospital on Tuesday, April 25. The joint CUPE-Ontario Council of Hospital Unions rally called for increased funding for hospitals in the province.;

WORD COUNT: 418

Workers rally; Call for provincial government to stop cuts and increase funding for hospitals

Slush and ice from the spring storm didn't deter hospital workers from rallying for full funding with the chant "Stop the cuts!" A large group assembled in front of the Paterson Medical Centre near the Lake of the Woods District Hospital (LOWDH) and called on the provincial government to stop cuts to hospital funding as part of a series of rallies to keep political attention on the issue.

Judy Bain, president of CUPE Local 1781 which represents registered practical nurses (RPNs) at the hospital, said the LOWDH hasn't had enough money in their funding envelope to cover the costs of running the facility for the last eight years.

"The hospital is constantly looking for ways to be more and more efficient, but I really think we've hit the bottom," she said. "We can't cut services, because there's really nobody else to pass the services onto. I think we're as efficient as we can be, but we've definitely hit the wall when it comes to operating our hospital with the current levels the government gives us."

Michael Hurley, the president of the Ontario Council of Hospital Unions (OCHU), which is the hospital wing of CUPE, said a five per cent funding increase is needed to cover hospital costs across the province. The cost pressures include things like drug price increases, the costs of medical technologies and doctors' salaries.

He added that one consequence of cuts for a hospital in a smaller city is that "health services are increasingly centralized in large urban centres, and people have to go to Winnipeg and they have to go to Thunder Bay for procedures."

Speakers at the rally voiced concern about the LOWDH undergoing an operational review and that it will lead to further budget cuts.

On Thursday, the government of Ontario will release its 2017 budget and it remains to be seen whether they have listened to OCHU's demands for funding increases over cuts.

Bain said the rally was a testimonial to the fact that it doesn't matter if a hospital is in a big city or a small city. "Everybody's facing funding problems and everybody's having staffing problems," she said. "It does take a toll on the services and the patients we serve."

The OCHU annual conference is also being held at the Lakeside Inn from Tuesday to Thursday, and Hurley said more than 160 attendees are discussing an action plan that includes the mobilization of their members in support of public access to hospital care and long-term care.

KCharlebois@postmedia.com

The Chatham Daily News: Roundtable welcomes guaranteed income project; Pilot project will launch in Hamilton, Thunder Bay and Lindsay; A1 / Front; 2017.04.27

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SOURCE: The Daily News
KEYWORDS: prosperity,roundtable,welcoming,recent,province,launch
WORD COUNT: 556

Roundtable welcomes guaranteed income project; Pilot project will launch in Hamilton, Thunder Bay and Lindsay

The Prosperity Roundtable of Chatham-Kent is welcoming recent news that the province will launch a guaranteed income pilot project in several Ontario cities this year.

Premier Kathleen Wynne made the announcement this week in Hamilton, which will be one of the test cities starting late this spring. The other communities include Thunder Bay this spring and Lindsay in the fall.

"I think this is an incredibly exciting project for Ontario," said Kate Do Forno, the Prosperity Roundtable's project co-ordinator, on Wednesday. "It will really help the province measure and understand... the impacts on individuals living below the poverty line."

Basic incomes are designed to be streamlined compared to traditional social assistance and aim to encourage people to work, without the disincentive of losing social supports in a changing economy often afflicted with precarious jobs.

Participants in the three regions will be chosen randomly and invited to apply to the project, in which 4,000 people will be selected. It will cost the government \$50 million annually.

The plan will provide as much as \$16,989 a year for an eligible single person. Couples will receive as much as \$24,027 a year. People with disabilities will receive as much as \$6,000 more a year.

Recipients who are employed will keep what they make from their jobs, with basic income payments decreasing by half their earnings.

However, participants will continue to receive provincial and federal child benefit payments on top of the basic income.

Despite her support of the project, Do Forno said she had some concerns.

"I don't want to see other important issues go to the wayside," she said. "There's the fight around the \$15 minimum wage. As well, there is the issue around reforms needed to social assistance rates. (They're) woefully low and the province needs to acknowledge and address that, too.

"I really think it's important for advocates in the community to make sure that their voices are being heard on other important issues."

The Liberal government first announced the measure in the 2016 budget. The project also will include those who aren't working and those who are homeless.

Do Forno believes the sample size for the pilot project might be too small, and said many people need help right now, but called it a step in the right direction.

"I will be eagerly watching how this plays out, that's for sure," she said. "Not only do I think the public's ready for it, I think the public needs it. I think the public's been asking for it for years.

"(It means) understanding how we can make sure that everybody has their basic needs met and can be a part of the communities that they live in."

The government will look at several factors in the test recipients to gauge the pilot's success, such as food security, stress, mental health, health and health-care usage, housing stability, education and employment.

The province consulted former senator Hugh Segal for advice on building its pilot project.

Segal said the basic income should replace Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program payments, but be slightly more generous, and it should come with less monitoring and administration than those programs.

Other jurisdictions, including Finland, Kenya and the Netherlands, have launched basic income experiments in recent years. With files from The Canadian Press TTerfloth@postmedia.com
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Still in flux? No BRT bucks; Council needs to make a decision about rapid transit - and there are no cheap options - before funding can be approved

Let's be realistic, London. It's hard to see Ontario including money in today's provincial budget for the city's still-in-flux bus rapid transit project.

That should be a wake-up call for city council, whose majority professes to support BRT in one form or another.

London's project is still in the consultation phase, with council having delayed a final decision on routes - due to a public backlash - to consult Londoners more.

In their last two budgets, in 2015 and '16, the ruling Ontario Liberals referred to London BRT, which as

proposed needs upward of \$215 million in provincial cash. But of all the Ontario rapid transit systems mentioned in past budgets, London's is the only one not yet funded.

Today, though, as the province brings down what's expected to be its first balanced budget in nearly a decade, it's hard to imagine Queen's Park offering any more than another nod of support. Exact dollar figures aren't exactly appropriate for a project still in the consultation phase.

"They could say that, with the Building Ontario Fund, we are moving forward to support transit projects in Communities X, Y and Z, and London's, too," said Zachary Spicer, a political scientist at Brock University. "It would be something like a promissory note." For council, that should serve as a reminder. This is not the time for political indecision or indifference.

A massive public meeting is set for May 3 and council is scheduled to approve the system's routes on May 15 and 16 - and a decision needs to be made.

Kill or replace the tunnel. Move the north corridor to Western Road. Take one BRT lane off King Street.

Approve it without any changes. Those are essentially the options, and one has to be chosen.

Last week, city politicians met with local MPPs, including Deb Matthews, the Liberal deputy premier who's represented London North Centre at Queen's Park since 2003. Mayor Matt Brown was blunt: Will there be BRT cash in the budget? Matthews didn't divulge any details, but didn't dismiss BRT either, saying she's "enormously optimistic" about the project.

A year ago, city council approved the \$560-million plan, which is a 24-kilometre system of highfrequency buses running on L-and 7-shaped corridors bisecting London. The downtown intersection of King and Clarence streets is the proposed hub.

But a community backlash over exact routes - especially from downtown merchants who fear years of construction could kill their businesses - has forced council to hold off on a final route decision. Weak public engagement in the early stages has undermined the project, and forced city officials to redouble consultation efforts.

And here is council, faced with a crucial decision in about three weeks.

It's not too much to expect the provincial Liberals to refer specifically to support for London BRT in Thursday's budget. But real money won't flow unless and until council finalizes the routes.

A provincial budget without specific dollars shouldn't be considered a huge deal, either for supporters or critics, said Spicer, who specializes in civic politics.

"It's not necessarily a bad thing if there's no money attached to it yet," he said, adding next year's budget will drop in the runup to the provincial election.

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