

Mississauga council wants wage freeze for Ontario

'Isolated From The Pain'

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Mississauga council is expected to call on Premier Dalton McGuinty tomorrow to freeze provincial and municipal wages and benefits in Ontario for a year.

Unionized public employees with secure contract deals have largely avoided the fallout of the economic downturn, said Ward 7 Councilor Nando Iannicca, who wrote the resolution, which councillors have already approved in principle.

He called the wage freeze a "gesture" to show public employees are willing to share the financial burden.

"We've had the privilege of being isolated from the pain that the average taxpayer feels," he said, noting Mississauga councillors have already agreed to a one-year freeze on their own salaries, and a 10% reduction in their expense budgets.

"I've got constituents who don't know if they're going to pay their property taxes next month," Mr. Iannicca said. "Against that backdrop, isn't it fair to say when you have the privilege of being in the public service ... we're going to stand still for a year?"

Greg Dennis of Ontario's Ministry of Government Services swiftly rejected the idea of an across-the-board wage freeze, saying the government has already exercised "great restraint" while renegotiating union contracts over the past year.

The agreements now in place are fair and reasonable, Mr. Dennis said, and the province does not plan to go back on them.

"It's not the way this government operates to go in and tear up contracts that were signed in good faith," he said.

Union members currently embroiled in contract disputes, such as Toronto's striking municipal workers, should get behind the resolution, Mr. Iannicca said. The city wants Toronto's two civic unions to forgo a sick leave program that gives workers 18 bankable sick days each year -- a \$250-million unfunded liability to the city.

Rather than allowing governments to target only those unions whose contracts are up for renewal, the provincewide wage freeze would share the economic pain equally among all public employees, Mr. Iannicca said.

But Sid Ryan, Ontario president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, dismissed that argument, saying workers are not to blame for the recession and do not deserve to be punished.

"To say the modest wages that we earn are driving the city into bankruptcy, or the province for that matter, is ludicrous," Mr. Ryan said.

