

## Hydro sale must be stopped: MPP



Duane Wingett, owner of the Red Steer Butcher Shop in L'Amable, explains to MPP Todd Smith the steps he's taken to reduce power consumption, while his hydro bills keep increasing. TONY PEARSON Special to This Week

By Tony Pearson

Duane Wingett has been doing his best to conserve energy. The owner of the Red Steer Butcher Shop just south of L'Amable now turns the air-conditioning off at night. He's unplugged a large cooler, and doesn't have an energy-drawing computer or cellphone charger in the shop. He's using compressors to maintain appropriate temperatures.

And yet, his hydro bill keeps going up ? and up ? and up. From January through August of this year, he's paid about \$3,500 more than during the same period last year, despite using less energy. Last August, he paid \$1,451; this August, he had to pay \$1,730, a nearly 20 per cent increase. Over the past five years, he calculates that he's seen over a 75 per cent increase in his energy costs. Prince Edward-Hastings MPP Todd Smith dropped by Wingett's store on Monday with the suggestion that the situation is about to get even worse, as the Ontario government goes ahead with plans to sell 60 per cent of Hydro One to private investors. In the legislature, Smith has called the proposed sell-off "the worst deal in provincial history," and compared it to "killing the goose which regularly produces golden eggs." At the Red Steer, Smith noted that Hydro One is already divesting itself of assets in urban areas; it just sold Brampton Hydro to three private companies. The end result, he believes, will be yet higher prices in small towns and rural areas.

Smith is the hydro critic for the opposition Progressive Conservatives, who now believe that the sell-off has to be stopped (15 per cent of Hydro One was sold last week; Premier Kathleen Wynne plans to put another 45 per cent of the public enterprise on the market). He acknowledges the irony in this, since Conservative premier Mike Harris tried to sell Hydro One in the early 2000s, before being stopped by the courts, public service unions, and public opinion.

"Hydro One pours about \$700 million a year into the provincial treasury," Smith noted. "With the sale expected to produce only \$1.4 billion for its stated objective of increasing infrastructure funding, anyone can do the math and see that's only two years' worth of what the company now makes for the province." He believes that a more efficiently run Hydro corporation could earn Ontario even more revenue, and stop the constant rate increases.

The Conservatives aren't alone in their opposition. The NDP also opposes the sale, as do the unions involved ? and already well more than a third of Ontario municipalities have passed resolutions objecting to the sale. Even the solidly Liberal Toronto Star has come out editorially against the deal, calling it unnecessary in light of new federal promises to invest more money in infrastructure projects.

Smith pointed out that the province's own financial accountability officer, Stephen LeClair, says that the sell-off is short-sighted. And most tellingly, opinion polls report that 70 per cent to 80 per cent of the Ontario public wants the sale stopped.

Smith noted that even without the sale, businesses in Eastern Ontario have been hit hard by rising hydro bills. "I just visited the Ivanhoe cheese factory, where they're now paying \$30,000 more for power. A Belleville manufacturing plant I visited has been hit

even harder, with charges more than doubling to almost \$400,000 a month. It's affecting Ontario's competitive position," he continued. "Someone looking to set up a business can pay far less for energy if they set up shop in Quebec."

Duane Wingett identifies another economic consequence of high hydro rates: "We can't hire any full-time employees. As it is, the family has to work seven days a week. This makes the fact of rising beef prices even worse for the consumer."

Smith noted that small businesses employ most workers in Ontario, and questions why, instead of giving away the energy resource, the province doesn't focus on getting costs down. "There's no purpose to make it harder for small business owners like Duane, just for a short-term cash grab."

Smith, as hydro critic, is now touring various parts of the province trying to get people to speak up and stop the sale. On Monday evening, he held a public meeting in Bancroft; more will follow.