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VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: It?s beginning to look a lot like Christmas?

By Chris Ballard, MPP
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Santa arrived recently in Aurora. And, as usual, he arrived under the stars.
What a parade. Marching bands, plenty of floats, sparkling lights and a politician or two waving. Aurora's parade attracts folks from outside our boundaries, drawn to this unique annual event.
Where most towns have their parade during the day, Aurora's is spectacular in its evening presentation. I especially like how my neighbours hold off turning on their outside Christmas lights until the little ones are walking home from the parade. Magical.
I recall hearing about the origins of the parade. Seems that with rapid growth and a lot of newcomers, townsfolk had grown distant. In an attempt to bring people together, volunteers organized a parade, with streets competing against streets for best float and other prizes.
Today, the parade is organized by Town staff, but it truly is volunteers that make the difference! Hundreds of kids, dozens of musicians, many adults ? it can't be easy to corral them all. Thank you to everyone who organized and participated.
The parade has grown over the years ? in fact I'm astounded there is anyone left to watch, given the number of folks taking part. I'm in a holiday mood already!

Fairer workplaces

As the holiday season quickly approaches I am reminded that it truly is the most wonderful time of the year in the most wonderful province.
Last week Ontario passed Bill 148, the Fair Workplaces, Better Jobs Act, 2017. This legislation will bring more fairness to Ontario workplaces; it will create more security and opportunity for vulnerable workers and their families. This act also includes the increase of the minimum wage, ensure more fairness for part-time and contract workers, expand personal emergency leave and step up enforcement of employment laws.
Minimum wage will increase to $14 per hour on January 1, 2018, and then to $15 on January 1, 2019, followed by annual increases at the rate of inflation. Further provisions include equal pay for part-time, temporary, casual and seasonal employees doing the same job as full-time employees; and equal pay for temporary help agency employees doing the same job as employees at the agencies' client companies.
The new legislation provides for up to 17 weeks off without the fear of a worker losing their job when they or their child has experienced, or is threatened with, domestic or sexual violence. This includes paid leave for the first five days. The government is also expanding family leaves and adding measures to ensure that employees are not misclassified as independent contractors, ensuring they get the benefits and protections they deserve.

Ontario Launches New Tool to Check if Prescriptions are Covered with OHIP+

January will also bring the introduction of the government's new OHIP+ plan, when 4,400 drugs become free for everyone in Ontario under the age of 25.
The province is making it easier to find out what medications will be covered with a new online search tool.
The new, universal prescription medication coverage will include asthma inhalers, drugs to treat depression, anxiety, epilepsy, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, antibiotics, EPIPENs, diabetes test strips, oral contraceptives, medications to treat some childhood cancers and other rare conditions, and thousands of others.
The online search tool to learn what medications are covered can be found at: www.ontario.ca/page/check-medication-coverage.I hope this will be the first step toward pharmacare coverage for everyone across Canada.
Ontario Boosting Rental Supply for Individuals and Families
We have heard concerns from residents all across the province about the lack of affordable rental options. People have to spend far too much on rent ? if they are ?lucky? enough to find a place to rent.
The government will make it easier for individuals and families to find a home by rebating development charges on new, purpose-built rental housing. This will encourage more construction and bring more fairness to the rental market.

Last week Peter Milczyn, Minister of Housing and the Minister Responsible for the Poverty Reduction Strategy, announced the province will rebate up to $125 million in development charges over five years for priority, purpose-built rental developments in municipalities with low vacancy rates or high tenant populations, and where affordable rentals are hard to find.
In the coming days, the province will be inviting municipalities to participate in the program.

Promoting Local Food
and Healthy Eating in Local Schools

Eating healthy and promoting a healthier lifestyle is an important lesson for us to teach our children.
The province, along with the support of Ontario farmers, is helping students learn more about local food, agriculture and the importance of healthy eating, while also raising funds to support their schools.
Over the past year, almost 500 schools across the province have participated in a unique fundraising program. Ontario students have helped raise over $1 million dollars to support their schools by selling locally grown produce including carrots, onions, potatoes, sweet potatoes and apples.
Look for schools in our area that are taking part.

As always, 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.