

Infrastructure crucial for local economy

BY ANDY COMBER

Ontario is not getting their fair share of infrastructure funding from the federal government, according to the province's public infrastructure renewal minister, David Caplan, who was speaking in Windsor Feb. 16.

"Ontario has 70 percent of the country's trade traffic, but not 70 percent of the funding - it is 30 percent roughly," said Caplan, explaining the imbalance in funding from the federal government to the province to provide for infrastructure.

"Infrastructure is a team sport, none of us can do it on our own," he said.

Caplan said the province is planning for the "long range" when it comes to infrastructure, but was fac-

ing some serious challenges. "We've inherited a huge infrastructure deficit," said Caplan, noting that the province needs over \$100 billion in infrastructure. "It's staggering; Ontario's entire annual budget is \$82 billion," he said.

The minister said the province is committed to building a new border crossing, which is vital to local industry and the nation's industry.

"We call it the North American gateway," said Caplan, who expects the site for the new crossing to be decided this year.

Caplan applauded the Ontario government's initiatives to restore the infrastructure in the province, including \$30 billion invested by ReNew Ontario, a five-year program launched



IN THE SPOTLIGHT - Flanked by Essex MPP Bruce Crozier and Windsor West MPP Sandra Pupatello, Minister of Public Infrastructure Renewal David Caplan, answers questions in a media scrum following a speech in Windsor, Feb. 16.

in 2005. Providing a good example to the public, the government also reduced its own energy consumption by 10 percent, he said.

Questions to the minister came from local business and political leaders, following the speech at the break-

fast meeting, which was hosted by the Windsor and District Chamber of Commerce.

Citing security as one issue, some expressed concerns over increasing the private interests in infrastructure that serves the pub-

lic, such as the Ambassador Bridge, which is owned by Detroit businessman Matty Moroun.

In answering, Caplan said the province was working to keep Ontario's core assets in public hands.

Essex Councillor Paul Innes told the minister the private versus public issue was important, but there are other imminent problems.

"How are you going to keep and maintain the infrastructure we have now?" asked Innes, who said he was discouraged by what the minister had to say at the meeting.

Much of the burden of the infrastructure costs have fallen on municipalities who must beg for grants and funding to support costly but much-needed infrastructure projects in their communi-

ties, said Innes. Earlier, Caplan acknowledged that the province had made mistakes in downloading much of the infrastructure on municipalities.

"Downloading the roads and bridges was a terrible mistake. I do think it was a bad decision that resulted in costs soaring," said Caplan, who was joined at the meeting by my Essex MPP Bruce Crozier, Windsor MPPs Dwight Duncan and Sandra Pupatello.

Of interest to Essex, which plans to build a new arena complex, Caplan said that a provincial fund for recreation infrastructure is already depleted. Just a month ago, LaSalle was able to garner \$3.8 million to help build its \$28.8-million recreation and arena project.

Town and business brainstorm on economic ideas

BY ANDY COMBER

Town council was mostly "all ears" to local business leaders joining them to discuss economic development in the Town of Essex, at a special meeting held Feb. 12.

Members of the Essex Business Improvement Area (BIA), the Harrow and Colchester Chamber of Commerce, as well as the former Downtown Study Committee, had been invited to offer their ideas on how to improve the business climate in the municipality.

"We have to protect our existing business," said Marlene Markham, manager of the BIA, who suggested the town form a business retention and expansion team, similar to Parry Sound's. Made up of members from the various business groups and general business community, the specialized team would help struggling businesses remain in the town, she said.

"They can help prepare business plans, deal with landlord and rent disputes, and assist with building permits and codes," said Markham, noting that services would be completely confidential, "especially if the business is having financial problems."

"That would take the place of an economic development person, as has been proposed," she said.

Paul Foster, a member of the Downtown Study Committee and currently the treasurer of the Essex Community Future Development Corporation, encouraged business owners to make use of that non-profit organization, which provides funding, advice and support to small businesses.

Foster said that Essex faces problems trying to develop on both sides of Highway #3, which is soon to be expanded to a four-lane highway, "creating a barrier."

"I suggest to push and expand Essex into Lakeshore and Kingsville, to have more area to grow," said Foster, pressing the town to open discussions with the bordering municipalities to redefine the boundaries.

"Redraw the line and promote Essex as a good place to live," he said.

Members of the Harrow business community also pressed council for action to encourage new residential, business and economic growth in the town.

"If we don't have the people, we can't support the

shops," said Scott Waters, president of the Harrow Chamber of Commerce, suggesting the town consider reducing or even eliminating development charges for a period of time.

"We've got to entice builders and people to move into the community," he said.

Other suggestions included improvements to the downtown cores by enforcing property standards, and securing grants and funding to redevelop brownfields - lands on which industrial or commercial activity took place in the past and that

may need to be cleaned up before they can be redeveloped.

The town had received some criticism for not taking enough action on the recommendations of the Downtown Study Committee, which were released in a report in October 2005. That report suggested the town consider hiring an economic development officer, assisted by a volunteer board of directors.

New economic group emerges

After about an hour of discussion, council was told the town should take an inventory of what it has and what it needs, before hiring an economic development officer.

"You need a strategic plan," said Bill Baker, a Colchester South resident who has an extensive background in business and market development.

Baker revealed plans for a

new business organization, Shores of Essex Resource Corporation, a not-for-profit organization that would prepare the strategic plan in about eight weeks at no cost to the town.

Ward 1 Councillor Randy Voakes, former chair of the Downtown Study Committee, expressed enthusiasm for the idea, so long as it involved the whole municipality. "I don't want to see that dividing line," he said.

Baker said a board of directors that would include representatives from the town's business community, the Essex BIA and the Harrow and Colchester South Chamber of Commerce, would govern the group. He said input would also include business interests in McGregor.

Council is expected to endorse the new organization at their February 19 regular meeting.



Moving out - Town council was advised during a special meeting Feb. 12 to develop a business retention and expansion team to help keep businesses in the Town of Essex.

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