

Growth biggest challenge for York towns

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Staff Reporter

A whole new town moved into York Region last year.

Well, not exactly. But the equivalent of a small town - about 24,000 people - moved here in 1997.

That's in addition to the 626,000 residents who were already calling the region home in 1996, according to York's annual report released last Thursday.

If York's growth trend continues, the region's population will surpass the 700,000 mark before the new millennium.

As thousands of residents continue to flood into York - one of the fastest growing regions in the country - coping with the impact of growth on our communities is an issue driving virtually every policy at the region and the nine local municipalities.

Growth affects every resident in the region - from parents who have a tougher time getting their kids into recreational programs and school kids who spend years in portables to business owners whose goods are stuck in traffic jams and patients who are stuck on waiting lists for health care.

"It is not overwhelming because we've been talking about it but it's important to be planned for," Richmond Hill Mayor Bill Bell said yesterday.

"We can't just sit here and hope there's a magic answer."

For politicians and officials at the region, traffic is the top priority.

"Traffic is our number one concern," regional chief administrator Alan Wells said.

"We have to act to remove gridlock from our roads. If we don't, we'll lose our competitive edge. We don't want people and commerce sitting in the (traffic) crunch wasting time."

The region's fledgling transit task force, which held its first meeting on Tuesday, will tackle some of the concerns.

"One of the issues we will have to look at is how does our transit blend with the GTSB (Greater Toronto Services Board, which will run GO Transit)," Bell said.

"Also, some of us, Richmond Hill included, may have to let go a bit (of) our local transit because we just have to get better east-west transit, particularly, and north-south, too. The only ones who give a (damn) about borders are politicians."

According to Markham Mayor Don Cousens, new subdivisions in Toronto were far better planned in the 1970s and early 1980s than those being built in the surrounding regions today, mainly because the province played an important role in ensuring the road network was built before new residents moved in.

"But the regions haven't been able to use the same strategy because the province has gradually put more responsibility for new infrastructure on the shoulders of municipal and regional governments," he said.

The final straw came in January, when Queen's Park saddled property taxpayers with GO Transit costs in addition to making them pay the full shot of their own local transit systems.

That's why, Cousens pointed out, Greater Toronto Area mayors have demanded a portion of the provincial

fuel tax to help pay for transit. He also stressed the province must invest more funding in major highways, such as extending Hwy. 407 further east and widening Hwy. 404.

"We're moving into gridlock and frustration and we don't need that."

Cousens stressed municipalities don't have the power to delay subdivisions until roads are built.

"In Markham, we're dragging our feet on a lot of development," he said. "If we delay it any more, we'll face hearings at

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Bill Bell
Mayor of
Richmond Hill.

the OMB (Ontario Municipal Board)."

In addition to traffic, York officials have also targetted other issues as top priorities, including:

- paying for other infrastructure, such as water and sewer pipes, in a timely fashion;
- policing;
- waste management;
- coping with services down-loaded from the province;
- and protecting the identity and integrity of communities.

Integrating new residents, particularly immigrants, into York's culture is something Cousens would like to see more

attention focused on.

"Growth is more than just the traditional long-time residents of Canada."

Cousens argued police officers are already hampered during crime investigations in multicultural neighborhoods because many immigrants are fearful of coming forward with information.

"In Canada, the police are our friends and they can work with us and we can work with them without threat or fear," Cousens

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