

QP Briefing: March 29, 2017

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1). Wynne says housing affordability fix won't shrink protected Greenbelt

By: Sabrina Nanji

Whatever plan Premier Kathleen Wynne is cooking up to temper the hot housing market, it won't include expanding development into the protected Greenbelt.

Wynne said Wednesday she was committed to growing, not shrinking, the nearly 800,000-hectare parcel of green space and farmland in the Golden Horseshoe area that's protected from urban development.

"That's not something we're looking at," the Premier told reporters at an unrelated announcement in Toronto. "The Greenbelt is a hugely important swath of land ... it's like the lungs of this highly populated part of the province."

Wynne said her government is working to tackle a "whole range of supply- and demand-side issues" that would address the "huge issue" of housing affordability, and "most importantly, change in some ways the ability of people to get into the market."

She added the measures would focus on all cities in the province, as well as the Toronto area – where housing prices have reportedly been rising faster than any other major city in the world, surging nearly 24 per cent in February from a year earlier.

On Monday, Finance Minister Charles Sousa confirmed the upcoming 2017 budget, which is expected in the coming weeks, could include a housing affordability "package."

Tim Hudak, former Tory leader and now-CEO of the Ontario Real Estate Association, said the province should look at increasing and diversifying housing supply and "putting shovels in the ground on land already designated for development."

"The real issue is bigger than just expanding or developing the Greenbelt. There is a lot that can be done to increase the number of homes on the market without touching the Greenbelt," Hudak said in a statement.

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2). Twelve-packs of beer in the LCBO now being 'evaluated'

By: Geoff Zochodne

Is the LCBO capable of minding more than six Ps or three Qs?

Almost 20 months after announcing it would test-drive 12-packs of beer at 10 of its stores, the LCBO says it has moved on to the “evaluation stage” of selling the bigger quantities.

“The pilot was one year, the program has moved to evaluation stage, we are still selling in 10 stores,” said LCBO spokeswoman Christine Bujold in an email. “The results of the pilot are being evaluated by an independent third party.”

Typically, 12-packs and cases of 24 beers are the exclusive domain of the privately owned Beer Store.

But in August 2015, the Crown corporation, with the encouragement of Ontario’s Liberal government, announced it would run a pilot project that would see 12-packs sold at 10 stores.

How long the evaluation stage will take, the LCBO couldn't say.

The 12-pack pilot project was recommended by Premier Kathleen Wynne’s public asset panel, led by former TD Bank president Ed Clark, which also proposed selling up to 60 per cent of Hydro One to private investors and offering beer in grocery stores. The Liberal government has sold about 30 per cent of Hydro One in stock offerings, and made beer available in 130 supermarkets. Twelve-packs, however, are still confined to just the 10 LCBO outlets.

Finance Minister Charles Sousa noted another 80 grocery stores will soon be able to sell beer, as the government works towards its target of up to 450 supermarkets slinging suds.

“There are 10 current sites that are piloting the twelve-packs,” Sousa said. “And now that that’s been completed, we’ll assess it to see what more we can do going forward.”

The finance minister also said “a lot” has been done already, but said not to expect much more in his upcoming budget, which is expected to be tabled in April.

“We’ve done quite a bit, and I’ve kind of been talking at length about what we’re doing with beer and cider, the improvement we’ve made to distillers,” Sousa said. “I’m not going to suggest that that’s going to be the signature piece of the budget.”

Asked about the progress of the 12-pack pilot project, Progressive Conservative finance critic Vic Fedeli called the government's alcohol policies "a lot to do about nothing."

"Whenever we hear about beer, wine and alcohol, it's always been used as a distraction," he said.

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3). Tories table bill to hand back oversight of government ads to auditor general

By: Geoff Zochodne

The Progressive Conservatives are demanding the Liberal government return the auditor general's teeth.

Deputy Progressive Conservative leader Sylvia Jones tabled a private member's bill Monday that would reassert the auditor general's right to reject a government ad deemed too partisan or self-congratulatory. Bill 112, the End the Public Funding of Partisan Government Advertising Act, would strive to undo changes made by the Liberal government in 2015, which the auditor warned would turn her office into a "rubber stamp."

It's longshot legislation, given the Liberals' majority in the legislature, but it comes in the wake of government ads promoting Premier Kathleen Wynne's "Fair Hydro Plan." The ads promise listeners and readers a 25-per-cent reduction on their electricity bills, despite only 17 per cent of that being new savings and before the Liberal government has tabled any legislation to back up the proposal.

"That's nearly a million dollars going towards Premier Wynne's re-election campaign," said Jones at Queen's Park. "This is taxpayers' money that should be going to important issues."

Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk reported last year that the government spent nearly \$50 million on ads in 2015-16, some of which wouldn't have passed muster if the Liberals' hadn't changed her mandate.

"We cautioned when the Government changed the law in 2015 that it was opening the door to this sort of thing," Lysyk said in a release. "Sure enough, the government walked right through that open door."

PC Leader Patrick Brown asked during Wednesday's question period if Wynne would restore the AG's previous level of oversight.

"I don't want diversion tactics. I don't want talking points," Brown said. "They've stripped the powers from the auditor general to abuse taxpayer dollars for self-interest vanity ads. I'm asking the government to do the right thing."

Wynne fired back that Ontario is the first and only province that has rules to block partisan advertising.

"That is the reality," she said. "While partisan advertising is now banned, it is still permissible and it will continue to be permissible — and important — for the government to inform the people of Ontario about initiatives that impact their lives."

At a media availability Wednesday morning, Wynne said that when the Liberals came to power in 2003, there were "no rules" around partisan ads. "There was a huge amount of partisan advertising that was going on with the members', the premier's face on advertising that was paid for by the government."

The Premier may have been referring to something along the lines of this old ad starring former premier Mike Harris:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUQMD86322M>

The Liberal government's changes to the ad rules in 2015 didn't knock down bans on using the name, voice or image of an MPP, which had been a source of controversy during the Harris years. What the Liberals did do was delete a section of the Government Advertising Act that defined partisan advertising as an item the auditor deems "is to promote the partisan political interests of the governing party," and therefore, as an ad that would not be approved. Another section setting a standard that an ad's primary objective must not be to "foster a positive impression of the governing party" was also deleted.

Jones' bill would insert a number of new sections into the Government Advertising Act, such as one that defines partisan ads as those that the auditor general finds is chiefly to "promote the partisan political interests of the governing party."

Jones' bill is scheduled to be debated Thursday afternoon.

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4). Ontario doctors, government head back to bargaining table

By: Sabrina Nanji

Ontario's doctors and government negotiators went back to the bargaining table Tuesday night, and the first order of business will be to agree on a process for binding interest arbitration, the Health Minister said Wednesday.

Binding arbitration has been the key demand for the Ontario Medical Association, which represents the province's doctors, who have been without a physician services agreement for three years.

"Our instructions to the negotiating teams are that the first order of business to be discussed upon sitting down, which happened last night, is to begin that process, hopefully, towards an agreement on binding arbitration," Minister Eric Hoskins told reporters after Wednesday morning's Question Period.

Hoskins called Tuesday's meeting the "first episode" of the latest round of "renewed" negotiations. Last August, doctors sought another round of bargaining after rejecting a four-year contract. Then both sides shook up their bargaining team lineups in February, which is when the Liberals first committed to negotiating arbitration, the OMA's main sticking point.

The OMA wants it enshrined that their contracts should be decided by a third-party arbitrator in case negotiations hit a wall, since they cannot wage a strike.

Although a process for binding arbitration has not been agreed upon yet, Hoskins said he is encouraged "by the spirit of collaboration."

"I'm encouraged and, well, gratified that the negotiations began last night with that discussion," he said.

In Question Period, PC health critic Jeff Yurek charged the government has "waged an ongoing battle with Ontario's doctors."

Yurek said the Liberals had "created the illusion that doctors' billings equal their take-home pay," and suggested that that's where the government laid the blame for cuts to patient care.

"Instead of working with doctors, time and again the minister and this premier have unilaterally cut patient services and attempted to blame the doctors for this government's own mismanagement," he said.

Yurek, as well as the NDP's health critic, France Gélinas, slammed Hoskins for polling the public's perception of the continuing standoff between the OMA and government, as first reported by The Canadian Press. The opposition parties charged the health minister with putting their political fortunes ahead of the best interests of patients.

Hoskins defended the polling, saying the government regularly polls on a variety of issues.

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