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TORONTO STAR

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NDP promises relief for cities

Finally, a party leader at Queen's Park is offering concrete solutions — including specific dollar amounts — to fix the damage done by years of provincial unfairness to Ontario's municipalities.

Full credit goes to New Democratic Party Leader Howard Hampton for giving cities more than sympathy and vague assurances of future relief. He has produced a fair and realistic plan to ease the downloading that is crippling municipal efforts to thrive. It is exactly the sort of assistance that Toronto, and other cities, need. Every property taxpayer in the province should welcome steps like these.

Hampton has effectively thrown down the gauntlet on the city agenda. It is now up to Premier Dalton McGuinty and Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory to rise to that challenge by matching, or exceeding, Hampton's plan. Failure to do so will be noticed.

Toronto city councillors, among others, are determined to make the reversal of Queen's Park's downloading a major issue in the provincial election slated for Oct. 10. They have good reason. Ontario is the only province in Canada where social programs are funded through municipal property taxes.

This year alone, about \$730 million will be diverted from Toronto's property tax earnings and pumped into provincially mandated programs. Municipalities, province-wide, are being slammed against a wall of downloaded costs in excess of \$3 billion.

All three party leaders — McGuinty, Tory and Hampton — admit this is unfair. All say there needs to be better balance in the fiscal relationship between the province and its municipalities.

But only Hampton has produced a concrete plan. If elected, he would assume the cost of key social programs burdening municipal ratepayers, honour cost-sharing agreements that have been flouted by Queen's Park, upload the cost of court security and provide more money for the yearly operation of transit systems.

When fully implemented, Hampton's plan would reduce the burden on all municipalities by a total of \$1.4 billion, with Toronto reaping almost \$400 million. About \$220 million would be available in time for next year's budget, taking a big bite out of Toronto's looming \$575 million shortfall. To balance its books the city would still need to approve two proposed new taxes earning an estimated \$356 million yearly.

Rather than producing their own detailed plan to address downloading, McGuinty and Tory have, so far, opted for delay. Municipal and provincial officials are currently conducting a high-level review of downloading with a final report due next spring — well after the provincial election. Tory has said he'll wait for the report before committing himself to solutions. McGuinty and Finance Minister Greg Sorbara have also indicated they would rather work through the review process than take action in the middle of these discussions.

That is not good enough. Before casting their vote, Ontarians should have a clear and specific idea of each leader's solution to downloading. This is too important to put off. Although the issue is admittedly complex and highly technical, some reforms are obvious and need not wait for the outcome of a review.

All party leaders, for example, should immediately promise to upload a provincial program providing assistance to the disabled. That, alone, costs municipalities about \$600 million yearly. Hampton, to his credit, is promising to shift this unfair load and put it where it belongs — with the province.

While Ontario's other party leaders remain noncommittal, Hampton has done the right thing by making his intentions clear. Some details may change, and that's understandable. Any plan announced now can be fine-tuned later, in response to the review on downloading finishing next spring. The fact that this review is underway is no excuse to leave Ontario voters in the dark on where the leaders stand.