

Ontario opens spending study with cities [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty launched a major review of municipal services yesterday, starting a process that could change how much the average taxpayer contributes to everything from ambulances to social housing.

The review, which will be done jointly by the province and its municipalities, will likely concentrate on how much cash each level of government puts into housing, health and social services. Those areas have traditionally been on the provincial tab, but Ontario's municipalities have shouldered some of the load -- unfairly, they say -- over the past few years.

Now municipalities hope the province will relieve them of that load, one they say costs them \$3 billion annually and forces them to use property taxes to pay a share of provincial services such as ambulances, child care and social housing. The review won't look at giving municipalities more taxing powers, but municipal representatives say they just want the province to relieve some of the stress on property taxes.

"We're at a breaking point," said Roger Anderson, president of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario.

It was at the association's conference at the Congress Centre that Mr. McGuinty announced the review, saying later to reporters it was "time to get into the crow's nest, so to speak, and look out 20 to 25 years." Mr. McGuinty would not commit to Ontario fully paying for the areas under review, which it stopped doing under former premier Mike Harris's Conservative government.

If Ontario does pay the total bill, the amount the average taxpayer puts into things such as social housing would be based on provincial income taxes, not property taxes. That means the amount itself could change -- potentially dropping for those with lower incomes -- while the City of Ottawa would see a significant amount of money freed up.

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- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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