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MPP Jones says Ontario?s 2019 Budget includes ?big takeaway? for all residents

Written By **MIKE BAKER**

Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones is standing behind the Progressive Conservative government's pledge to balance Ontario's budget by 2023/2024.

In presenting the first provincial budget of the Doug Ford era, Ontario's Finance Minister Vic Fedeli revealed something of a surprising document last Thursday (April 11), with very little in the way of drastic cuts that has, at times, defined previous PC governments.

Instead, Mr. Fedeli announced the 2019 Ontario Budget is ?all about putting people first?, while laying out a definitive plan towards balancing the provincial books over the next five years. To date, Ontario's deficit stands at an eye watering $11.7 billion.

?We are restoring fiscal balance, making Ontario open for business and open for jobs, while we're protecting what matters most ? our health care, education and other critical public services,? Mr. Fedeli told media last week. ?These are the commitments that we have made to the people of Ontario.?

While there are several key takeaways from this year's document, some of which will be highlighted below, Ms. Jones was keen to press home the point that the 2019 Budget includes no new taxes for residents or businesses when talking to the Citizen this week.

?Frankly, the budget, if we look at it in an overall view regardless of age, whether you are working or looking after children, we have made a commitment as a government to make sure there are no additional taxes this year,? Ms. Jones said. ?I think that's a big takeaway for everyone.?

This was a first for Ms. Jones who, after spending years serving as a member of the official opposition, was involved in her first budget as a representative of the sitting government. She pointed towards increases to childcare tax credits for low-income households, pending changes to the car insurance industry and the introduction of a new dental care program for seniors as three areas she's particularly pleased about.

The new Ontario Childcare Access and Relief from Expenses (CARE) tax credit is based on a sliding scale for families earning up to $150,000 per year. Low income households will benefit the most, Ms. Jones said, with families earning less than $20,000 per year eligible to receive up to $6,000 per child under the age of seven from the province. Families will receive up to $3,750 per child between the ages of seven and 16, and up to $8,250 for a child with a severe disability.

On average, the CARE tax credit will provide approximately $1,250 per family to around 300,000 households in Ontario. The credit is expected to cost the provincial government in the region of $390 million per year.

The announcement of the CARE tax credit follows hot on the heels of the PC government's pledge to spend $1 billion over the next five years to create 30,000 new child care spaces across Ontario.

Ms. Jones states the PC government wants to lower costs for motorists by encouraging insurers to provide ?more options? to drivers in Ontario.

?We're promoting more consumer choice. That will increase the competition and ensure that the money we're spending when someone is an accident is actually going towards rehabilitation and health care services instead of lawyers fighting each other,? Ms. Jones said.

Statistics show that Ontarians pay amongst the highest auto insurance premiums in Canada, with drivers in the GTA hit the hardest.

While details regarding proposed changes are scarce at present time, Mr. Fedeli indicated the general idea is to provide drivers with an opportunity to build a more customized insurance plan that caters to their needs.

Included is the implementation of a new ?driver care card', which will serve as a debit-style card for people making insurance claims. In what is a first in Canada, the cards would, following an accident, be loaded with money that individuals could use towards paying for various services, including rehabilitation and physical therapy.

Another important facet, says Ms. Jones, is the introduction of a new dental coverage initiative for low-income seniors across Ontario. The new program will offer complete coverage to individual seniors making less than $19,300 and couples making less than $32,300. The program is slated to begin this summer.

?The issue of seniors accessing dental care is something that will make a real difference in lives of our low income seniors who are still engaged and participating in the community, but, frankly, are struggling to make sure their personal health care is looked after,? Ms. Jones said. ?I was pleased to see this program introduced.?

In total, the PC government is projected to spend $163.4 billion in 2019. Health care spending accounts for a significant portion of that, coming in at $65.3 billion this year. Included in that total is an additional investment of $384 million in hospitals and $267 million in home and community care in 2019. The PCs also plan to invest $3.8 billion for mental health, addictions and housing supports over the next ten years.

Also included is a plan to make home ownership and renting more affordable for Ontarians by helping to increase the supply of housing through a new Housing Supply Action Plan.

?The housing supply concept, or challenge if you prefer, is something that hits many ministries. The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing is taking a lead on how we can make sure we have more supply available for people just entering the market, or seniors who want to downsize or change the model they have,? Ms. Jones said. ?There are lots of conversations going on and, while I can't give specifics at this time, when we make our announcement, this won't be just one chance. This will be a series of initiatives down the road that will make it easier for people to enter the market.?

While the budget isn't nearly as painful as some expected it to be, there are still several areas for concern for local residents. NDP leader Andrea Horwath condemned the $1 billion in cuts announced to the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, with others criticizing the government for a 15 percent decrease to the Indigenous Affairs portfolio.

Ms. Jones noted a significant portion of those cuts, particularly to the children and community and social services sector, can be attributed to ?ministry collaboration?.

?Transforming how we provide services to our most vulnerable is a priority for (Minister Lisa MacLeod), and the fact we are able to do so many of the programs (under that portfolio) cross ministry,? Ms. Jones said. ?As an example, in my own ministry as Solicitor General, we actively work and engage with projects and initiatives with the Attorney General on probation, parole and bail issues. It impacts both of our budgets, but makes the service better for all.?

There will also be drastic changes coming to the way people can buy and consume alcohol in Ontario moving forward. The Ford government is proposing that tailgating at sporting events become a legal practice, opening up bars and restaurants to sell alcohol starting at 9 a.m., and even permitting public consumption of alcohol in public areas, specifically parks.

That practice will only be permitted here in Dufferin-Caledon if our local municipalities embrace and endorse it, Ms. Jones says.

?One of the things that used to really frustrate me as a member of the opposition was when the government of the day would make changes without having municipality buy-in or support,? Ms. Jones said. ?We will only be introducing this in municipalities that want it. The opportunity for alcohol to be consumed in public places would, and must, come hand in hand with a municipal bylaw

stating that is something they want in their community.?

Ms. Jones held meetings with local constituents on Friday to discuss parts of the budget. Those discussions, she says, went fairly well, with many questioning our local MPP on education, health care and the overall deficit.

?When governments are faced with the kinds of debt and deficit we were left with, we have two options. One is to make very drastic changes to the services we provide, or put in place policies and legislation that will build a bigger economic pie,? Ms. Jones said. ?Some of our detractors would say ?why aren't we getting rid of the deficit faster', but it comes back to the fact we still have a responsibility to fund the services Ontarians need and expect.?

For more information on Ontario's 2019 Budget, visit budget.ontario.ca/2019/contents.