

Issues & Answers

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE NEWS AND THE NEWSMAKERS

Hospitals fight for growth funds

Booming population leaves health facilities scrambling to keep pace

BY JENNIFER BROWN AND LISA QUEEN
STAFF WRITERS

After months of waiting for money promised to cure York Region's overflowing emergency wards, the promise fell flat.

"It's a joke," was one senior administrator's first reaction, followed by a frustrated sigh.

Desperately needed dollars to help care for the increasing number of residents pouring into emergency rooms around the region ended up a fraction of what administrators need to keep creditors at bay.

It was yet another example of the war York Region hospitals have been fighting for years now — a battle for recognition that 24,000 new residents will be born or settle in the region each year and that the population will rise from the current 665,000 to 1.1 million by the year 2021.

York Mackenzie MPP Frank Klees, pleads with hospitals and residents to keep the faith — no other government, he says, has tackled health reform as the Tories have and it takes time.

But in many eyes, Tuesday's handing of cash to York Region hospitals represented a token gesture to appease the suburbs. The \$500,000 pales in comparison to the \$650,000 received by one Toronto hospital the same day.

With more than 150,000 emergency room visits to York Region hospitals in the last year, administrators are struggling to provide enough front line staff to handle the crunch.

Empty coffers have meant short-staffed shifts and longer wait times for patients.

"The government really needs to move to a funding mechanism that is sensitive to population-based demands," says Frank Lussing, president of York Central Hospital in Richmond Hill.

With some \$42 million committed by the province for hospital construction to address growth, all three York Region hospitals have plans for expansion in the coming years. However, they all must come up with significant dollars to fund the balance of their projects — at least another \$50 million.

Then there's the question of how to pay for the operating costs associated with opening those new facilities.



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

The expansion of York Central Hospital in Richmond is now under way. Plans to expand the region's other two hospitals, Markham Stouffville and York County in Newmarket are also on the drawing board.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

The fourth in a series of articles examining York Region's growth and how it affects the people who live here.

York Central Hospital's emergency room will more than double in size, while the new long-term care facility will push its budget to almost \$100 million by the year 2003, from its current \$55 million.

Richmond Hill residents Bill and Rita Byres welcome the addition. While their elderly family members are in good health, should they ever need the services of the facility, they're glad it will be there.

And despite the frequent crunches in the emergency ward, Rita says even if they have to wait, they know it is because of the increased pressures.

To answer the needs of new and existing

families in the Markham-Stouffville catchment area, that hospital is embarking on an expansion plan — estimated to cost slightly more than \$10 million — that will, with luck, ready it for the next millennium.

The subdivision that will have the most impact on the eight-year-old hospital is Cornell, which surrounds the health facility.

The development will reach its maturity in seven years and the expected population for Cornell could exceed 30,000. That alone could mean an increase of \$2.8 million in financial costs to help pay for an increase of 450 inpatient cases and 300 additional day surgery cases or the need for six beds.

"We received growth funding of \$1.4 million in July and that will be annualized and is equal to our growth to date, so that is great for this year," said president Elizabeth Woodbury. "But we've been in a catch-up mode because funding hasn't kept up to the population."

Diagnostic imaging, outpatient care facilities such as emergency care and new inpatient services such as same-day surgery and rehabilitation will all be expanded in the next five years.

At York County in Newmarket, a \$67-million expansion plan is in the works to renovate the jigsaw puzzle of a building — parts of the hospital date back to 1927, 1945 and 1954 — for 2002. But with only \$17 million committed to date by the province, its actual completion date is unknown.

"It's a pretty basic program when you look at what we are building — it's meat and potatoes — there will be no atriums in this project — just bottom line patient care," said Dan Carriere, York County's president. "People in this area have to demand they get equality to meet their needs. I think people in this area deserve as much as other com-

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