

'WE OFFER PASSENGER RAIL TO THE PEOPLE OF THE NORTH'

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Park Report and during stops around the riding, on everything from passenger rail to his thoughts on how many hospitals the region should have.

Ford also talked about his long history in the area.

"When I was building the cottage 30 years ago I stayed right across the street at the little motel here," said Ford, pointing across the street from Westside Fish and Chips in Huntsville. "It's been a while. Since I've been premier, I haven't been able to get to the cottage in Port Sydney on Fawn Lake there just down the street from Mary Lake. I just love it here. This is my second home. I miss it. I miss my cottage. I wish I could have come up. Last week I got the sleds all ready to go," said Ford.

ABOUT OUR HOSPITALS ...

The premier's visit was fresh off the heels of a Feb. 26 announcement of plans to overhaul Ontario's health-care system - by consolidating a number of agencies into one called Ontario Health. Part of that transformation would include the dissolution of the 14 Local Health Integration Networks and merging their duties with those of six provincial health agencies, including Cancer Care Ontario and eHealth Ontario.

"The number 1 issue I heard right across the province travelling and talking to doctors and nurses and front-line health care workers is get rid of these LHINs, get rid of these silos. So that's what we're doing and why we're getting rid of these silos. We're getting rid of the CEOs and big-paid executives and we're making sure we consolidate everything under our one administration," said Ford.

He dismissed the suggestion that the consolidation was the beginning of health-care privatization, saying that was just what the opposition is stating.

Ford also reaffirmed his support for keeping a hos-

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PASSENGER RAIL, BALA FALLS AND MUSKOKA'S MEDICAL FUTURE

LOCAL IMPACT: FORD IS A POWERFUL FIGURE FOR MANY OF THE REGION'S BIGGEST ISSUES

pital in both Huntsville and Bracebridge.

"They wanted to do some wild stuff, well that's not going to happen. We're going to make sure that we keep and invest in the hospital here in Huntsville and Bracebridge. That's what people want, and that's what we're going to do," said Ford.

THE BROKEN BALA FALLS PROMISE

Premier Ford was once again required to acknowledge a broken campaign promise.

During the election campaign in February, Ford came to Bala and pledged to stop the development of the Bala Falls electric development - he later said that wouldn't be possible, as it would cost taxpayers a significant amount of money.

"We said we'd get rid of it, but we just couldn't do it. It was too far along. As the campaign was going on everyone in Bala was calling, saying these guys are working triple overtime to get it done, and we would have been penalized well over \$20 million. But we are reinvesting \$5 million back into that area to make sure there isn't the flooding people expect," said Ford.

Rural schools and the hiring freeze

Ontario's education ministry recommended that school boards institute a hiring freeze ahead of the reveal of the provincial budget.

Ford said the boards would soon be getting an update.

"We're sitting down

with all the different school districts and minister of education. We need to freeze the hiring at this point, and once we roll out the budget then we'll be able to give fair direction to the school board," said Ford.

MPP Norm Miller said that March is the financial end of the year in government, which means there tends to be a lot of spending as different groups work to use all of their budget; he argued that this was a financially-prudent move.

NOT PASSING ON PASSENGER RAIL

The last passenger rail train came through Huntsville in 2012, and there are those who want it back.

As part of the 'Plan for the People of Northern Ontario' during his election campaign, Premier Ford pledged to bring full passenger rail service back.

Ford said he had not forgotten about that commitment.

"We make sure we keep our promises, so over the next little while we will be receiving the budget as it rolls out, and we're doing everything we can to make sure it's sustainable this time - unlike the last time - and we offer passenger rail to the people of the north," said Ford.

Miller argued that the government is currently dealing with a multi-billion dollar deficit. Miller had earlier stated that he does not expect passenger rail to be a significant part of this year's budget.

PREMIER PROTEST

Despite the short notice of Premier Ford's visit, there were a little over two dozen people who took part in a protest outside the Bracebridge legion where he had dinner.

When Miller and Ford arrived at the venue, they were met with chants and waving signs; protesters



Roland Cilliers/Metroland

Premier Doug Ford and MPP Norm Miller stopped by Huntsville's Westside Fish and Chips on March 1 during a whirlwind tour of Muskoka.

held signs about a number of causes, including calling for a change to the minimum wage and opposing cuts to education.

Diana McConnell, with the Parry Sound-Muskoka Decent Work Network, said that they were there hoping to get some time with the premier.

"They're always talking to the business community, but they're not necessarily talking to the workers in this community and moms of kids who are going to be greatly impacted by the cuts to autism," said McConnell of the provincial government.

"They're always touting that they're talking to the business community, but what about everybody else? There's more than just a business community here in Parry Sound-Muskoka."

"I was really hoping we would get some face time with Doug Ford, and if not Doug Ford than Norm Miller. That didn't happen."

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STORY BEHIND THE STORY

About a week ago we had heard Premier Doug Ford would be stopping in the region. The newsroom came together in advance to come up with questions that would best take advantage of this opportunity. We then followed him around to various events during the day to get his take on local issues.