

Toronto mayor, Ontario premier spar over public health cuts ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

TORONTO — Tensions between Ontario's premier and Toronto's mayor escalated Monday as the two sparred over the province's recent cuts to public health services and child care funding.

Mayor John Tory questioned why the government was trying to reduce spending in those areas while also contemplating breaking a contract with big brewers — and taking on stiff financial penalties — to expand where beer and wine could be sold in the province.

In a speech challenging the government's priorities, Tory described the cuts as damaging and said they will affect services like children's breakfast programs, vaccination programs, and water quality testing.

Premier Doug Ford responded with a statement telling Tory — a former Ontario Progressive Conservative leader — that he should not wade into provincial issues he is "neither involved in or understands."

Ontario recently notified municipal public health units that it will reduce its cost-sharing levels from 100 percent or 75 percent in some cases, to 60 to 70 percent for some municipalities, and 50-50 for Toronto.

The city also said last week that provincial child care cuts could mean a loss of more than 6,000 childcare spots in Toronto.

That comes as the government negotiates with brewers who own the Beer Store and have a 10-year contract with the province that limits the number of places where beer and wine can be sold. The government has not said how much it could cost to break the contract and expand booze sales to more locations.

Tory took issue with the province's pursuit of increased alcohol sales in a speech to the Scarborough Business Association in Toronto's east end, where Ford has been popular with voters.

"Cutting public health programs and daycare programs to find the extra money to pay the Beer Store to change their contract?" Tory said. "What does that say about priorities — cutting public health and child care but funding alcohol in corner stores?"

The mayor appealed to the audience to help him fight the province's cuts and said the city has always been willing to find budget efficiencies but not at the expense of vital programs. Tory said he will be meeting with government legislators in the coming days to press them to change course.

"I will be reminding government MPPs that they did not seek or receive a mandate to cut public health or child care," he said.

Meanwhile Ford said the province is attempting to address a deficit left behind by the previous Liberal government, which currently stands at \$11.7 billion.

"Instead of irresponsibly wading into provincial issues he is neither involved in or understands, perhaps Mayor Tory should find time to sit down with his Auditor General and find some value for taxpayer's dollars," Ford said in a statement.

The premier also said the government will continue to meet its financial commitments to public health and asked the city to do the same.

"Instead of taking shots in the media, our government has invited the City of Toronto to participate in technical working groups as we advance our health modernization plan," Ford said.

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