

Business executives pay thousands for private dinners with Ontario Premier Doug Ford

JILL MAHONEY >

TORONTO

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 13, 2019

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

160 COMMENTS SHARE



07:20 Voice 1x



TOP STORIES

Bobby Orr defends Don Cherry, calls decision to fire commentator 'disgraceful'

NOVEMBER 15



TWITTER

Doug Ford had several private dinners with business executives who paid \$20,000 each at a charity auction for face time with the Ontario Premier.

Two of the companies that secured access to Mr. Ford – technology firm OnX Enterprise Solutions and retirement-home provider All Seniors Care Living Centres – were also lobbying to do business with the province. In addition, after dining with Mr. Ford, real estate developer Sam Mizrahi asked for a meeting to discuss Ontario Place, the mothballed theme park the government is planning to overhaul.

The “intimate private dinner” packages provided deep-pocketed individuals and companies an exclusive audience with the Premier. The dinners are not subject to political fundraising rules since the funds went to charity, but raise ethical concerns because they are akin to trading cash for access, observers say.

The Globe and Mail requested government records relating to dinner packages with Mr. Ford that were auctioned off at the Toronto Police Chief’s fundraiser last year under the province’s Freedom of Information law.

A spokeswoman for the Premier said Mr. Ford is proud to support Victim Services Toronto, which helps crime victims and received money raised at the gala, but did not answer questions about whether he was lobbied at the private dinners.

“As he has said many times before, no one can buy or unduly influence Doug Ford,” Ivana Yelich said in an e-mail.

Mr. Ford is planning to attend this year’s Chief’s Gala on Thursday and will again donate private-dinner opportunities, Ms. Yelich said. He is the first Ontario Premier to provide such an item for the auction, according to Allison Sparkes, a police spokeswoman.

Allowing wealthy individuals and companies to pay for exclusive audiences with the Premier risks eroding the public’s faith in government, even when the money benefits a charity, said Ian Stedman, a lawyer and government-ethics expert who is doing a PhD at Osgoode Hall Law School.

TOP STORIES

Bobby Orr defends Don Cherry, calls decision to fire commentator ‘disgraceful’

NOVEMBER 15



Duff Conacher, co-founder of Democracy Watch, called the dinners a clear case of trading cash for access, despite the charitable beneficiary. “It’s still giving an opportunity for someone to buy access to you and that’s the problem.”

Ontario Integrity Commissioner J. David Wake declined comment on the dinners through a spokeswoman.

However, in previous annual reports, Mr. Wake urged MPPs to exercise caution when donating opportunities for face time to charity fundraisers. He recommended politicians reserve the right to later turn down purchasers if meeting with them would be inappropriate. (Ms. Yelich declined to say whether Mr. Ford contacted Mr. Wake beforehand or whether he asked to deny successful bidders if he saw a potential conflict of interest.)

The dinners with Mr. Ford were sold in a live auction last November after Mr. Ford gave a speech lauding police. The packages – for 10 guests at a Toronto steakhouse or Italian restaurant – were given a value of “priceless” in the item description, which noted that lobbyists must register with the Office of the Integrity Commissioner.

After the first three dinners sold quickly for \$20,000 each, two more packages were added, and went for \$21,000 each, Ms. Sparkes said. A sixth dinner was sold for \$20,000 several days after the event. However, only five meals took place after one was cancelled. In all, the dinners raised \$101,000 out of the event’s total of \$653,420.

Other auction items included trips, sports games with Chief Mark Saunders and fishing expeditions and a lunch with Bill Blair, federal Minister of Border Security and a former Toronto Police chief. Marie-Emmanuelle Cadieux, a spokeswoman for Mr. Blair, said he was not lobbied at the events, but she declined to release the names of the successful bidders. Ms. Sparkes said the lunch was sold for \$8,000 and two fishing trips went for \$5,000 each.

OnX Enterprise Solutions, which is also known as OnX Canada, bought a dinner with Mr. Ford as part of its “charitable contributions” to Victim Services, spokesman Roger Hamshaw said. He said the Toronto-based IT company is a proud sponsor of the Chief’s Gala. OnX president Paul Khawaja and other employees dined with Mr. Ford and Chief Saunders on March 20.

TOP STORIES

Bobby Orr defends Don Cherry, calls decision to fire commentator ‘disgraceful’

NOVEMBER 15



LOBBYISTS' registry.

Mr. Hamshaw declined to answer questions about whether OnX executives lobbied Mr. Ford at the dinner and whether the company has had contact with government officials since the meal.

Government financial statements for the 2018-19 fiscal year show three payments to OnX Enterprise Solutions of between \$111,000 and \$116,000 each. Two contracts, signed in early 2018, were for ministry software and IT services and the other payment was for IT purchases for the Legislative Assembly, officials said.

Another dinner with Mr. Ford was purchased by Michael Kuhl, president of development at All Seniors Care Living Centres, when the company contacted organizers several days after the fundraiser, Ms. Sparkes said. That meal took place June 4.

The Toronto-based company, which operates 31 retirement homes in five provinces and is developing several others, hired Loyalist Public Affairs in August, 2018, to lobby the Ontario government. Its goal was: "Discuss innovative solutions for improving healthcare and ending hallway medicine, including how retirement homes can play a role in freeing up hospital beds." (The relationship was terminated in August, 2019, according to the lobbyists' registry.)

Mr. Kuhl did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Mr. Mizrahi, who is building a luxury condo and hotel tower in downtown Toronto that is slated to become the country's tallest skyscraper, had dinner with Mr. Ford on Jan. 29, according to government records.

The next day, Mr. Mizrahi e-mailed the Premier's then-chief of staff to arrange another meeting, in part about Ontario Place. Less than two weeks earlier, the government had said it was accepting proposals to redevelop the Toronto waterfront property into a "world-class" entertainment destination.

"I look forward to our continued vision in making Ontario and Canada even greater on the world stage and getting together again soon to discuss various initiatives including Ontario Place," Mr. Mizrahi wrote.

TOP STORIES

Bobby Orr defends Don Cherry, calls decision to fire commentator 'disgraceful'

NOVEMBER 15



Services, which helped him after he lost his fiancée and best friend in car accidents. During his

Feb. 26 meal, Mr. Bechai said he and Mr. Ford shared “personal stories,” but did not discuss his business.

Colin Taylor, co-founder of aPriori Capital Partners, a private equity fund manager, said he bought a dinner with the Premier to support Victim Services and that his British-based company “has no dealings” with the Ontario government. In the end, Mr. Taylor was not able to attend the Oct. 9 meal and police event organizers donated it to others, he said.

In addition, George Friedmann, owner of the Windsor Arms Hotel in Toronto, bought a dinner package with Mr. Ford but a date could not be found in the time frame he wanted, he said. The meal was cancelled and no payment was made.

With a report from Stephanie Chambers

Our Morning Update and Evening Update newsletters are written by Globe editors, giving you a concise summary of the day’s most important headlines. [Sign up today.](#)

© Copyright 2019 The Globe and Mail Inc. All rights reserved.

351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher