

Differing local views on last week's Provincial budget

By Bill Rea

The government is patting itself on the back for the budget Finance Minister Charles Sousa brought down last week.

But further reaction depends on who one talks too.

The Province's economic plan supports good jobs today in communities across Ontario by investing in infrastructure and in a low-carbon economy driven by innovative, high-growth, export-oriented businesses, Sousa stated. The plan invests in people's talents and skills and their ability to get and create the jobs of the future, by expanding access to high-quality college and university education. The plan also helps all Ontarians achieve a more secure retirement.

Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones raised a number of problems she had with it.

In today's budget, the government has put forward a plan to pay for their 13 years of reckless spending on the backs of the people of Ontario, she said in a statement issued by her office shortly after the budget came down. This confirms what the Ontario PC (Progressive Conservative) caucus has been saying all along. That life is harder under the Wynne Liberals.

Meanwhile, Mayor Allan Thompson had more positive things to say, commenting the government listened to what municipalities were asking for.

Thompson said his attention was drawn to the plans that government infrastructure spending will help bring broadband internet service to Caledon. The Town, he said, is planning to put up \$350,000 this year, and the Province is proposing to put up \$7 for every \$1 the municipality does.

The mayor was also happy to see the prospect of more infrastructure money for things like roads and bridges. Caledon has some of those assets that are in bad shape.

This is a real good news story for Caledon, he said. I'm pleased with what they've done.

The cost of energy, like gas and natural gas, is slated to increase. Thompson was concerned about the impact that would have on facilities like hospitals and schools.

I think it's a little aggressive, he said, although he added it's also too soon to say. The jury's out on it.

Jones was concerned that the budget's going to make Ontario a more expensive place in which to live.

She commented that a lot has been made about post-secondary tuition being free for students coming from households with annual incomes of less than \$50,000.

What's been lost in the discussion is all other families are going to be paying more, Jones observed.

I think it's a shiny ball, she added, commenting she has no problems with a break like that for families making less than \$50,000. But education grants are being taken away from families with incomes of \$83,000 or less, and Jones said that will be hard for them to deal with.

You're helping a very small percentage and hurting a very large percentage, she commented.

There were other examples like that which Jones cited.

She said there will be more money for hospice care, but many seniors are going to have to pay more for drugs.

Some are describing it as a "give and take budget," Jones observed.

She also commented on the cap and trade, which will see more fees on gas and natural gas, which will increase the prices of a lot of products.

Jones added that funds that were meant to address climate change are going to be going into general revenues. That means they can really be used for anything the government wants.

We don't have that guarantee, she said.

The high cost of energy was a concern too.

There seems to be no end in sight to skyrocketing energy prices, as families will have to pay more for gas for their car and to heat their home, she observed. Now Ontarians can expect to pay as much as \$400 more per year for gasoline and \$475 more per year to heat their home.

As well, the budget announced the \$30 Drive Clean fee is to be eliminated.

That one, I really shake my head at, Jones said, commenting the program, which was created by a Progressive Conservative government, is still there. She added the Auditor has stated the program doesn't do what it's supposed to do, and car manufacturers have improved methods for dealing with emissions.

How many automotive service centres will continue to provide the Drive Clean test when they are not able to charge for this service? she wondered.

Another problem she had was no systemic admission that the government has a spending problem. The debt is at about the \$300 billion levels. The government has stated it will have the budget balanced by next year, and Jones figures they will do that through short-term one-offs, like selling more of Hydro One or dipping into reserves. She agreed they might be able to balance things, but it won't solve the reality of the government's situation.

She likened it to someone saying, "I have a mortgage payment, so I'm going to sell off my dining room furniture."

Jones said people don't want to think about the increasing debt, but they have to look at the legacy the government is leaving for the future, because it impacts on the ability to provide services. Interest rates are currently at an historic low, but they have to go up eventually. What will happen then?

"We're not having this conversation yet, and I think it does a disservice to the residents of Ontario," she commented.