

Drummond Report - 'Wait and see' approach characterizes Northern responses | The Manitoulin Expositor

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by Stacey Lavallie

NORTHERN ONTARIO—Just days after the release of the anticipated 2012 Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services, a.k.a. the Drummond Report, opposition MPPs and health, education and services providers are weighing in.

Vic Fedeli, the former mayor of North Bay and one of the only Progressive Conservative MPPs in Northern Ontario, said the report was an “eye-opening” opportunity for Ontarians to see that the

Liberal government, under Dalton McGuinty, didn't know how to do anything but “spend money.”

“Dalton McGuinty has put us in a hole,” Mr. Fedeli told The Expositor. “When he took office, we had a balanced budget. We've had a deficit now for years. The money is here—we don't have a revenue problem, we have a spending problem.”

The 700-page report makes 326 recommendations aimed at decreasing the province's deficit until it would break even in 2017-2018. The commission chaired by Don Drummond, former vice president and chief economist at TD Canada Trust; Dominic Giroux, president of Laurentian University; Susan Pigott, vice president of communications for Toronto's Centre of Addiction and Mental Health; and Carol Stephenson, dean of the University of Western Ontario's Richard Ivey School of Business.

Mr. Fedeli said the report seems to ignore Northern Ontario for the most part, which he thinks works in the North's favour.

“When I was mayor of North Bay, I used to say the government didn't understand anything north of Steeles (Avenue, in Toronto),” Mr. Fedeli noted. “It's still true, but maybe it's (the city of) Vaughan, now.”

He said most organizations, ministries and communities in Northern Ontario are already “pretty lean,” so it was a good thing the commission didn't try to find ways to cut the North. At the same time, he acknowledged the report's recommendations may have a disproportionate affect in the North.

“These types of changes affect us to a greater extent,” he said. “Increasing the hydro bill by 10 percent has more of an impact in the North, where our winters are longer and colder and we rely on hydro to heat our homes.”

Doreen Dewar, chair of the Rainbow District School Board (RDSB), said the implications of the report on the education of Northern Ontario's children were dire.

“These recommendations, if implemented, will really affect our most vulnerable people—children and especially children in lower-income families,” Ms. Dewar noted. She stated that children in lower income families wouldn't be able to adequately cope with some of the recommendations, if they become cost-cutting measures.

“While it is no problem for some families to provide their children with school supplies, it can be very difficult for others to buy the books and pencils and pens,” she said. Cuts to the textbooks budgets

also concerned her.

Algoma-Manitoulin MPP Michael Mantha also shares two of Ms. Dewar's largest education concerns. Both are concerned that recommendations to charge students for busing to and from school as well as cutting the fifth optional year of high school will negatively impact schools.

"We're closing schools to save money," Ms. Dewar said. "Some of our students have to bus a lot further. In southern Ontario, there are students with a thousand students who all walk."

Mr. Mantha said the idea of charging for busing, while perhaps not as large an issue in the south of the province, would be huge in the North, where some students spend up to—or even more than—an hour on the bus to get to school.

"It's evidence of a North-South divide," he agreed.

Both he and Ms. Dewar are concerned the province will choose to cut funding for the fifth optional year of high school—either cutting the option for students entirely or requiring them to pay.

"Students require 30 credits to attain their diploma," Ms. Dewar said. "If they are having difficulty, that fifth year allows them the chance to catch up and get their diploma."

"It's not a place where we should make a cut," Mr. Mantha noted.

All-day Kindergarten was on the report's chopping block, as was the retirement age of teachers (too early) and class size (too small). However, Sudbury MPP Rick Bartolucci, once a teacher and principal himself, quickly shot down the idea of retiring all-day Kindergarten.

"Mr. (Dwight) Duncan, the Minister of Finance, has already clearly said all-day Kindergarten will stay," Mr. Bartolucci told The Expositor the day after the report was released. Mr. Bartolucci is one of three Liberal MPPs remaining in Northern Ontario following the 2011 election that saw Mr. McGuinty and the Liberals fall short one seat of a majority government.

"Anyone who has a knee-jerk reaction to the commission's report is doing a disservice," Mr. Bartolucci said of the report's more than 350 recommendations. "The reality is that every recommendation is advice. We will be considering these recommendations, and now we'll make decisions."

Mr. Bartolucci said he was particularly pleased the health care section of the report, which contains roughly a third of all the report's recommendations, reflects a direction the province is already heading, unlike education.

"We've invested \$80 million in the type of services Mr. Drummond recommends," Mr. Bartolucci noted. "Out of hospital services, for example. It's time to move forward—those changes need to take place."

Mr. Mantha said he and his party were also happy with the direction the commission's direction was taking with regard to health care.

"There's some good in the report and some bad in the report," he admitted, "but we're happy to see what we've been saying is reflected in the health care recommendations. Help in the home, keeping seniors at home and support for them is part of our mandate."

However, Mr. Mantha said the large document was also "very vague" and there were concerns that the recommendations could be interpreted many ways.

Derek Graham, CEO of the Manitoulin Health Centre, which operates hospitals in Little Current and Mindemoya, was of the same opinion. Though Mr. Graham was unable to speak directly with The Expositor prior to press time, he did provide the paper with a statement on his first impressions of

the report.

“We’ll be looking it over very closely,” Mr. Graham stated. “We’re looking forward to working with the ministry and any Local Health Integration Network (LHIN) staff on any changes that are required. There are a lot of big picture statements within the Drummond Report to do with health, but very few details. Until it is fleshed out and is designed into system changes at the local level, we won’t really know what the impacts will look like. I think we can agree with a lot of the big picture things that are said, but as you know, the devil is in the details.”

Those details also concerned Fern Dominelli, the chief administrative officer for the Manitoulin-Sudbury District Services Board (DSB). The DSB provides and administers housing, ambulance, social services (such as Ontario Works) and child care services for the Manitoulin and Sudbury districts.

“The devil is in the details,” he said, unknowingly echoing Mr. Graham’s observations. “The recommendations are fairly vague and until there is actually a plan in place, it’s impossible to see how these recommendations will affect us.”

One of the things he was concerned about was the DSB’s five-year plan regarding land emergency medical services (EMS) bases. The most recent base to obtain full-time staffing was Mindemoya late last year, with the next to one in Massey get underway in June.

“We’re concerned because we won’t know if the funding is going to be there,” he said.

Mr. Dominelli was a bit skeptical on how some of the recommendations would work, such as a recommendation to centralize Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works at the municipal level, yet still provide provincial support at Service Ontario locations.

“I’d really like to see how they intend to make that work,” he said.

Mr. Dominelli was concerned about the idea that schools with low populations may be closed, as several rural communities in Northern Ontario are small and busing to other communities could add hours to a student’s day.

“I’m also concerned about the recommendation to either end full-day Kindergarten or remove the early childhood educators (ECE) from the classroom,” he noted.

One thing that he found fairly interesting was the idea of the LHINs becoming more central features in the health care system.

“It’ll be interesting to see how involved the LHINs become,” he said.

Further involving the LHINs with its community health organizations is one of the recommendations, noted North East LHIN (NE LHIN) CEO Louise Paquette. Strengthening ties with the health units, five of which are overseen by the NE LHIN, along with other community groups, is part of the LHIN’s mandate.

“It’s important to note that the report is advice to our government,” Ms. Paquette told The Expositor. “Over the course of the next few months, the government will study the report, then release its budget.”

Until the budget is released, Ms. Paquette said it is too early to see how Mr. Drummond’s recommendations will affect health care in Northern Ontario.

“A few weeks ago the minister (of health) released our action plan, and it is a plan we will follow,” she said. She noted the plan already seemed to take into consideration many of the recommendations regarding moving care out of hospitals and into the community.

“Right now we are working with our health units on a fall prevention plan,” she said. “Fall prevention helps serve our more than 100,000 adults who are over 65-years-of-age stay safe and out of the hospital,” she said.

As for the “painful” cost-cutting measures in the report, she said they weren’t a surprise.

“The government and Mr. Drummond have been very clear on the fiscal situation,” she noted. The sort of change required to reverse the situation will be “disruptive,” she said. “We need to embrace (that) change.”

The nearly 700-page report and its 362 recommendations could have sweeping effects across the province, warned Pat Madahbee, the Grand Council Chief of the Anishinabek Nation. However, he confessed he regarded the report with a certain level of skepticism.

“The recommendations are only as good as how they’re implemented,” he said. “How many will see the light of day? I can rhyme off half-a-dozen reports that are just sitting there, unused.”

He was glad to see First Nations concerns, such as the disparity between First Nations and public education funding, addressed, but was also worried a one-size-fits-all approach could hurt Northern Ontario and the First Nations.

“We’re well-poised to work with the government should they approach us, so now we’re just waiting.”