



Message from Queen's Park



Monthly Column by MPP John Yakabuski

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The period between New Year's and when the Legislature returns could in many ways be referred to as: the Silly Season. This is the time when the Premier sends out all her Ministers to travel the province telling everyone how wonderful the government has been and that it is only going to get better. She is hoping to galvanize Liberal support in the next provincial election. Of course they can say whatever they want because the Legislature is not in Session and they are not going to be held accountable—as they normally would—during Question Period. When the Legislature reconvenes, in the fast-paced world we live in, there is usually some new priority that needs to be raised.

It is also a time when they feel that people won't be paying a lot of attention to some controversies that have arisen. One such matter is the question of tolls in the city of Toronto. How the Premier flip-flopped on the issue and how this could affect us here in rural Ontario. It is generally held (and even the Premier has not denied it) that she privately promised Mayor John Tory last summer that if he wanted to impose tolls on the Don Valley Parkway and Gardiner Expressway, she would see that the regulatory changes would go through. Moreover, in the fall she stated in the Legislature that she had no intention of standing in the way of tolls on these two roadways. Patrick Brown and the PC Caucus immediately said, "No way." It was clear that the people agreed with Patrick Brown. This became apparent to the Premier as time went on. On January 26th, without warning, she called a news conference to say that Toronto would not be allowed to proceed with tolls. This was done for purely political reasons.

In order to soften the blow, she announced at the same time that the share of the gas tax that municipalities with a public transportation system receive would double over the next five years. As is typical of Liberals, not a single penny will go out before the next provincial election. Regardless of when the money would flow, if they are doubling the amount of gas tax going to municipalities with a public transportation system, where does that leave us in rural Ontario? You know that as things currently stand, no gas tax is shared with municipalities that do not have a public transportation system: this means most municipalities in rural Ontario. With still more funding going to public transportation, and the envelope itself not increasing, this will make it even harder for rural municipalities to get their fair share of provincial funding. As many mayors say to me: "We do have a public transportation system—it's our roads and bridges. And it's about time we got treated fairly."

I have long advocated, through my Private Member's Bill, that the provincial government allocate a share of its gas tax revenue to all municipalities, just as the federal government does. This has also been part of the election platform of the PC Party in each of the two last provincial elections. I can assure you that I will be bringing this issue up in a most-aggressive fashion when the House returns.

On the issue of electricity prices, we are finally getting to hear some media coverage on the effects those increases are having on public institutions and organizations. We recently heard how curling clubs across Ontario are faced with the prospect of closing because of energy prices. While many public institutions don't want to raise the issue for fear of reprisals from the government, it is time there was an open accounting of what the cost of energy has meant to the operation of hospitals, schools, long-term care homes, and other institutions across Ontario. They pay hydro bills just like the rest of us, and are forced to absorb massive increases while their budgets are not keeping pace. Despite the best efforts of staff, the cost of energy cannot help but effect the level of service that they can provide. The Liberal government has seen this coming for years, but has done nothing to correct it. I don't think sorry is good enough.