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POLITICS: Municipal Affairs Minister Al Leach called on carpet by local leaders

Minister says local councils to blame for tax hikes, not province

BY LISA QUEEN STAFF WRITER

Municipal Affairs Minister Al Leach walked into a lions' den Tuesday — a conference of 1,200 councillors and mayors who blame him for everything from local property tax hikes to saddling Greater Toronto residents with a new level of government.

Leach was attacked by municipal leaders at the annual Association of Municipalities of Ontario conference

at the Royal York in Toronto.

Under the gun from thousands of irate property owners facing tax increases, municipal leaders are condemning the province for the hikes.

They blame the increases on the downloading of services to municipalities and on provincial reassessment, which assigned a value to each property based on a standard formula.

Despite provincial assurances downloading wouldn't cost local tax

payers a cent, a councillor from the region of Haldimand-Norfolk drew a round of applause when he accused Leach of forsaking municipalities that hadn't sent a Tory MPP to Queen's Park.

"Does it depend on your member's influence how much money you get to become revenue neutral?" he asked, adding his taxpayers face a 17.5 per cent tax increase.

He pointed out Premier Mike Harris stood before last year's convention and made a pinky swear that downloading would be an even swap.

The premier's pinky swear has not been upheld.

But Leach said the province will reimburse municipalities that found themselves out of pocket because of downloading at the end of the year.

He challenged municipalities that came out even or ahead on downloading — including York Region — to identify themselves.

Nobody did. "I can tell you, from a provincial standpoint, the money in and the money out is revenue neutral," Leach said.

As for blaming reassessment for tax increases, he insisted critics should be pointing their fingers at their local councils.

Tax increases come as a result of the tax rates councils set in the last month, not because of reassessment, Leach said.

Besides, some property owners — including himself — deserve to pay higher taxes, because they haven't been paying their fair share for years.

"My taxes in Toronto went up 60 per cent and they damn well should have. We have been under-assessed for many years."

Leach admitted the province has asked a lot of municipalities over the last year.

"It's been quite a year and nobody said it was going to be easy. And it sure as hell hasn't been. It's been a tough year, but municipalities have rose to the challenge," he said.

"We've all worked hard to bring in reform that is long overdue and I think we can all agree it was long overdue. 1999 will be a year of much more certainty."



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