Ministry + Sudbury News - Apr 23 2018

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Ministry News

Bad books: How Ontario's new hydro accounting could cost taxpayers billions – Globe and Mail

In March last year, Kim Marshall called and left a message for Bonnie Lysyk, Ontario's Auditor-General. Ms. Marshall was the chief financial officer of the Independent Electricity System Operator (IESO), the agency that manages the province's electrical system and acts as an intermediary between power generators and consumers. The IESO had just made a big change to its accounting practices, and Ms. Marshall said she wanted to give the Auditor-General a "heads up."

Ms. Lysyk was already well aware of the change. She and her staff had found the IESO's latest financial statements online. Poring over them in their downtown Toronto office, they found a terse footnote describing the new accounting policy.

"And my staff go, 'What the heck is this?' " Ms. Lysyk told The Globe and Mail. "You're not supposed to do this."

Ms. Lysyk believed the IESO's new practice – a method know
accounting – violated government accounting standards. Wh
that it represented a radical departure in how the governm
Wynne – not just the IESO – planned to disclose its future
public.

Earlier that month, the government had announced significant reductions in electricity rates, what it dubbed the Fair Hydro Plan. A decade of investing in greener power sources, such as wind and solar, and the shuttering of cheaper but dirtier coal-fired power plants had resulted in soaring hydro bills – a serious political liability for Ms. Wynne, who had accepted personal responsibility for fixing the

problem.

But charging Ontarians less for electricity than it cost to produce meant the province would have to borrow billions of dollars to cover the shortfall.

"In order for that to not show up on the bottom line, they created creative accounting to take it off the government's statements," Ms. Lysyk said.

Using that new accounting, the government declared it had balanced the province's books for the fiscal year ended Mar. 31, 2018, just months before a general election. But Ms. Lysyk said that was not true. And the Financial Accountability Office, the body responsible for providing the legislative assembly with independent analysis and advice on Ontario's finances, agreed: In December, it forecast that the province would actually rack up a deficit of $4-billion – a discrepancy that will grow markedly as the government's off-balance-sheet borrowing continues.

Ms. Lysyk said she's worried that the Wynne government's success in concealing its borrowing will encourage more aggressive bookkeeping, both in Ontario and in other provinces.

"If you get away with doing something that's inappropriate accounting, the next time you'll do it again and you'll do it again," she said. "Pretty soon they won't have any numbers that will have any integrity behind them."

Ontario had been racking up large deficits every year since
already owed more than $300-billion – almost $22,000 for e
province. Bond rating agencies had downgraded its credit ra
become a serious political liability.

Even before Ms. Wynne became Premier in 2013, Ontario's Liberals promised a return to balanced budgets. In his April, 2017, budget speech, Finance Minister Charles Sousa boasted that her government had finally done it. "And next year and the year after we're projecting it to be balanced, too," he declared. "And the people of Ontario can count on it."

It was made possible by a team led by the Ministry of Energy that also included senior officials from the Ministry of Finance, Treasury Board Secretariat, the Provincial Controller, Ontario Power Generation and the IESO. Between December, 2016, and May, 2017, they devised a novel approach that would allow the government to have its cake and eat it, too.

'The government is making up its own accounting rules'

As with most businesses, utilities record consumers' outstanding balances as assets, typically as "accounts receivable." The IESO's new practice, rate-regulated accounting, is akin to accounts receivable on steroids. The underlying idea is that heavily regulated industries, such as power generation, which are unable to set their own prices, should have a means of deferring costs, such as building a new power plant. Rate-regulated accounting allows utilities to place such costs in special accounts to carry them forward into future years, provided their regulator gives them the right to recover those costs through future bills. Such rights can be recorded as assets – even though no electricity has been generated, used or billed for.

The main criticism of the practice is that it can produce books bearing little resemblance to reality. When BC Hydro adopted it, that province's auditor-general objected strongly, warning in a special report that "if overused, rate-regulated deferrals can mask the true costs of doing business, distort the financial condition of an enterprise and place undue burdens on future taxpayers."

And what happens if the utility can't collect? "On a number of occasions," explained Michael Ferguson, the Auditor-General of Canada, "there has [later] come a realization that, in fact, the organization will not be able to charge those rates. And, therefore, there have been fairly large amounts of some regulatory assets that have been written off."

Recording expenses as assets is perfectly legal in certain contexts, but the practice has been controversial in the private sector. In their book Easy Prey Investors, forensic accountants Al Rosen and Mark Rosen write that recording "fake assets" on corporate balance sheets is one of the "most common financial scams of the past 50 years."

If the accounting concept is elusive, the IESO's motives for adopting it are even murkier.

In fact, the IESO decided against adopting rate-regulated accounting when it was formed in 2015 – a decision supported by its auditor, KPMG. And earlier this year, Ms. Marshall told the province's public accounts committee that in February, 2017, she presented financial statements prepared in the usual way to her audit committee.

The following month, though, she produced a fresh set of financial statements using rate-regulated accounting.

The official explanation is that in mid-January, 2017, at one of the earliest meetings to discuss the Fair Hydro Plan, Ontario Controller Cindy Veinot ordered Ms. Marshall to "take a closer look" at adopting rate-regulated accounting because she didn't think the IESO's existing policies were appropriate.

The government has repeatedly stated that Ms. Veinot's request was completely unrelated to the Fair Hydro Plan. Deputy energy minister Serge Imbrogno asserted that "the important thing is that the changes that the IESO made reflected its existing business" and not the Fair Hydro Plan, which had not been announced yet. Peter Gregg, who was appointed IESO president and CEO in April, 2017, said the management team simply asked itself: "Is this the right thing to do?"

Since Canada's public sector accounting standards make no mention of rate-regulated accounting, the IESO turned to private-sector standards in the United States known as generally accepted accounting principles, which permit the practice.

The official story overlooks two crucial details. First, while the IESO was changing its accounting policy, Mr. Imbrogno, Ms. Marshall, Ms. Veinot and other senior officials were already part of the team devising the Fair Hydro Plan. Enacted last June, the Fair Hydro Plan Act put IESO's new policy to immediate use, instructing the IESO to create a "regulatory asset" on its books. This "asset" reflected the agency's right to recover the costs it was about to incur paying for hydro discounts from future consumers, over a 30-year period.

Tim Beauchamp, a member of the auditor-general's advisory panel and a former director of the Public Sector Accounting Board, said the entire accounting structure of the Fair Hydro Plan depended on the IESO's ability to call this right an asset. "Without [the IESO], it doesn't work," he said.

The second detail is that, as an agency of the Province of Ontario, the IESO's finances are consolidated into the province's public accounts. With the provincial controller's encouragement, the agency's management had effectively adopted a new accounting policy on behalf of the entire province.

With those new rules in place, the Fair Hydro Plan could proceed. Here's how it works:

Ontario Power Generation, which operates the province's fleet of nuclear and hydroelectric stations, has assigned four of its employees to manage the Fair Hydro Trust, a special-purpose entity created in December. OPG's financial results will actually get a boost because it will earn interest and management fees from the trust. And OPG doesn't need to worry if the trust blows up financially, because the trust "is structured to be bankruptcy remote and ring fenced from OPG."

Even so, OPG appears to be the only arm of government that has expressed reservations about its role in the Fair Hydro Plan. "OPG's reputation could potentially be adversely impacted through its involvement as the Financial Services Manager under the Fair Hydro Act," the company warned in its 2017 annual report.

The Fair Hydro Plan's complexity comes at a cost. Had the province borrowed directly, the interest costs likely would total tens of billions of dollars over the plan's duration. But using information and assumptions supplied by the government, the Financial Accountability Office (FAO) calculated the additional interest costs at $4-billion over 30 years. Said Ms. Lysyk: "We're talking $4-billion more than needed, to get an accounting result."

Alexandre Laurin, the C.D. Howe Institute's research director, said he'd never before encountered such a convoluted arrangement in the public sphere. To him, the use of related party transactions between multiple entities resembles tax-avoidance schemes in the private sector.

"The same accountants that are advising the government are advising the private sector to build other types of complex accounting structures," he told The Globe. "How crazy is this, really?"

FAO officials had immediate concerns. "It looked like there was at least a very novel new approach being taken to a large amount of planned borrowing and repayment," chief financial analyst Jeffrey Novak said.

Meanwhile, the auditor-general's office scrambled to find out what had happened. Ms. Lysyk demanded tens of thousands of pages of briefings and e-mails created by the Fair Hydro Plan's architects. She began meeting with the senior officials responsible and their advisers, including KPMG.

Months later, she concluded that the IESO's accounting change was no mere coincidence: The government had instructed the Fair Hydro Plan's architects that the rate reductions must not cause a reported increase in the province's deficit and net debt. Other options were rejected on that basis.

Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault categorically denied accusations that the Fair Hydro Plan was an election ploy. And he justified the new accounting practice that made it possible by telling the provinces's estimates committee last October that because electricity ratepayers, not taxpayers, would be required to repay the debt and interest costs associated with the Fair Hydro Plan, the associated costs did not belong on the province's books.

In order to weigh the Auditor-General's allegations against the government's position, The Globe sought the same documents Ms. Lysyk used in preparing her reports. Her office is not subject to the province's Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, so The Globe requested them from the departments that originally produced them.

In responses to the requests, all the departments anticipated that large volumes of records would fall under exemptions in the act. The Treasury Board Secretariat, for example, said that of the 1,500 or so relevant pages in the possession of its deputy minister, just 169 would be released. Citing the large number of records involved, the Ministry of Energy estimated The Globe would be charged $112,000 in fees, half of that up front.

So The Globe issued narrower requests and also asked that the Information and Privacy Commission mediate some of them. At publication time, The Globe had received no documents.

What is clear is that, in devising the Fair Hydro Plan, the government relied heavily on consultants, including three of the world's "Big Four" accounting firms: KPMG, Deloitte and Ernst & Young. It also hired Blakes, a law firm. According to the Auditor-General, the government paid these advisers a total of $2-million for their services. In a statement, the Treasury Board Secretariat emphasized that work was part of the government's efforts to "ensure due diligence was completed."

Their opinions and advice carried the day. Sophie Kiwala, a Liberal MPP and member of the estimates committee, said on Oct. 24: "Our plan has been approved by the peers of the Auditor-General at some of Canada's top accounting firms, including Ernst & Young, KPMG and Deloitte."

KPMG's team, composed of more than half a dozen of the firm's partners, was led by Michel Picard. In one 32-page document provided to The Globe by the government, KPMG itemized and refuted the Auditor-General's objections to the new accounting practice. "The concerns expressed by the AGO result from a difference of opinion in the application of professional judgment," KPMG spokesperson Lisa Papas told The Globe in a statement. As the auditor of IESO's books, the firm also signed off on the application of these new accounting standards, just as it had under the IESO's previous accounting methods. "We would like to emphasize that the standards provide a choice," the firm said in a statement. "There has always been the ability to choose between two alternatives."

In the past three years, KPMG earned between $86,000 and $92,000 in annual fees for auditing IESO's books. Last year, it earned $652,000 for its advice on the new accounting policy.

Did KPMG's dual role as auditor and consultant represent a conflict of interest? "You might say that their ability to be impartial and effective auditors had become compromised," said Randy Hillier, a Conservative MPP who sits on the public accounts committee. "Why would you not [sign off] when you're getting such a significant bundle of cash?"

Ms. Lysyk told the same committee that firms should not be advocating for particular accounting treatments on a client's behalf while auditing the client's books.

Forensic accountant Al Rosen said that, generally speaking, it's not difficult to hire consultants to provide favourable accounting opinions in Canada, in part because standards are so elastic. "You can go to any of the public accounting firms and get them to render an opinion on whatever you want," he said. "The ethics have gone all to hell."

KPMG and the IESO denied any impropriety. "It is very common for auditors to provide advisory services to help their clients understand the application of complex accounting matters," KPMG said in a statement.

Should the Auditor-General have been consulted?

On Jan. 11, 2017, as Ms. Lysyk's office prepared to audit Ontario's public accounts, it sent a letter to KPMG asking if there would be any accounting policy changes at the IESO. KPMG did not respond. There was a follow-up phone call, but KPMG did not call back. In Ms. Lysyk's opinion, KPMG had a professional obligation to respond.

She also felt that the Ministry of Finance and the Treasury Board should have told her earlier. "You do assume when you're the external auditor for anybody that you're kept in the loop," she said. "That's the relationship, it should be open and transparent."

She said the e-mails reviewed by her office confirm that the architects of the Fair Hydro Plan expected her office to object to the IESO's proposed accounting changes – and that their silence had been deliberate. "All the stuff said, 'Don't tell the Auditor-General what we're doing.' "

Helen Angus, the deputy minister of the Treasury Board Secretariat, resisted that allegation before the public accounts committee. "I don't think we second-guessed the Auditor-General on her opinion," she said.

KPMG agreed that it had a professional obligation to respond to the Auditor-General's requests, but it said it discharged that duty by answering her inquiries in the months after the publication of the IESO's statements.

And the IESO's senior management saw no need whatsoever to consult the Auditor-General. Mr. Gregg, the CEO, said his obligation was to satisfy his own board of directors and its audit committee. And Ms. Marshall told MPPs in February: "We would speak to the Auditor-General once we had come to a conclusion on our own."

So what did those "approvals" from the big accounting firms actually mean? In a statement to The Globe, KPMG emphasized it had no formal role in selecting or approving Ontario's accounting policies. Nor did Deloitte. Ernst & Young declined to answer questions about its work.

The Auditor General's office, on the other hand, is the only body responsible by law for opining on whether the province's financial statements have been prepared according to appropriate accounting standards. And if the government did not stand down, Ms. Lysyk warned, she would issue a qualified opinion on Ontario's books.

Other auditors-general confirmed that is not something they do lightly.

"It's one of the most serious things we can do … to say we don't believe this set of financial statements has been fairly stated," said Mr. Ferguson, Canada's Auditor-General.

Ms. Lysyk said she received letters from all the other auditors-general in Canada supporting her position. Although she declined to release those letters to The Globe, Mr. Ferguson confirmed that wrote such a letter.

So did Carol Bellringer, B.C.'s Auditor-General. "It's inconsistent with the framework that is in place for the public sector," she said. "If British Columbia decided to set up a regulatory account within its provincial accounts, we would say, 'No, you can't do that.' "

Others also rallied to Ms. Lysyk's defence. In a report published in December, the FAO adopted her recommended accounting policy and warned that the government's approach "reduced the transparency and reliability of Ontario's fiscal plan."

But Ms. Wynne's government seemed untroubled by Ms. Lysyk's warnings. She had already issued a qualified opinion on a separate issue – the government's accounting for the assets of two pension funds, a matter of billions of dollars – but the government shrugged that off, too.

Deputy finance minister Scott Thompson signed the statement of responsibility on last year's public accounts, with which the government accepts responsibility for the statements' integrity and avows that they conform with public sector accounting standards. So did Ms. Veinot, the controller, and Ms. Angus, deputy minister of the Treasury Board. In theory, these signatures conferred substantial obligations upon these officials – even as the Auditor-General was warning them that the province was using improper accounting. (None of them granted The Globe an interview.)

The last line of defence was the legislature. The public accounts committee is charged with reviewing the Auditor-General's reports and making recommendations to the Legislative Assembly. When it convened in February to discuss the Auditor-General's concerns, Mr. Hillier, the Tory MPP, flagged the issue as unusual. "This committee has a track record of being non-partisan to a large extent," he said – suggesting, though, that neutrality might be difficult when it came to the politically charged Fair Hydro Plan.

Indeed, the committee's questioning split along party lines. Mr. Hillier and NDP MPP John Vanthof hammered the officials involved in creating the financial and accounting structure, demanding justification for the additional interest costs.

Liberal MPP Liz Sandals, by contrast, asked no questions about the Fair Hydro Plan. Instead, she voiced her support for rate-regulated accounting and defended the IESO's decision to not consult the Auditor-General. She used much of her allotted time to ask Mr. Thompson to comment on the balanced budget. He responded that the government was "in a very solid position to balance this fiscal year."

An era of bad books?

Last month, the government published the 2018 Pre-Election Report on the state of the province's finances. The requirement to produce that report was first introduced in 2004, by the government of Dalton McGuinty. Published in the lead-up to the 2007 election, then-finance minister Greg Sorbara presented it as an antidote to the Conservatives' alleged accounting shenanigans.

"The previous government's approach to balancing the budget was to count on phantom revenues like asset sales which they knew would not materialize," Mr. Sorbara said in a statement. "It is essential that the real state of the province's finances be known before and not after an election."

With Ontarians heading to the polls on June 7, they are confronted by two conflicting accounts about the state of their province's current and future indebtedness.

At press time, the Auditor-General's office was rushing to prepare her opinion on the Pre-Election Report. She is likely to issue another qualified opinion.

The Fair Hydro Plan triggered a breakdown of trust. Previously, the Auditor-General relied on KPMG to audit the IESO's books. Not any more: This year, she conducted her own special audit. "We couldn't risk that something else is going to pop up on this," Ms. Lysyk said.

It did not go well. Ms. Lysyk said she was "professionally unable" to provide an audit opinion because management refused to sign certain documents.

"They basically treated, I think, my audit team like we were subservient to KPMG," she told the public accounts committee. "When a board or management in any other province recognizes that an AG's office has issues with their accounting, they would have handled it differently."

Both the IESO and KPMG said they co-operated fully at all times.

Ms. Marshall will step down as the IESO's CFO at the end of this month. (No replacement has been named.) But the battle over the integrity of Ontario's financial statements rages on. In March, Ms.

Lysyk warned the public accounts committee that the government risked receiving its first-ever "adverse" opinion – essentially a disclaimer that the financial statements should not be trusted.

One year after the unveiling of the Fair Hydro Plan, the irony is that the alleged raison d'être for the accounting practice that made it possible has suddenly vanished: Mr. Sousa, the finance minister, has revealed that Ontarians can no longer count on balanced budgets; he has forecast deficits of more than $6-billion for each of the following three years as the government ramps up spending on health care, child care, social assistance and postsecondary education.

The government now forecasts its next balanced budget won't arrive until 2024-25. In a recent report examining Ontario's finances, the C.D. Howe Institute concluded: "While the government may claim to have balanced the budget for 2017/18, the medium- and long-term fiscal outlook for Ontario is dire."

Sudbury News

Funding - City receives more than $500k from OLG – Sudbury.com

The city of Greater Sudbury received a non-tax gaming revenue payment of $527,185 from the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation (OLG) on April 20.

This is the fourth-quarter (January to March 2018) non-tax gaming revenue payment for hosting Gateway Casinos.

Since November 1999, Sudbury has received more than $40.4 million in non-tax gaming revenue.

"OLG provides host municipalities with significant revenues every year which help communities invest in local priorities and infrastructure projects that are important to them," said Sudbury MPP Glenn Thibeault.

"OLG provides funds that directly benefit vital public services like health care and education while contributing to the local economy."

These payments are made under an equitable formula in the Municipality Contribution Agreement that determines the funds municipalities receive for hosting a gaming facility and are based on a graduated scale of gaming revenue that is consistent across all sites in Ontario.

At approximately $2 billion annually, OLG provides the Ontario government with its largest source of non-tax revenue.

In fiscal 2017-2018, the province allocated $115 million in gaming revenue to support charities through the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Every year, the Government of Ontario allocates funding to the province's problem gambling program for research, treatment and prevention.

The amount for fiscal 2017-2018 was $38 million.

NOHFC - NOHFC injects $1.8M into Greater Sudbury Airport projects – Sudbury.com

The province is pouring more than $1.7 million into upgrading the water system at Greater Sudbury Airport.

The new infrastructure will ensure adequate supplies of water to meet fire suppression standards and clean and safe drinking water are available at all current and future airport facilities. The increased capacity will allow the airport to expand and grow for existing and prospective airport clients and services.

The investment is part of more than $1.8 million from the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund corporation announced Friday at Greater Sudbury Airport.

In addition, $50,000 is being made available for a new maintenance facility at Greater Sudbury Airport with Porter Airlines, creating eight new full-time jobs in the process. The project includes improvements that will allow Porter to service its three new aircraft and upgrades to software and other information and communications technology.

As well, the Greater Sudbury Chamber of Commerce received $69,000 to study and explore the feasibility of establishing a multi-modal freight facility to act as a hub for various modes of freight transportation in Greater Sudbury

“It's critical for us to continue to grow our Northern economy,” said Sudbury MPP and Minister of Energy Glenn Thibeault. “Roads, bridges and airports allow us to get our goods and people where they need to be.”

Todd Tripp, Chief Executive Officer, Greater Sudbury Airport, said Friday's announcement wasn't only about infrastructure. It's about jobs, it's about the economy, and it's about keeping people here.

“Our airport is all about sustainable growth,” Tripp said. “We have an excellent team that's keeping us vibrant and working well with the community.

“This financial support will directly impact our capacity to expand and grow now and into the future. Not only are we able to increase our water supply and infrastructure capacity, several jobs are being created right in our own community. Economic contributions of Airport’s are impactful; given their importance in supporting and enhancing communities and business across our region and across Canada."

Paul Moreira, senior vice-president and Chief Operating Officer, Porter Airlines, said hundreds of thousands of dollars have been invested into its airplane maintenance base at Greater Sudbury Airport. The partnership with the City of Greater Sudbury and its airport has been a tremendous success, he said.

“We are extremely grateful for the support from the NOHNF,” Moreira said. “It was instrumental in getting this facility up and running. Startup of these types of facilities are costly, and these type of ventures can be substantial to an airline. It made a real difference in our business model, and we're seeing some real results in our operations as a result.”

The NOHFC is investing more than $5.5 million in transportation infrastructure that will facilitate the movement of people and freight into and across the North.

These investments support 11 projects that will create 46 full time jobs and dozens of indirect jobs.

Health - Sudbury long-term care is in crisis mode – Sudbury.com

A group of roughly a dozen of Sudbury's personal support workers representing three unions (UNIFOR, CUPE, SEIU) gathered on April 20 to voice their concerns to Nickel Belt MPP France Gélinas.

Representatives from seven different long-term care facilities were on hand for the meeting Friday morning where they discussed the stress that their system is under and the pressures that PSWs face on a day-to-day basis.

The meeting was organized by Melissa Wood, unit chair with St. Gabriel's Villa, one of Sudbury's seven long-term care facilities. Sudbury is home to close to 2,000 personal support workers, but that number is not nearly enough to meet the demand.

Across Ontario there are more than 30,000 people on wait lists for long-term care facilities, a number that has grown from 20,000 in 2014.

"We wanted to get everyone together to meet and discuss our issues in long-term care," said Wood. "We know there are issues and we know they're on an individual basis and what we're finding in talking to each other is that there's a crisis in long-term care in regards to workers, in that there's not enough workers in long-term care."

The three unions have been lobbying the Ontario government for years for better standards and a better funding model for the long-term care system and its workers.

"We seem to be at a stand still, no one seems to have a platform or issue on how to move forward with lack of workers," said Wood. "Wages can range anywhere from $15 to $26 an hour...even if we do increase the minimum care standards, we don't have the workers available to go into these long-term care settings or home care settings. It's not an enticing career for people to want to get into."

Gélinas says that there have been issues in the province's home care system for years and those issues are now popping up more and more frequently in the long-term care sector. The Nickel Belt MPP says that there needs to be a more concentrated effort to make PSW jobs more attractive if there's any hope of drawing more people into the field.

"They are at the range of 36 per cent (employee) vacancy at St. Joseph's Villa, and 30 per cent vacancy at St. Gabe's," said Gélinas. "Nobody can remember the last time they had a full staff."

St. Joseph's Villa and St. Gabriel's Villa entered into a pilot program with College Boreal where Development Support Worker, EMS, and Registered Practical Nurse graduates were offered a free one week training course to take the PSW test in an effort to fill vacancies at the two long-term care facilities.

"Those are not people who chose to be PSWs," said Gélinas. "College Boreal is graduating a lot of health care people, but knowing about health care and being a good PSW are two completely separate things."

Gélinas and the Ontario NDP have been pushing for a minimum standard that would guarantee four hours of hands-on care for anyone in a long-term care facility. The Ontario Liberals have been supportive of Bill 43, which will go to second reading on April 24.

It may appear that advocating for minimum standards when there aren't enough PSWs to carry out these standards is putting the cart before the horse, but Gélinas believes that having this bill on the table shows that there is some progress and the government is starting to take notice of an often overlooked sector of the health care system.

"There needs to be a bit of a culture shift," said Gélinas. "The goal is to change the perception of young people that these (PSW positions) are good jobs. People need to be able to enter this field thinking this is something that can be a career, that can pay their bills and feed their families."

Wood backed up the NDP health critics point, saying that there are challenges with both attraction and retention when it comes to personal support workers.

"The grand scheme of things is that the Liberal government wants people to be able to stay in homes and have the availability of long term care or home care but there's no workers at either," said Wood.

"I don't know what the solution is to making it more attractive. It could be money, but there has to be job satisfaction and right now that's not there."

Local - Beers get crafty at the Northern Ontario Microbrew Festival – Sudbury.com

When the Northern Ontario Microbrew Festival launched four years ago, the organizers could not fathom the response they had received. This weekend, Sudbury beer enthusiasts will have a chance to once again sample craft beers as they enjoy live performances at the popular Sudbury event.

“Originally we started off as a one-day event but realized that we were selling out quickly, so we extended it to two days,” Ashley Mccarvell, event co-ordinator of the microbrew festival, said. “This year we also decided to continue the party on Saturday, we have lots of performances coming up in the evening followed by another party at Townehouse.”

In the festival’s fourth run, it is showcasing brews from breweries in North Bay, Parry Sound, Manitoulin and even as far as Thunder Bay.

Brian Wilson, brewmaster and founder of Highlander Brewing Company, has been a regular at the microbrew festival mainly due to the camaraderie he finds at the event.

“I think it is important to realize that stuff north of 416 does happen and I think when you get a group of brewers together who are all like-minded and are trying to grow our business in Northern Ontario that’s worth showcasing,” Wilson said.

Apart from the fan favourite Scottish Ale and Blacksmith Smoked Porter, Wilson also brought along a unique aged brew, Labrador Tea Wintergreen Ale to mark the fourth anniversary of the microbrew festival.

“Craft beer has grown, and people are coming out to try new things, as the event keeps growing,” Wilson said.

Wilson’s brotherhood sentiments echoed across every microbrewery present at Caruso Club.

As for the response, Joet Dhatt, partner at Manitoulin Brewing Company, said, “Right from the moment the door opened, I didn’t expect so many people. So many people are interested in learning about our beers and brewing process. It's great."

Saturday's event was broken into two sessions – one starting at 1 p.m. till 4 p.m. which focused heavily on interaction with the breweries and learning more about them. The second session will be running from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. and will imitate a live club event before ending the night at Townehouse with more live performances.

If you missed out on the chance to try some craft beer, check out our jealousy-inducing photo gallery. Or check back with us later as Sudbury.com does some tasting themselves.

NOHFC - [$1.7M boost for the Sudbury Airport]() – CBC Sudbury

The Greater Sudbury Airport is receiving more than $1.7 million from the provincial government for transportation infrastructure.

Sudbury MPP Glenn Thibeault made the announcement on Friday. The money is coming from the province's Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation.

The province says the money will be used for upgrades to the airport's water system. It adds the money will be used for upgrades to make sure water supplies for fire suppression are up to standard.

The money will also make sure drinking water is safe and available at current and future airport facilities.

In addition, Porter Airlines is getting more than $50,000 from the province to establish a new maintenance facility at the airport in Sudbury.

"NOHFC's support of Porter's investment in a Sudbury aircraft maintenance base shows how the private sector can work with government to benefit local economies," Paul Moreira, senior vice president and chief operating officer of Porter said.

The province says the Porter project will create eight new full time jobs at the airport.

Health - Ontario PC leader makes campaign stops in Sarnia-Lambton – Sudbury Star

Scrap drug-injection sites, bulk up long-term care beds.

Progressive Conservative Leader Doug Ford hit two controversial health care themes during a Southwestern Ontario blitz Friday, saying he wants to open 30,000 new long-term care beds in the next decade but abolish supervised drug injection sites if his party wins the June 7 election.

The newly minted PC leader, whose late brother, former Toronto mayor Rob Ford, grabbed international headlines for his use of crack cocaine, said he's "dead against" safe injection sites and believes the focus should be on drug rehabilitation instead.

"I fully understand, there's a small epidemic out there, opioids and the rest, we have to help these people," he said in the parking lot of a Sarnia medical office.

If he becomes premier, Ford said he will do all he can to fight Ontario's opioid drug crisis and get people struggling with addiction the help they need, but he did not elaborate.

"If your son, daughter, loved one ever had an addiction, would you want them to go in a little area and do more drugs? I am dead against that," he said.

"We have to help these people. We can't just keep feeding them and feeding them."

Pressed for details, his campaign said Ford would release his plan to address mental health and the opioid crisis in coming weeks.

Health Minister Helena Jaczek shot back at the PC leader, calling his comments "reckless" and noting "Doug Ford says he's for the people, but just not the people who need our help the most."

In a written statement, the Liberal minister said supervised injection and drug overdose-prevention sites have reversed hundreds of overdoses in Ontario and play a "critical" role in fighting its opioid crisis that cost more than 1,000 lives last year.

"With these comments, not only is Doug Ford perpetuating the stigma around mental health and addiction, but his reckless comments are putting people's lives at risk," Jaczek wrote.

Ford was on a pre-election swing, in Sarnia, Chatham and Blenheim.

In Sarnia, he vowed to create 15,000 new long-term care beds over the next five years alone, a move he said will ease the burden on hospitals and cut wait times.

"We need to be investing in the front lines," he said. "We don't need more layers and layers of bureaucracy."

Ontario's long-term care system — more than 600 homes, with 77,000 residents — has come under harsh public scrutiny under the Liberals, most recently by the murder spree of imprisoned former nurse Elizabeth Wettlaufer who killed eights residents of two Southwestern Ontario nursing homes.

Besides questions about oversight, and whether it can meet Ontario's needs, the long-term care system has also been flagged by Ontario's auditor general, who cited backlogged complaints in a late 2015 report.

Before that, the province was found breaking its own nursing-home inspection law, prompting the government to add 100 inspectors.

"We need to start building more long-term care beds," Ford said. "That will relieve the hospitals."

The Liberals have also promised to add 30,000 new long-term care beds in the next decade, while the New Democrats have said they would create 40,000 in that time.

Liberal campaign co-chair Deb Matthews said Ford needs to explain how he'd pay for the new beds, since he's vowed to reduce government spending.

The Liberals have pledged more than $222 million over three years to tackle the opioid drug crisis, with money earmarked to expand harm-reduction services and hire more frontline staff.

There were 1,053 opioid-related deaths from January to October of last year, compared with 694 during the same period in 2016, government figures show.

The province said earlier this year it had approved funding for seven medically supervised injection sites, five of which had already opened.

Late last year, Ontario also received a federal government exemption allowing it to approve and fund temporary overdose prevention sites. The first site opened in London in February.

Health - Burnout, turnover concern PSWs – Sudbury Star

When Carol Varey started as a health care aide/personal support worker, she made $1.28 an hour.

That was 42 years ago.

Now working at Finlandia Village, the 64-year-old Varey makes $19.14 an hour.

Wages were a hot topic at a health-care assembly on Friday at Mine Mill Local 598 Unifor, as were worker shortages, resident care, violence, injured workers, minimum care standards, and strategies for an aging population.

Those present shared their concerns with Nickel Belt MPP and health critic France Gelinas.

"We've got to get those PSWs on the floor," Varey said. "We're burning out."

Unifor, CUPE, and SEIU have been lobbying the government for years for better standards of care for long-term care and workers, said Melissa Wood, unit chair at St. Gabrielle Villa.

"But what's happening is that we seem to be at a standstill," she said. "No one seems to have a platform on how to move forward.

"Even if we do increase the minimum care standard, we don't even have the workers available to go into these long-term care settings or homecare settings. It’s not an enticing career for people to want to have as a career. People are going in it, but after they graduate, after a couple of years they’re going back to school. We have shortage of workers and no one wants to be in this career.”

The problem is with attracting and retaining aides and PSWs.

There are roughly 2,000 of these types of workers in Greater Sudbury.

Ideally, Wood said, the amount of workers needed to service Sudbury would be increased.

“The Liberal government wants people to stay in their homes and to have the availability of a long-term care home, but there’s no workers at either,” Wood said. “I don’t know what the solution is to make it more attractive.”

Wages for long-term care professionals ranges anywhere from $15 to $26 an hour, Wood said.

“I think PSWs should be valued as any other health official,” one of the attendees to Friday’s health-care assembly said.

“There doesn’t seem to be a plan for our aging population,” Wood added.

Varey hopes the unions, the companies, and families of long-term health care will join together and “realize that the PSWs, the dietary, housekeeping, all the people, are all important in long-term care.”

Despite all of the concerns brought up during Friday’s assembly, Varey still loves her job.

“Those are people,” Varey said of the residents she cares for. “That’s not room 716. Those are people. When you care for somebody every day of the year and you look right into their eyes and you’re there on their happy days, you’re there on their sad days, you’re there when they’re in pain, and you’re there when they’re dying. You want to look somebody in the eye and look after them all that time ... You care.”

NOHFC - Airport upgrades funded – Sudbury Star

When the Greater Sudbury Airport's current water and reservoir system was installed, Queen Elizabeth II had just been crowned and the Space Race between Russia and the United States was just getting underway.

Some 65 years later, the system is getting a $4-million overhaul, which will be partly paid for thanks to about $1.7 million from the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation.

The money, along with $50,359 to help Porter Airlines establish a new maintenance facility at the airport, was announced Friday by Sudbury Liberal MP and Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault.

“Transportation infrastructure: it's needed for us to grow our Northern economy,” said Thibeault at a press conference at the airport. “Roads, highways and pipelines allow us to get more growth where things need to be. These investments here and across the province will help the economy grow and create jobs across the North.”

The $1.7 million is going to the Sudbury Airport Community Development Corporation, a not-for-profit body which manages the airport.

Thibeault said the two projects will not only make life better for airport users and staff, but “investors will see Sudbury is ready to grow.”

Also announced was $69,000 in funding for the Greater Sudbury Chamber of Commerce to develop a study that looks at the feasibility of building a multi-modal freight facility to act as a hub for various modes of freight transportation.

Greater Sudbury Mayor Brian Bigger said “these investments are just another example in where we are improving our local economy.”

Todd Tripp, the airport's chief executive officer, said “the investments for this airport are not only for the airport, it's about the economy and jobs.”

Paul Moreira, Porter Airlines' senior vice-president and chief operating officer, said the new hangar, which opened in January and initially employed seven, has grown to a staff of eight now.

“It's been a phenomenal success,” he said. “They (aviation mechanics) are doing some good work. We are seeing some real positives in terms of the quality of work and operational efficiencies. It's such a huge benefit to our operation.

Moreira said Greater Sudbury has such a good quality of life that Porter had no trouble finding people to work at the leased hangar which involves overnight shifts to do preventative maintenance work on Porter planes staying overnight at the airport.

“Even if there was not qualified people (locally), the quality of life does seem to attract people,” he said. “They will move here.”

Three Porter aircraft visit the Sudbury Airport daily. Porter's main aircraft maintenance facility, which is based at Billy Bishop Airport in Toronto, employs about 50 aviation mechanics.

In an interview, Tripp said work has already begun on the water system project which will give the airport new water pipes and a better reservoir system.

“It will give us better pressure especially in the event of a fire,” he said. “We are hoping to have it done by the end of the year, if not early next year.”

The airport, incidentally, is tied into the municipal water system.