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VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Ontario investing $100 million to help homeowners save energy

By Chris Ballard, MPP
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With a record warm winter and both natural gas and gasoline prices in decline, energy conservation is not necessarily high on homeowners' radar.

But climate change is a threat, not only to our economy and way of life, but to our very survival.

The province is putting its new Climate Change Strategy into action by investing $100 million from the Ontario Green Investment Fund to take advantage of the economic and job opportunities in clean technologies, and to help homeowners reduce their energy bills and cut greenhouse gas emissions (GHG).

The program should help about 37,000 Ontario homeowners conduct audits to identify energy-saving opportunities, and then complete retrofits, such as replacing furnaces, water heaters and upgrading insulation. (Full program details will be available in the coming months.) If you're a homeowner, I hope you consider taking advantage of this program.

Ontario's Green Investment Fund is a $325-million down payment on the province's cap and trade program. It aims to strengthen the economy, create jobs and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In 2014, Enbridge Gas Distribution and Union Gas, partners in this new initiative, undertook residential energy efficiency programs resulting in a 500,000 tonne reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. This new $100 million investment is expected to save an equivalent of 1.6 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions.

Fighting climate change while supporting economic growth, efficiency and productivity is part of the government's plan to build Ontario up and deliver on our number-one priority ? growing the economy and creating jobs.

We're told by energy conservation experts that a homeowner in Toronto whose house was built prior to 1990, and we assume the same for Aurora given similar housing, climate and natural gas prices, could see annual natural gas savings on average of about $400 by investing in such things as new high-efficiency heating systems, attic insulation and air sealing.

But is dedicating almost one-third of all Green Investment Fund money to residential audit and retrofit programs really the best way to use funds for reducing GHG emissions?

Direct emissions from Ontario's residential buildings in 2013 was estimated to be 12 per cent of Ontario's total GHG emissions. That means the direct emissions from Ontario's residential buildings was 20.8 megatonnes. (Ontario's total greenhouse gas emissions for 2013 was 171 megatonnes.)

In fact, Ontario's residential sector accounts for 29 per cent of the province's energy related GHG emissions in 2014 (not including transportation fuels), mostly from the use of heating fuels like natural gas.

Clearly, improving the energy efficiency of our homes not only helps homeowners' pocket books, it also is good for the environment.

Update on Bill 42

Bill 42, my private members bill, seeks to have the Chair of York Region directly elected by voters. Since the Region's founding in 1970, the Chair of the Region has been handpicked in private by Regional Councillors and mayors. I've always believed this is counter to fundamental democracy, especially given the Region taxes account for more than 30 per cent of your municipal tax bill and the Chair wields considerable power.

It makes sense to me that the public be able to ask Regional Chair candidates what their vision is for the region and how they hope to achieve it. It would hold politicians more accountable, in my view.

I'm pleased to report Bill 42 is moving ahead and will have public hearings at Queen's Park in February. Members of the public who sign up can talk directly to MPPs of all political stripes at a committee meeting. If you want to appear or send a letter, please contact my office to find out how.

The current Chair selection process might have been fine in 1970 when the Region was founded and had just 44,000 residents, but it's not okay today when more than 1.1 million people call the area home.

I am pleased that both Aurora and Newmarket Town Councils, as well as a number of other York Region municipal councils, have passed resolutions supporting my bill. I would be delighted to see Regional Council craft new legislation that reflects the wishes of the public ? provided it ensures the direct election of the Chair and is in place for the next municipal election, scheduled for 2018.

I invite you to contact me on any issue. Please call my community office at 905-750-0019, or visit my website at www.ChrisBallardMPP.ca. My email is: cballard.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org. I look forward to hearing from you.