

Drummond Report - Commission predicts doubled debt if changes not soon made | The Manitoulin Expositor

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by Stacey Lavallie

QUEEN'S PARK—The news contained in the 2012 Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services report is as grim as the commission's chair, Don Drummond, warned: Cut spending or go bankrupt.

Ontario currently sits at a debt of \$16 billion, but if the province were to freeze spending at its current rate, and revenue were to remain the same, by the end of seven years that deficit would nearly double

to \$30 billion.

The report's 362 recommendations are just that—recommendations—but they will be considered by the provincial government before its budget is created, Sudbury MPP and cabinet minister Rick Bartolucci told The Expositor last Thursday.

Here is a brief look at some of the recommendations.

General

recommendations

The commission recommends the province not cut costs across the board, but instead look to reform "sloppily-run" ministries or departments for cost-recovery.

Further, the report recommends a 2.4 percent cut per year to all program spending except in health care, education, post-secondary education and social services. Health care would be limited to 2.5 percent per year, education to one percent per year, post-secondary to 1.5 percent per year, and social services to 0.5 percent per year.

It also says the province should not rely on hiring freezes and attrition to recover money as that could impact service for "years or decades to come."

The report also recommends the province should sell off certain public assets or service delivery agencies, such as the LCBO headquarters or Ontario Hydro.

"Reform must be pervasive and speedy," the report reads. "There is an understandable tendency to approach any set of reforms piecemeal and over an extended period...it runs contrary to our fiscal mandate to balance the budget."

Health

recommendations

Moving health care out of the hospital and into the home is the key focus of the health care recommendations, which make up roughly a third of the report's 362 suggestions. It suggests the government "resist" the urge to build more alternate level care (ALC) housing and instead focus on programs to keep Ontario's aging population safe and in their homes.

"Home-based care should be used more extensively for recovery from procedures such as hip and

knee surgery,” the report recommends as an example of how treating patients at home would be more effective.

The report also recommends the “consolidation” of health service agencies and boards, where appropriate.

More nurse practitioners and family health teams are recommended as a way to take pressure off Ontario’s doctors and hospitals and the report recommends no more doctors be hired—something that may not sit as well with Northern Ontarians, many of whom are still on waiting lists for doctors.

The report goes on to recommend that senior executive and CEO salaries be made available for public scrutiny, as well as be tied to health outcomes—a pay-for-performance method.

Cuts to the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) were previewed as one of the possible recommendations before the report was released and the suggested cuts made it into the final draft. Non-essential or non-beneficial surgeries should be cut, the report recommends.

Education

recommendations

Long bus rides are a reality for many Northern Ontario families, and now the Drummond report recommends students pay to ride the school bus. A “modest” fee to take the bus is one of the recommendations.

The report recommends retaining teachers longer—they retire early, usually—as well as cutting textbook and material budgets.

The Liberals’ full-day kindergarten program was hit by the report, which called it “high cost with low return.” However, the Liberals have already said the program will remain.

The report notes if the government is not willing to cut the full-day kindergarten, it should look at cutting most of the school’s non-teaching classroom staff.

First Nations schools are particularly noted in this section as being under-funded when compared to their public counterparts and the report suggests this should be corrected.

Students require 30 credits to graduate from high school and can accomplish this in four years, or can return for a fifth year to allow themselves extra time to complete the credits. Either closing down the fifth year option or charging a fee should curtail this, the report recommends.

Post-Secondary

recommendations

The Drummond Report wants colleges and universities to work together to diversify programs and minimize duplication, and suggests post-secondary institutions create an incentive system to reward excellent teachers.

Funding for post-secondary education should be linked to “quality objectives.”

The report recommends student financial assistance should be “reshaped” to target more assistance to low-income students, as well as phasing out tuition and education tax credits and instead invest in “upfront grants.”

Universities and colleges should be required to look at their four-year programs to see if they can be compressed into three-year programs. Money should not be spent on international marketing of Ontario’s universities. Rather, this educational outreach could be integrated existing trade missions,

as universities, colleges and the federal government already invest in these activities.

Social

recommendations

The report starts by suggesting the province move “aggressively” towards a “fully integrated” benefits system to simplify client access and improve outcomes.

It goes on to further recommend support be put in place to help disabled individuals receive training and assistance to join the workforce.

It also recommends “excess capacity” in the youth justice system be eliminated by closing facilities.

The upload of Ontario Works to the province or the download of the Ontario Disability Support Program to the municipality is another possibility. Either way, a single point of access for clients accessing Ontario’s services should be made available.

Child and youth mental health services should be consolidated to improve delivery, and any money saved through reforms should go to reforms within the system.

Infrastructure, real estate and electricity recommendations:

The Drummond Report launches this section with a particularly painful recommendation of implementation of full-cost pricing on water and wastewater services, as well as ending the “Ontario Clean Energy Benefit as quickly as possible.”

The recommendation suggests Ontario’s 80 distribution companies be consolidated along regional lines to create “economies of scale.”

The report further recommends the feed-in tariff (FIT) program take steps to lower the initial prices offered in FIT contracts, and introduce a method to reduce the tariff over time.

Also in the report’s recommendations are methods to cut programs that lower the cost of electricity.

For the full report, or its appendix of recommendations, visit www.ontario.ca.