

DoKURA NEWS

Winter 2020

Welcome to the Winter 2020 newsletter for DoKURA (The District of Kenora Unincorporated Areas Ratepayers Association).

Over the past few months the association's directors have been busy tracking several issues that impact the non-municipal areas of the region.

HYDRO BILLS ON THE RISE

Customers of Hydro One, the sole electricity provider in the Kenora District unincorporated areas, will have noticed changes in their bills this winter, and in many cases an increase in the dollars owed.

In November the provincial government changed the way it provides financial support on residential and small business bills. Announcements about the change stated it would have only a minimal impact on bill totals, however, in this region and elsewhere across Hydro One's rural service territory, the increase in winter bills for those using more than 1,000 kwh a month was more in the 15% to 20% range for many of those 800,000 customers.

In looking into the issue it became apparent the support measure change – moving government subsidies from within the cost of electricity itself and the sales tax rebate from before to after the tax calculation on the bill – had significantly increased delivery line costs, and to a lesser degree, the amount of federal tax (GST) paid.

Whether unintended or not, it resulted in increases of \$25 to \$75 in monthly Hydro One bills over 2019. Another change for area Hydro One customers, cancellation of the Seasonal Class rate and inclusion of seasonal customers in regular rural rate groups, is still pending. The Ontario Energy Board invited public submissions on the change in the fall, and while it had suggested a ruling to begin the transition would be made for 2020, as of early February no action had been taken.

The major impact of the change, under discussion since 2015, would be for low-volume seasonal customers being moved to the R2 (Low Density class). Low volume customers are those using less than 6,000 kwh of power on an annual basis, with most of that consumption in the summer months.

For seasonal customers using little or no electricity in the winter months who currently pay roughly \$40 a month during those periods, it would mean a phased-in increase in monthly delivery charges to the R2 (Low-Density) unsubsidized rate, an estimated \$120 a month. Estimates are some 20,000 of Hydro One's current 154,000 seasonal customers would experience increases

of that amount, with others, along with year-round customers having bills lowered by about \$10 a month. Your association will continue to monitor both these electricity issues and report back to members when changes are announced.

MEETING WITH MPP

Since the June 2018 provincial election DoKURA has been attempting to arrange meetings with our two regional Members of Provincial Parliament — Greg Rickford, Kenora-Rainy River, who is also Minister of Energy, Northern Development and Mines; and Sol Mamakwa, Kiiwetinoong.

Early this year we finally made it to the top of Greg Rickford's meeting request list and five directors met with him January 6 at his Kenora office.

The impact of the revised Ontario Electricity Rebate was the first of five topics discussed.

Text of the submissions made and discussed are available at DoKURA's website www.dokura.com, under the Information heading.

Minister Rickford noted the OER impact on Hydro One customers had been noted in other utility areas depending on their Delivery Charges and volumes of electricity used and would be addressed by the province, likely this spring or summer.

He said government members, up to and including Premier Doug Ford, had received numerous concerns about the change and bill increases since November. He explained the substantial bill increases were an unintended consequence of moving the province's tax funded electricity subsidy costs — now some \$5.575 billion annually — into the open, so customers could see on their bills what the actual electricity production costs were, and the level of government financial support needed to keep bills affordable.

2/

Other topics raised with Minister Rickford were the planned closure of the Turtle Portage boat transfer facility, financial support for road associations, administrative and financial support for Local Services Boards and future tax rate reductions for the Provincial Land Tax to offset assessment increases after 2021.

On the Turtle Portage issue, Minister Rickford suggested having a private or public group take over the facility was the best approach. He said if such a group steps forward and presents a viable business plan, he would assist them in obtaining government support to cover refurbishment costs — currently estimated at \$200,000 — as part of the takeover.

He also offered to work with Local Services Boards on the issues of administrative support and 911 service, two key concerns discussed.

He suggested the best approach on the question of the fixed PLT rate was a presentation to the Ministry of Finance pre-budget consultations and offered the services of his local office staff to help arrange that. More funding for road associations remains an unresolved issue. While officially recognized Local Roads Boards receive considerable government support, only a small number of the over 40 road associations in the district qualify for the limited government funding program available to them.

DoKURA has long advocated such associations should have funding criteria eased so more of them qualify for support, and they should be included in federal government gas tax allocations distributed by the government to Local Roads Boards.

KDSB LOCAL LEVY

Provincial support for the various regional services provided through the Kenora District Service Board continues to increase. The board, on which four elected representatives from non-municipal areas sit as directors along with nine municipal appointees, operates the regional land ambulance service, and operates directly or co-funds social housing throughout the district as well as directing provincial funding for child care and social support programs.

For a number of years the board has made presentations to the government pointing out the level of support the Kenora District receives does not reflect higher costs due to distance and low population density compared to other Northern Districts and southern Ontario service providers.

As result, provincial cost-sharing has increased. In its 2020 budget the KDSB outlined some \$62.4 million in spending, up \$3.5 million or 6.2% from 2019. However due to increased provincial funding, the cost to area property owners through their municipalities and the Provincial Land Tax for non-municipal areas, is a local levy of \$18.3 million, an increase of just \$51,800 over 2019, or 0.28%.

Land ambulance and social housing are the cost areas with the greatest level of local financial support, and the non-municipal areas continue to provide around 45%, or \$10.25 million of local funding which is based on its share of total property assessment in the district. The City of Kenora, at \$3.5 million or just under 24%, is the next biggest funder.

BUDGET PRESENTATION

On February 3, DoKURA made a presentation to the province's pre-budget consultation hearings in Kenora attended by Finance Minister Rod Phillips and Minister Rickford.

Text of the three-minute Oral Presentation made by Director Bob Stewart and the lengthier written presentation submitted to the budget committee are posted on the DoKURA website.

The 'ask' in the presentation was for the province to continue its practice of reducing the Provincial Education Tax rate in line with average assessment increases and to apply the same practice to the Provincial Land Tax after the new fixed rates are fully implemented in 2021.

KDMA MEETING

Director Barry Baltessen attended the annual Kenora District Municipal Association meeting on January 31 in Sioux Lookout as an observer.

Major presentations and concerns discussed among municipal delegates included increasing public health costs as the province changes its cost sharing for public health units from a 75-25 split with municipalities to a 70-30 split, along with reduced funding for some public health programs. Estimates are this will add some \$1.1 million to local public health levy costs for the nine district municipalities by 2021.

Henry Wall, chief administrative officer of the Kenora District Service Board outlined the KDSB's budget and highlighted increases in social housing and child care spaces and the need to continue to address short falls in these areas.

3/

He urged the municipalities, First Nations and unincorporated areas to speak as one to resolve social issues across the region.

Kevin Queen, executive director of Pinecrest Home for the Aged, and Sioux Narrows Nestor Falls mayor Norbert Dufresne outlined improvements made to the district home. They highlighted the challenges district home for the aged facilities in Kenora, Dryden and Red Lake face in hiring sufficient Personal Support Workers due to a shortage of qualified workers and available housing for newly hired workers in some areas.

They also urged KDMA members to continue to lobby the province to resume funding municipally-owned long term care facilities on behalf of unincorporated areas. This funding, some \$1 million annually in the Kenora District in the past, was discontinued in 2010 under the previous government. District municipalities currently contribute \$3.3 million annually towards operating costs for the three facilities and an additional \$895,000 this year for capital expenditures.

DoKURA has written a letter of support in the past encouraging the province to resume the contribution on behalf of unincorporated areas which had been made from Provincial Land Tax collections.

Municipal councils were also encouraged to educate themselves on the federal Nuclear Waste Management Organization and its site selection process. After a decade of study and public consultation, the federal agency as narrowed the choice of where to store

Canada's nuclear power plant waste to two locations – South Bruce in southern Ontario and Ignace in northwestern Ontario. A final site selection is expected by 2023 with construction to begin in 2030.

PUBLIC INPUT SOUGHT

Planning has now begun for the new All Nations Hospital in Kenora to replace the Lake of the Woods District Hospital. Public consultations are a key aspect of the two year planning phase and the hospital has created a website to keep the community and region informed on progress.

In addition to in-person public sessions, an online survey is available so people can provide their input on what services and facilities they would like included in the new hospital.

The website can be accessed at <https://anh.lwdh.on.ca>
The survey link is on the front page.

Directors Barry Baltessen, who is member of the Pellatt United Fire Fighters, along with Directors Ed Murray and Bob Stewart attended a January 23 Public Health and Emergency Medical Services consultation session in Kenora. Baltessen highlighted the issue of volunteer firefighters not being covered by their fire service WSIB benefits when answering medical calls due to confusion between the Ministry of Health which administers First Responder units operated by fire departments and the Ministry of the Solicitor General which controls the Office of the Fire Marshal and asked the province to resolve this issue.

DIRECTORS AT WORK

Board of directors members continue to work with various groups/organizations in the area providing input on the concerns of the unincorporated areas.

DoKURA continues to look for people – year-round or seasonal residents - from the unincorporated areas interested in serving on, or working with the board.

The DoKURA board makeup allows for Directors At Large in addition to the four Kenora District Services Board members elected for each of its four wards or areas, Directors At Large are elected at Annual General Meetings and serve two-year terms.

If you are interested in serving or working with the DoKURA board please contact us at dokuraorg@hotmail.com

The 2020 board of Directors and Officers are:

Jack McKenzie - President

Gord Dingman - Vice-President

Irene Kember - Treasurer

Bob Stewart - Secretary

Directors

Ed Murray - KDSB - Oxdrift

Laurie Hoffman - Director at Large - Oxdrift

Gord Dingman - Director at Large - Oxdrift

Barry Baltessen - KDSB - Lake of the Woods North
Jack McKenzie - Director at Large - LotW South
Bob Stewart - KDSB - Lake of the Woods South
Irene Kember - Director at Large - LotW South
Mark Sobchuk - KDSB - Lac Suel
Bill Deschamps - Director at Large - Lac Suel

KEEPING YOU INFORMED

Keeping people in unincorporated areas informed of the issues that impact them is a challenge. If you are receiving this newsletter on behalf of a group or organization, please assist us by distributing it to your members, or have them contact us to be added to our email distribution list.

<http://www.dokura.com> / dokuraorg@hotmail.com