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Row erupts over P3 pact

Health-care activists take aim at Liberals

Say hospital reconstruction details 'deleted'

BY THERESA BOYLE, QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU

Health-care advocates say the provincial Liberals have broken a promise to release the entire contract for a controversial reconstruction of a hospital in Brampton. They say pertinent sections are being kept secret, and claim the Liberals have reneged on a vow to scrap public-private partnerships, or P3s.

"Many, many documents are deleted and omitted from those released," Natalie Mehra of the Ontario Health Coalition told a news conference yesterday. "What's absolutely clear in the documents that are released is that these are P3s, despite the minister of health's attempt to portray them differently."

At issue are plans pushed through by the former Conservative government for two P3 hospitals — one in Brampton and the other in Ottawa. Under a P3 scheme, the private sector pays to erect the building and runs some non-health-care services, and the province then pays to use the building.

The Liberals won last October's provincial election after campaigning on an anti-P3 platform. They said they opposed using public-private partnerships to finance hospital construction, and promised to cancel such projects as long as taxpayers weren't hit with major financial penalties.

The Liberal government subsequently altered the contracts, essentially changing them from leases to mortgages. The plan would see the province buy back the building over a fixed term.

While the Liberals argue the changes mean the hospitals in Brampton and Ottawa are now public entities, critics such as the health coalition maintain they are still P3s, albeit modified ones.

The Liberals had promised the contracts would be released before year's end. The Ottawa contract remains under wraps, while only portions of the Brampton deal were released last week. The coalition is looking specifically for the project's full cost, a schedule of payments to the private corporations, the borrowing rate, and profit projections.

But there were mixed messages offered yesterday on why pertinent sections of the contract had been omitted.

"Speak to the hospital," said Eva Lannon, spokesperson for Health Minister George Smitherman. She noted that the deal has not yet reached the stage of "financial close," and said once that happens, more details will be released.

Hospital spokesperson Stuart Oakley explained: "There is certain information that is not present because it is proprietary to THICC (the Health Infrastructure Corporation of Canada — the private consortium leading the development.)... You would have to get the information from THICC."

Said Graham Farley, vice-president of Carillion Canada, a THICC member: "Disclosure of the documents is up to the ministry and to the hospital. We have rights under the Freedom of Information (act) to include or not include certain commercially sensitive items."

Farley said borrowing costs and the value of the entire project are deemed commercially sensitive.

The health coalition is also taking issue with the way the documents are being released, saying members had to go through "six feet" of paper only to learn the information they really wanted wasn't there.

Viewing time, which must be booked by appointment with the hospital, is limited to two hours, Mehra said, and requires a signed waiver promising not to photograph or duplicate any document.

Asked why all the information can't be found on the Internet, Oakley said: "Actually there is a summary document that is on our website... Why not the whole thing? Because it would be massive and I don't think people would be able to download it with the highest Internet speed."