

OPINION



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Gift-card offer seems like after-thought for York

ISSUE: Liberal ice-storm gift-card plan falls short for York Region ice storm victims.

While it was somewhat heart-warming to see the private and public sectors work together to provide help to those hit hardest by the Dec. 22 ice storm, something leaves a bad taste in your mouth.

Following days without power and vague updates on the status of the restoration efforts from Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne and other officials, it seemed help was at hand for the approximately 300,000 Toronto residents left shivering in the dark from the wintery blast that swept through the GTA the weekend before Christmas.

The much-needed assistance came in the form of gift cards, \$842,000 worth, purchased through a combination of corporate largesse and government funds.

When Dec. 31 arrived and gift cards became available, chaos reigned at the 15 Ontario Works offices designated as pick-up sites.

A day that began as a photo-op with Ms Wynne handing out food hampers to storm-addled residents descended into a public relations disaster as the gift card giveaway led to long lines, lost tempers and a lot of people going home empty-handed. Ms Wynne later conceded there simply aren't \$842,000 worth of grocery gift cards up for grabs.

Some 8,500 families were eventually given aid but questions arose about whether those outside of Toronto would receive assistance.

That question was answered earlier this week as the government announced plans to distribute grocery gift cards to other GTA municipalities impacted by the storm. About \$450,000 worth of gift cards

were to be distributed starting Tuesday but York Region was supplied with fewer than 400 cards that ran out shortly after 1 p.m. Peel and Durham regions received around 2,700 and 1,900 gift cards to distribute, respectively.

In response to criticisms about communications, Kelly Baker, a spokesperson in Ms Wynne's office noted the premier contacted more than a dozen GTA mayors including Vaughan Mayor Maurizio Bevilacqua, Markham Mayor Frank Scarpitti and York Region chairperson Bill Fisch, while also giving daily updates on the restoration efforts.

As for the gift cards, Ms Baker said the options boiled down to doing something or doing nothing, with the premier deciding that trying to help was the preferable option. At the same time, she accused the opposition parties of offering no constructive suggestions.

She claims the intention was always to expand the gift card program outside of Toronto, but, if that's indeed the case, why wasn't it mentioned prior to Monday, two weeks after the storm? It seems far more likely that, despite the deep freeze, the government was feeling the heat for playing what some have termed "postal code-politics".

Certainly, the relatively small number of gift cards allotted for York Region makes us appear to be an afterthought.

In an opinion piece that ran in the Toronto Star on Monday, Ms Wynne acknowledged the province's response to the storm's aftermath wasn't perfect while pledging to conduct a review. Let's hope she follows through on that.

The idea of going through another crisis with a seemingly ad-libbed response leaves us, and likely many GTA residents with an empty feeling.

BOTTOM LINE: Premier used disaster as photo-op without planning on how to handle situation.

LETTER OF THE WEEK

Questions surround town council

After reading several articles in The Sun-Tribune recently, I think we need to sit back, take a deep breath and wonder about our local politics.

Mayor Wayne Emmerson's future occupation, according to an editorial, could be that of an unelected position with York Region — sounds like the Senate in Ottawa.

Perhaps his long service record in our community deserves an appointment to a higher level of government. However, when one starts to connect the dots, a bit of agitation sets in.

For Whitchurch-Stouffville's 2014 draft budget, Councillor Richard Bartley and Mr. Emmerson want a 3.1-per-cent tax hike reduced to something closer to 2 per cent. One can only speculate from where the reduction will come.

If, indeed, Mr. Emmerson is appointed as the next chairperson of York Region, he can pretty much say anything at this time.

In another article, Councillor Phil Bannon wants to discuss a salary review, which could mean more money for himself, other councillors and, of course, the mayor — a position for which he no doubt will run.

Mr. Bannon says he wants to remain "hands-off", then suggests a review committee be selected by town committees. Doesn't Mr. Bannon know all these people?

University makes sense here

Stouffville: a university town? It's time for a bolder vision of what our town can become.

Last month, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities published its criteria for post-secondary education expansion, including satellite campuses to accommodate unprecedented levels of enrolment growth.

The greatest enrolment pressure is in the GTA, yet the three publicly funded universities have limited capacity to absorb more students on existing campuses. The province is looking for places where population growth is strongest and where post-secondary access is limited. Milton is the most obvious contender; York Region is second.

East Gwillimbury has offered land at its GO Transit station and Newmarket, too, is in conversation with York University. Yet these communities already have GO train access to York, which makes their bid less desirable.

Markham-Stouffville has had the region's strongest population growth in terms of numbers (Markham) and percentage (Stouffville), and is furthest from York.

Markham — Ontario's high-tech capital — may seem the most obvious location. However, this year Stouffville will be linked across the region by public transit: a new YRT route along Stouffville Road to the Yonge Street transit corridor and a GO station at Gormley.

Why not establish an independent remuneration committee from people who have nothing to do with town business? Perhaps a pay-for-performance system within established budgets, like most corporations, would make more sense.

The 40-per-cent pay increase suggested two years ago was outrageous. The 18.65 per cent councillors received is also out of line, no matter what other municipalities are paying.

How many people do you know who received a pay increase of more than 9 per cent in any given year in the last five years?

During the seven years we have lived in the Ballantrae Golf and Country Club, we have supported the greater Stouffville area.

However, other than stoplights outside our community on Hwy. 48 and improvements to our fire station, where are our tax dollars going?

We clear our own roads/walkways in the winter and have our own irrigation and sewer system. Yet other taxpayers receive 100 per cent of the town's services.

Mayor Emmerson says "Council meetings are minor things in our jobs", then points out "the job of council has become very complex". Perhaps this new complexity requires greater skill sets from our councillors than in the past.

ART WOODRUFF
BALLANTRAE

Our existing GO and YRT services link us to Markham and Scarborough and Uxbridge. More people will have access to Stouffville than to any other York Region community.

Stouffville's employment lands are sitting empty. The province is looking for proposals that will create facilities larger than 70,000 square feet (the size of our Canadian Tire) for 1,000 students in the short-term. An obvious location would be on the east side of Hwy. 48 between Hoover Park Drive and Main Street.

A successful bid, however, would require the town to donate land and money. Stratford, for example, offered land and \$10 million to attract matching provincial, federal and private sector funding, resulting in a campus of the University of Waterloo. The annual direct and indirect economic benefit to Stratford is more than \$43 million.

Proposals to the province must be made by a university. The strategic economic development plans for Whitchurch-Stouffville have emphasized the opportunities of the "creative class" economy.

We have the location and infrastructure for a successful satellite campus bid. What is needed locally is a big vision, the political nerve to offer land and significant seed-money — and to start a conversation with a university president.

ARNOLD NEUFELDT-FAST
STOUFFVILLE