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Sent: 2017-05-15 6:53:27 AM
Subject: Today's News - Monday, May 15, 2017

Today's News

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Date: Monday, May 15, 2017
Edited by: John Cannella (John.Cannella@ieso.ca)

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thestar.com - Fri May 12 2017
Byline: Rob Ferguson

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Canadian Press - Fri May 12 2017
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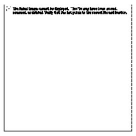

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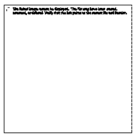

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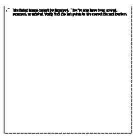

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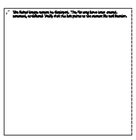

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The Sault Star - Mon May 15 2017
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NDP wants financial watchdog to assess the Liberal's hydro rate cut plan

thestar.com - Fri May 12 2017
Byline: Rob Ferguson

The NDP has asked Ontario's financial accountability officer to assess the government's 25 per cent hydro rate cut legislation (www.thestar.com) given leaked cabinet documents showing rates trending sharply higher in a few years.

"I don't trust Liberal numbers," New Democrat MPP Peter Tabuns said Friday after sending a letter to Stephen LeClair, the province's independent financial watchdog.

An "objective assessment" of the plan and its long-term costs is crucial with the government planning to pass the bill before the Legislature rises for its summer recess in three weeks on June 1, Tabuns added.

He accused the government of intending to "jam" the legislation through before

MPPs have enough time to study it in detail.

Both the New Democrats and Progressive Conservatives charge the Liberal plan is aimed at keeping rates down while the Liberals, struggling in the polls, try to improve their odds heading into the June 2018 provincial election.

Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault supports the NDP request, saying LeClair received a full briefing in April and has made follow-up requests for information.

"We welcome and encourage the independent financial accountability officer to review Ontario's Fair Hydro Plan," he said in a statement.

In the letter to LeClair, Tabuns wrote: "recently leaked cabinet documents suggesting hydro bills in Ontario will rise by over 50 per cent by 2028 are serious cause for concern, as are the government's attempts to deny the validity of the figures."

Tabuns was referring to remarks from Thibeault that the confidential cabinet documents, obtained by the Progressive Conservatives and first revealed by the Star, were "outdated" and "inaccurate."

The NDP called on Premier Kathleen Wynne's government to turn over "all the documents" used in the formulation of its rate cut plan, which began in January with instant rebates of the 8 per cent provincial portion of the HST on hydro bills. Another 17 per cent cut is slated to kick in on bills soon.

Thibeault introduced legislation for the plan on Thursday, saying it will spread the costs of expensive electricity system improvements in the last decade over a longer period of time.

He compared it to "refinancing a mortgage" to have lower payments now. That will cost $25 billion in interest charges over 30 years, with rate increases held to 2 per cent over the next four years.

But the leaked cabinet document shows rates rising more steeply, starting with 6.5 per cent in 2022 and topping out at 10.5 per cent in 2028, when average monthly bills hit $215.

The average monthly bill is now $156 and the rates cut plan will lower the average this year to $123.

While the NDP has a plan to cut hydro rates (www.thestar.com) between 17 and 30 per cent, Thibeault said it would not bring "immediate relief" for Ontario homeowners, renters and small businesses counting on the government plan for help with their hydro bills this summer.

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NDP calls for budget watchdog to examine Liberal cabinet hydro documents; NDP calls for watchdog to examine hydro docs

Canadian Press - Fri May 12 2017
Byline: Allison Jones

TORONTO - The NDP is calling on Ontario's budget watchdog to examine how the Liberal government's hydro relief plan will affect consumers' bills, particularly in light of leaked cabinet documents suggesting large increases after an initial drop.

New Democrat Peter Tabuns wrote to the financial accountability officer this week, asking him to assess the likely impact of the plan on electricity bills and compare that to what bills would be without the Liberal plan.

A Liberal cabinet document leaked to the Progressive Conservatives contains a projection that electricity bills will drop this year, rise slightly for four years while increases are held to the rate of inflation, then rise quickly after that.

It also shows that from about 2027 onward, when consumers would start paying off debt and interest associated with the hydro plan, consumers will be paying more than they would without the Liberal government's plan to cut costs in the short term.

The government dismissed the document as containing outdated projections, but wouldn't make public any of the various other projections it says went before cabinet.

Tabuns called Friday on the budget watchdog to examine all of those documents.

"I don't trust Liberal numbers," he said. "I would like to have the financial accountability officer do his assessment so we're making a somewhat more informed decision on what's before us."

It would ideally be done quickly, Tabuns said. The legislature has just eight sitting days left before it rises for the summer, which doesn't leave a lot of time for opposition review and debate, Tabuns said.

The legislation tabled this week would cut bills by an average of 17 per cent, lowering time-of-use rates for the next 10 years by removing from bills a portion of the global adjustment, a charge consumers pay for above-market rates to power producers. For the next 10 years, a new entity overseen by Ontario Power Generation will take on debt to pay that difference.

Then, the cost of paying back that debt with interest - which the government says will be up to $28 billion - will go back onto ratepayers' bills for the next 20 years as a "Clean Energy Adjustment."

A spokeswoman for Financial Accountability Officer Stephen LeClair said Friday the office doesn't comment on politicians' requests, but said in March they had already been planning a report on the hydro plan.

LeClair received a full technical briefing last month and the government has responded to all follow-up requests for information, Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault said in a statement.

"We welcome and encourage the independent financial accountability officer to review Ontario's Fair Hydro Plan," Thibeault wrote.

"We expanded the FAO's oversight last fall, which improved his office's access to information, making it even easier to provide important analysis. These enhanced powers, combined with the technical briefing, will give the FAO access to the necessary information required."

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Get The Electric Probe!; NDP asks watchdog to look into Wynne's hydro rate cut plan

Toronto Sun - Sat May 13 2017
Byline: Shawn Jeffords
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The New Democrats have asked the province's financial watchdog to probe the Liberal government's hydro rate cut plan.

NDP energy critic Peter Tabuns, who wrote to financial accountability officer Stephen LeClair Friday asking for the investigation, says secret cabinet documents leaked by a government whistleblower point to serious problems with the scheme that will see On Thursday, Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault disputed the accuracy of the figures in the leaked cabinet document.

Tabuns said he would like an "objective assessment" of the entire Liberal plan before MPPs are asked to pass the legislation.

"Frankly, we're going to be asked to vote on this in the next eight days," he said. "I don't know about you, I don't trust Liberal numbers."

In March, Premier Kathleen Wynne announced a plan to cut hydro rates by 17% after months of outrage over increasing electricity costs.

The cut amounts to 25% if a previous 8% HST rebate is included.

The leaked document Thursday says that between 2022 and 2027, Ontario residents will be zapped by a 6.5% jump annually each year, followed by a whopping 10.5% increase in 2028.

"We want the Financial Accountability Officer, who we have some confidence in, to actually go through and come out and say this is what the numbers are," Tabuns said. "I don't want to have to rely on a minister who doesn't know which draft of the plan he's dealing with."

Kismet Baun, spokesman for FAO Stephen LeClair, said the financial watchdog could not comment on the matter.

"The FAO will not confirm receipt of the letter, nor will he confirm one way or the other that he was intending to look at the Hydro Plan," she said in a statement to the Toronto Sun.

Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault said Friday he would "welcome and encourage" the scrutiny of the Financial Accountability Officer on the government's hydro plan.

The watchdog has been briefed on the rate cut and the government has responded to requests for additional information, he said.

"What's disappointing is that the NDP know all of this, and decided to try to distract from the Fair Hydro Act which we tabled yesterday," Thibeault said in a statement. "The act would, if passed, provide an average rate cut of 25 per cent for Ontario households, and as many as half a million small businesses and farms starting this summer." sjeffords@postmedia.com

ONLY 1 IN 3 TRUST WYNNE

Just one in ten Ontarians say they trust Premier Kathleen Wynne.

According to a new Forum Research survey the premier remains deeply unpopular with Ontario voters.

Asked who they find most trustworthy of the three main party leaders, respondents rank Wynne ranks dead last with 11% saying they trust her. NDP leader Andrea Horwath is ranked as the most trustworthy with 29% saying they trust her. Patrick Brown is viewed as trustworthy by 25% of respondents.

Here are some of the other findings from the May poll: n Patrick Brown is seen as best choice to be premier, with 27% supporting him. Andrea Horwath ranks second on that question with 25%. Kathleen Wynne ranks last with 13%. n Patrick Brown is viewed as the best leader for the economy, with 31% support. Andrea Horwath was seen as the best economic steward by 21% of respondents and Premier Wynne ranked third with 13% support on that question. n Premier Kathleen Wynne's personal approval has increased to 15%, up from an all-time low of 11% in February. The bad news is 73% of respondents said they disapprove of the job she's doing. Patrick Brown's approval is at 19% with the majority of respondents (54%) saying they don't know enough about him to have an opinion. Andrea Horwath is the most popular of the three leaders with 4% approval.

- Shawn Jeffords

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Thibeault dismisses leaked document

North Bay Nugget - Sat May 13 2017
Byline: Jennifer Hamilton-Mccharles
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Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault is dismissing a leaked document that indicates energy rates will spike come 2022.

The document, which breaks down the Liberal government's recently announced plan to slash hydro rates by 25 per cent, shows that prices will begin to rise for the average homeowner following this year. The government plans to cap the rate increases to two per cent a year, but then they spike when that cap expires in 2022.

According to the document, which the Progressive Conservatives said was presented to cabinet in March and provided to the PCs by a "whistleblower," residential bills will jump to an average of $151 a month in 2023. By 2030, rates for the average user will jump by $216 a month.

Speaking in North Bay Friday, Thibeault said the leaked document is months old and its numbers inaccurate.

"When it comes to projections, the only document that shows where costs are expected to go is the Long Term Energy Plan and that is coming out in the very quick future," he said.

"We're not going to see the increases (the Conservatives) are talking about. We're holding rates to the cost of inflation for the four years. But after that it's my job to find ways to continue to pull costs out of the system.. ."

Nipissing MPP Vic Fedeli remains unconvinced.

The Fair Hydro Plan isn't about making life affordable for Ontario. Rather it's about this government's short-term goal of re-election in 2018, he said.

"The fact-filled leaked document proves Minister Thibeault's announcement today was nothing short of financial engineering in an effort to set the stage prior to an election," Fedeli said.

"The details are explained in black and white in a leaked document marked 'confidential'. It shows that rates decline in 2017 only to rise the following year. However in 2022, the (Kathleen) Wynne government's plan completely falls apart and rates immediately spike. By 2024, they are the highest rates Ontario has ever seen."

Thibeault called it projection to say where energy costs will be in 10 years and claimed the Tories are criticizing the Fair Hydro Plan because they have no plan of their own.

"We brought forward a plan that will reduce hydro bills by 25 per cent for all households. They (the Conservatives) wanted to make sure we weren't talking about that, but talking about leaked documents that were inaccurate and don't really show where the projections are going to be," Thibeault said.

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Chris Selley: Ontario Liberals kept their promise of short-term hydro relief. What happens after is another story

National Post - Fri May 12 2017
Byline: Chris Selley

This week wasn't super great for the Ontario Liberals. On the day they tabled their Hail Mary "Fair Hydro Plan" legislation to cut average hydro bills by a total of 25 per cent, the Tories shared with the media a leaked Cabinet document that rather spoiled the narrative. You'll never guess what: according to this undated document, the relief is temporary. It projects that from 2022 to 2029, the average bill will rise from $142 to $214 - that's 51 per cent, which is exactly how much the average bill rose from 2010 to 2017, creating a marquee political crisis for Premier Kathleen Wynne and her party. Bills would continue to increase every year, more slowly, until 2047, before finally declining.

Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault called the document "outdated" and the data in question "months old." The 2017 Long-Term Energy Plan, expected to be released in the summer, would provide more current and relevant estimates, he said in a statement. He also accused Tory leader Patrick Brown of "desperately trying to justify his opposition to our plan." And he declared himself "disappointed" that the NDP would "try to distract from the Fair Hydro Act" - rude! - by demanding the Financial Accountability Office investigate the plan. (The Liberals say they're happy to go along with that.)

Not for a moment to begrudge the opposition parties their high dudgeon, but no one should really be surprised by this. What Ontarians were promised was an immediate 25 per cent average reduction in hydro bills, with increases "not ... beyond the rate of inflation for four years." And that's pretty much what this Cabinet document projects: annual increases of between 1.6 and 2.4 per cent in each of the first four years. If you imagined there might not be an "and then" component to the Fair Hydro Plan, well, I hope you had a pleasant ride on the back of that turnip truck. Welcome to Ontario.

Dave Abel/Postmedia NetworkLiberal Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault outlines the Ontario Fair Hydro Plan at Queen's Park on Thursday May 11, 2017.

The plan isn't exactly rocket science. The province is contractually obligated to pay electricity producers over a set term; it wants to lengthen that term; so it will borrow money to keep the payments flowing while extracting less of it from ratepayers' wallets in the near term, in hopes of improbably winning the 2018 election - I mean, delivering much-needed air to struggling Ontario families. Sooner or later that bill comes due, with interest. The only question is the details.

If you're bound and determined to provide short-term hydro relief, and not to legislate away fiscally inconvenient contracts, it's not a terrible plan. It's even halfway defensible, on its own terms: the infrastructure in question is supposed to last 30 years, so why not finance it over 30 years?

Counterpoint: Why didn't they do that in the first place?

And since no one else is talking about tearing up those contracts, it might even be the best plan that's out there. Its only competition for now is the New Democrats', which is complex and aspirational by comparison. An NDP government would ask Ottawa to take the HST off electricity, and assume that for some reason Ottawa would say yes. There would also be "an independent panel of energy experts and planners" (and, one hopes, magicians).

Related

Ontario Liberals roll out legislation to lower hydro bills for 10 years - but consumers will still pay for it later (news.nationalpost.com)

Lawrence Solomon: How to make Ontario's awful power system as dull (and affordable) as natural gas (business.financialpost.com)

National Post View: Let's learn from Ontario to be wary of politicians who claim green schemes won't be costly (news.nationalpost.com)

Counterpoint: Unless you buy the Liberals' assurances that significant other savings will be found in existing contracts over this 30-year undertaking - and there is no good reason you should - the plan amounts to little more than taking out a loan. The good news is, interest rates are low. The bad news is, taxpayers are going to have to repay it, and it only seems fair they would contribute proportionately to how much power they consume.

The opposition could have made this point Thursday even without this Cabinet document. It wasn't so much a bombshell as a convenient prop to illustrate the Liberals' self-made nightmare: they presided over skyrocketing hydro rates; real people have suffered; and nobody believes - nor should they - that it was all necessary to clean up a Tory mess bequeathed to the Liberals when Justin Bieber was nine years old.

Do the Liberals have the best plan to lower your hydro bills in the short term? They might. But if you went in for back surgery and got a vasectomy instead, would you ask the surgeon to fix it? Or would you ask if someone else were available?

. Email: cselley@postmedia.com(mailto:cselley@postmedia.com) Twitter: cselley

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People always lose with green scheme energy deals

Toronto Sun - Sun May 14 2017
Byline: Lorne Gunter
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Call it whatever you like -"green" or alternate or renewable energy. Wherever governments interfere in power markets to reduce greenhouse emissions, the results are always higher taxes and skyrocketing power bills, with few environmental benefits.

The latest proof came Thursday when Ontario's provincial Tories released secret documents showing that despite efforts by the governing Liberals to bring down Ontarians'electricity bills this summer, Premier Kathleen Wynne and her cabinet already know that after next year's election, power bills will have to go up - way up - until they almost double by 2028.

In their obsession with closing coal-fired power plants and replacing the electricity produced at them with wind, solar and biomass (a blind fixation shared by Alberta's NDP), Ontario's Liberals have made a series of awful deals with wind turbine operators and solar farm owners.

They have signed numerous long-term contracts to buy "green" power at well over the market value. And they often dump excess electricity at deep discounts into neighbouring states, losses they then pass on to Ontario homeowners and businesses on their power bills.

Perhaps the dumbest of these deals was the Liberals'decision to convert a coal-fired plant in Thunder Bay to burn woodchips. They made the deal before they checked whether plentiful Northern Ontario chips were suitable to fire the furnaces they had bought.

They weren't. So instead of using local chips, Norwegian chips must be shipped in. Power from the Thunder Bay plant costs $1,600 per megawatt-hour - 25 times more than other Ontario woodchip power plants and nearly 100 times more than coal.

The same is beginning to happen in Alberta where the NDP government is paying big-time to shut down useful coal plants and ban construction of new ones.

To help cover the cost, the government of Premier Rachel Notley has implemented a $3-billion-a-year carbon tax that has added over a third to the cost of natural gas used to heat homes during long, cold prairie winters.

It miscalculated the cost of cancelled long-term power contracts with large-scale electricity users by about $2 billion.

And it will be paying billions in subsidies to utilities over the next decade and a half to cover the cost of shutting generators early. There will also be payouts to coal towns losing mining jobs and businesses.

Alberta isn't up near the $40 billion Ontario has wasted, but give us a few years.

The documents uncovered by the Ontario Tories on Thursday show that while the Wynne government may be able to bring power bills down now by 25% (through restructuring the long-term costs of "green" power), it won't be able to avoid fiscal reality for long.

While average monthly power bills in Ontario may come down to around $123 a month this summer, by 2028 they will have spiked again to $215.

Another issue is that all this suffering and sacrifice (rising power costs will eliminate tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs) is doing nothing environmentally.

All these billions are being spent to eliminate about 7 megawatts of "installed capacity" in Ontario and about 6.5 megawatts of coal in Alberta.

That sounds like a lot, but consider that China has installed coal-fired capacity of 940,000 megawatts according to its National Energy Agency. And by 2030, that amount will have risen to 1.3 million megawatts.

It's true China has recently announced it will scale back its coal-plant building plans, but it will still be adding over 500 megawatts a week for the next 13 years, while Ontario and Alberta are beggaring their economies and future generations over a mere 13.5 megawatts.

Does anyone, other than environmentalists (and Liberal and NDP premiers), think all that money and pain will save the planet? lgunter@postmedia.com

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North's 'woes'stump ministers; Asked how to bridge gap between growing GTA and shrinking N. Ontario

The Sault Star - Mon May 15 2017
Byline: Gord Young
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Provincial cabinet ministers were unable to offer municipal leaders any solutions to the long-time challenge of growing Northern Ontario.

Municipal Affairs Minister Bill Mauro, Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault and Natural Resources Minister Kathryn McGarry participated in the "bear pit session" at the annual Federation of Northern Ontario Municipalities (FONOM) conference in North Bay, where they were asked about how to bridge the gap between the Greater Toronto Area, which is experiencing tremendous growth, and the North, where the population is declining in many areas.

Unfortunately, the three couldn't provide a cure-all for the North's woes.

"We can do a lot more to talk about promoting growth and expansion in Northern Ontario by utilizing the facilities that we already have," said Thibeault Friday, referring to post-secondary institutions such as Canadore College and Nipissing University. "And let's also talk about immigration. We can utilize more immigrants to take some of the jobs we have up here. When we are booming, we're constantly looking for skilled labour. But we never seem to fill that gap."

Thibeault, who represents the Sudbury riding, said part of the solution is simply "letting people know how great it is up here."

"We really are a jewell in this province. And - you know what - if more people recognized that, we would see more people coming up here," he said.

Mauro, who represents Thunder Bay-Atikokan, echoed Thibeault's sentiments, but noted that small communities everywhere are facing similar issues.

"Small-town Canada shares in this dilemma," he said, pointing to the diversification of the economy as another possible solution.

He said forestry and mining are the cornerstones of many Northern communities. But Mauro said the challenge is that those sectors are often cyclical.

He suggested municipal leaders also look to their federal representatives.

"I just wish I could give you the right answer. We all share in the challenge," he said.

At the discussion's end, FONOM president Al Spacek said the province has thousands of employees who work at computer screens in "high-cost real estate" in the south who aren't front-line workers. He suggested some of them may welcome the opportunity to come North, highlighting how Sault Ste. Marie is home to the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corp.'s headquarters and how Sudbury houses a federal tax data centre.

North Bay Coun. Mac Bain also added later on how important it is for Northern communities to retain existing jobs. He pointed to Ontario Power Generation positions that are being lost in the city.

In addition, Bain noted the North East Local Health Integration Network is supposed to be located in North Bay, but many of it executives work elsewhere.

"I hope the ministries keep people where they should be in Northern Ontario and in the communities that they should be," said Bain.

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