

Provincial budget misses the mark: MPP

It is going to cost more to live in Ontario in the year ahead.

That is the verdict of Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones following the release of Ontario's 2016 Budget last week.

Looking over the plan released Friday by Finance Minister Charles Sousa, "pretty much everything will go up as a result of initiatives included in the budget," she said, even things that have been touted as positives such as the elimination of the \$30 fee for Drive Clean emission testing.

"We are not, as a government, facing down debt," says Ms. Jones. "Since the Liberals have been in power, Ontario's debt has doubled. We're now over the \$300 billion mark, which puts us in the illustrious first spot for a sub-national country.

"They have done no assessment of all the programs that are out there. If you look at the fact they are decreasing the deficit, some of it has come from removing money out of contingency funds. One time. The sale of Hydro One has gone into decreasing the deficit [but] there has been no actual structural realignment to say, "What are we doing well? What do we need to do better? What needs to be eliminated?"

While those are the primary budgetary alarm bells raised for Ms. Jones, the commitment to eliminating the Drive Clean fees raised more than a question mark.

"You eliminate the user fee, but you don't eliminate the program? Why?" she asks. What possible justification is there for having that program in place? They admitted in eliminating the user fee that technology has grown in such a way that they are not capturing those polluting cars the way they did when the program was first put in, to be fair, by a Conservative government. It has outlived its usefulness. To eliminate the fee without eliminating the program, to me, just boggles my mind."

That being said, however, there are some wins in the program for Dufferin-Caledon, she says, including eliminating the wait list for individuals who have developmental disabilities and are looking for housing, which she characterizes as "a good step."

"There is also the small percentage of students who are [going to be] assisted with tuition being eliminated on family incomes under \$50,000," says Ms. Jones. "People need to understand that it is only tuition for students whose family income does not exceed \$50,000. In terms of the actual percentage of students who would qualify, it is than 30 per cent. I don't think that the vast majority of students in Dufferin-Caledon should be doing a happy dance because when they actually delve into the program they are going to find it is not going to assist them.

"The flip is they have also eliminated the tax credit families used to get when they assisted their children going through to post-secondary education. Not only are not more children qualifying, we haven't expanded the qualification. We have said for a very limited number of students whose family income is \$50,000 or less that we will cover your tuition. For everyone else, they have actually hurt it by removing the tax credit for families who previously were able to write off a percentage of the tuition costs through their taxes. "

For Ms. Jones, being an MPP in the opposition becomes a matter of oversight. Money is always going to be spent by ministries no matter who is in power, but it is the role and responsibility as the opposition to make sure that money is being spent wisely "and that is the big question.

"There are some good things, but I think the elephant in the room is we have doubled the debt under the Liberals and they are ignoring that issue," she says. "There is a lot in [the budget] and we are still getting into some of the details. We're now starting to realise there are some fees that are going up in relation to things we all have to get, such as driver renewal stickers, park fees, and there will be more things coming forward we will need to highlight and get further involved in."

By Brock Weir