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Ford's chief of staff questioned by ethics watchdog probing OPP hiring

By **ROBERT BENZIE** Queen's Park Bureau Chief

ROB FERGUSON Queen's Park Bureau

Tues., Feb. 26, 2019

Premier Doug Ford's chief of staff has been interviewed by the ethics watchdog probing allegations of political interference in the appointment of Toronto police Supt. Ron Taverner as OPP commissioner.

Progressive Conservative sources told the Star that integrity commissioner J. David Wake recently questioned Dean French for more than two hours about his role in the Ontario Provincial Police hiring.

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Ontario Premier Doug Ford, left, sits with his Chief of Staff Dean French as they prepare to hear Federal Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer speak at the Ontario PC Convention in Toronto on Nov. 17, 2018. French has been interviewed by the province's integrity commissioner over the appointment of Toronto police Supt. Ron Taverner as OPP commissioner. (CHRIS YOUNG / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

The meeting is significant because documents filed with the Ontario Superior Court of Justice suggest French was actively involved in the search for a new commissioner.

The government has insisted that Taverner, a 72-year-old Ford friend, was selected by an "independent" hiring committee that had nothing to do with the premier.

Asked about the questioning of French, the premier's office said Tuesday they are cooperating with Wake's investigation.

"We look forward to this process coming to a close as soon as possible," the office said in a statement.

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While Ford has not yet met with the integrity commissioner, Community Safety Minister Sylvia Jones has.

Documents filed by a lawyer for OPP Deputy Commissioner Brad Blair, who was passed over for the force's top job, show French and then secretary of cabinet Steve Orsini, the head of the public service, and deputy minister Mario Di Tommaso, Taverner's former boss at Toronto police, did the job interviews.

A Nov. 15 email to Blair from Odgers Berndtson, the executive search firm, confirmed that Ford's chief of staff was on the interview panel.

"This time around you'll be meeting with Steve Orsini, Dean French and Mario Di Tommaso," Odgers Berndtson project manager Sue Mahon wrote to the OPP deputy commissioner.

That missive is part of a trove of documents filed by lawyer Julian Falconer in his push to have Ontario Ombudsman Paul Dubé [probe](#) the Taverner appointment.

Dubé has said it is beyond his jurisdiction. Wake's separate inquiry was triggered by a complaint from the opposition New Democrats that the Member's Integrity Act had been violated.

Blair's lawsuit has also brought to light that Ford's office sought an OPP van for the premier with more than \$50,000 in customized features, including a 32-inch TV, a Blu-ray DVD player, a mini-fridge, mobile Wi-Fi, leather captain's swivel chairs, and a "power reclining sofa bench."

NDP MPP Tara Natyshak (Essex) blasted the premier for demanding an "over-\$100,000, off-the-books, taxpayer-funded super-van."

"The vehicle the premier asked for sounds like the Taj Mahal on wheels," Natyshak said of the Ford Transit passenger van, which has a base price of about \$42,000. Customization and taxes would have pushed the price to more than \$100,000.

The community safety minister said Ford merely requested "a used van" to be retrofitted so "he could continue to do his work while he is travelling from community to community."

Jones said it is "a perfectly reasonable use of resources."

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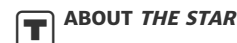
“His office asked for the option of a used van so he can travel the province in comfort. At the end of the day nothing has happened on this file yet,” said Smith.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath accused Ford of “jumping on his own gravy train: while parents of autistic children beg for financial help with high treatment costs.

“The premier has access to a number of OPP vehicles, SUVs, that are quite comfortable,” she said.

“These are public dollars and no premier needs to have that kind of a pimped-out ride. Why he thinks the public should be paying for it, that’s something he’s going to have to answer to.”

Robert Benzie is the Star's Queen's Park bureau chief and a reporter covering Ontario politics. Follow him on Twitter: [@robertbenzie](https://twitter.com/robertbenzie)



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