

NEWS RELEASE Communiqué

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MPP John Vanthof - 2017 Year End Report

December 20, 2017

As 2017 draws to a close, it is a good time to reflect on notable events that have happened here in the riding of Timiskaming-Cochrane, and throughout the Province over the past 12 months.

Sadly, the year started as it will end, with many Northerners especially worried about the condition and safety of our provincial road system due to ongoing concerns about winter road maintenance. Consistent and reliable winter road maintenance for all classifications of highways in the North has been a significant and ongoing concern since I was first elected in 2011; despite some changes made by Government, it remains a #1 priority. Because highway management was privatized as a cost-saving measure, the structure of the maintenance contracts allows for road management decisions to be made by private companies, instead of Ministry of Transportation (MTO) staff. Although the MTO completes inspections and responds to complaints, their involvement begins after the issue of concern is identified. Typically, the MTO manages issues of concern by imposing fines or levies on the private company when standards are not met; however, this delayed reaction does not improve road safety during critical weather patterns. We will continue to push for improvement, and ultimately, a return to a system where the MTO actively manages our provincial roads. Safe road conditions should be the priority, not the profit on the bottom line.

The loss of passenger rail service continues to be an issue throughout the Northeast. Since the Liberal government cancelled the Northlander in 2012, Northerners have felt cut off from the rest of the province. Though the Wynne Government boasts about spending on transit in Ontario, they do not seem to have a problem leaving Northerners stranded.

Another issue of great concern to the people of the area is high electricity costs. Hydro bills have reached a point where people are having to make quality of life choices about household bills, especially here in our cold climate. In June, the NDP announced a hydro plan that would drop hydro rates by 30% in rural Ontario, by initiating a strategy that would regain control of Hydro One, make time-of-use metering optional and eliminate extra rural delivery charges. The Wynne Government responded with its own plan, which basically reduces hydro rates for the short term; however, the cost will be reassigned to our hydro bills once the election is over in June 2018. The current Government's hydro plan is a temporary relief measure that will cost consumers far more in the long run. As the 2017 year begins to wind down, the NDP continues to lead the fight against the pay-before-use hydro metering program being proposed by Hydro One.

Health care continues as a major issue in the province, with a broad range of concerns at the forefront. In rapidly growing areas, hospital overcrowding is at crisis levels; in the rural areas, just keeping the hospital doors open has become increasingly difficult. Hospital budgets have been stretched to the limit and shortfalls from financial neglect are becoming evident. Here in the Northeast, there is an inability to provide a sustainable program to allow access to non-emergency patient transfers. While the cost of non-emergency transfers is absorbed in the overall budgets of large health centers, small rural hospitals cannot offset the need for service in their smaller budgets. As a result, this shortfall causes excruciating delays for the patients, especially the elderly. Moving in to 2018, the NDP will continue to advocate for increased long term care funding in an effort to alleviate the situation. Additionally, the lack of mental health services in the North has come to the breaking point, with insufficient mental health professionals and dedicated health care beds to meet the growing need for timely care in our communities. As the year comes to a close, far too many families are dealing with the tragic consequences of this healthcare service shortfall.

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One local issue that is truly emblematic of the challenges that we face in the North was the unannounced closure of the LCBO outlet in Larder Lake, a town whose economy is very dependent on tourism. In other parts of Ontario, this type of closure of a government service would be unacceptable, especially since the next closest LCBO outlet is 30 kilometers away in Kirkland Lake. The residents and seasonal visitors have fought valiantly to re-instate the outlet store through rallies, social media and a letter-writing campaign. The community even produced a video, which was viewed by thousands online. Though the fight is not over yet, the lack of commitment by this Government to services in the North is staggering.

Many local residents, and students were severely impacted by a lengthy strike at Ontario's community colleges. Throughout the strike, the NDP urged the Premier to use her power to advance negotiations between the parties. Unfortunately, Premier Wynne chose to wait until the semester was in true peril for many students; rather than taking proactive steps to help in the negotiation process, she introduced back-to-work legislation. We continue to advocate for students who have been impacted.

While there are many issues that we have dealt with over the past year, I have only highlighted a few of the high-profile and ongoing concerns broadly affecting our region. On the legislative side, I introduced a motion to create a Northern Committee that would be made up of all MPPs from the North. The Northern Committee's mandate would be to review and amend any legislation to ensure that it be considered in relation to the realities of Northern Ontario life. Though the motion passed, the current Government is once again ignoring the North by not moving forward with implementation of the motion.

Once again, it has been an incredible honour to represent the residents of Timiskaming-Cochrane at Queens Park in 2017. My staff and I would like to wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year- we look forward to working for you in 2018 and hopefully, beyond.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Vanthof', written in a cursive style.

John Vanthof, MPP Timiskaming-Cochrane