

HEALTH CARE: Provincial government announces \$150 million in funding for Ontario hospitals



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Health Minister Elizabeth Witmer chats with York County Hospital president Dan Carriere Thursday in Newmarket after she announced new funding for Ontario hospitals, including \$20 million for growth.

CRIME: Four bank heists keep police hopping

Rash of robberies sweeps region

BY MIKE ADLER
STAFF WRITER

One gun-waving bandit got away with a plastic bag of cash Thursday from a bank in Markham, but just hours earlier, an attempt to rob another Markham bank netted a would-be thief nothing.

Police believe the attempt failed because the teller approached at the Bank of Montreal branch on Main Street, Markham reacted to the demand for money with a question.

"It was more of a shock reaction. It didn't sink in," said Pina Gross, a senior manager at the bank, adding the 41-year-old teller didn't refuse the demand.

A lone man entered the bank at about 11:10 a.m., and indicated he had a gun, but showed no weapon, York Regional Police said.

He is described as being in his late 30s, white, six-foot tall and 220 pounds. The suspect was wearing a green and white ball cap and a three-quarter-length purple winter coat, police said.

The second robber came through the sliding doors of the Toronto Dominion Bank at the Denison Square plaza, not far south of the first bank, at 1:30 p.m.

Police said he waved the gun around, yelling for everyone not to move. He then pointed a handgun at a 26-year-old male teller and told him to fill up a plastic bag.

The bandit fled with \$3,960, police said, although Det. Sgt. Bruce Powley said some stolen money was dropped nearby and returned to the bank, so "I guess we have a good citizen out there."

The TD suspect, last seen heading west from the plaza, is described by police as black, six-foot two-inches tall, wearing black clothes. His long hair was in dreadlocks.

Twenty minutes later, police responded to another robbery at the Steeles Avenue Bank of Montreal branch in Vaughan. Here, a suspect, who showed a handgun and fled with a small amount of cash, is described as East Indian, in his mid-30s, "chubby" and clean-shaven, wearing a blue puffy jacket and a dark toque. He fled in a small white sedan.

There was another robbery Wednesday at the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce in Aurora. This time, the suspect was white, five-foot five-inches to five-foot eleven-inches tall, with shoulder-length hair, a mustache and a black ball cap.

Anyone with information about any of these incidents can call the hold-up squad, at 773-1221, ext. 7873.

Funding increase still not enough

Extra money scratching the surface of needs, hospital president says

BY DAWN LIERSCH
STAFF WRITER

Even a half-million-dollar boost from the province amounts to little more than a drop in the bucket for York Central Hospital.

Facing a \$15.8-million increase in the Richmond Hill hospital's operating budget this year, York Central president Frank Lussing can only hope more relief is on the way.

"It helps, it's a nice start. But, for us, it's just barely scratching the surface of what we need," Lussing said after the province's announcement on Thursday of extra funding for hospitals.

During a news conference at York County Hospital in Newmarket, Health Minister Elizabeth Witmer promised a \$105-million cash infusion to all Ontario hospitals.

She announced a one-per cent increase to their 1999 operating budgets for a total of \$68 million. Of that, York County will receive \$514,333, York Central will receive \$469,019 and Markham-Stouffville will receive \$379,290.

An extra \$20 million will be given to hospitals in fast-growing regions

And \$17 million was provided to operate costly, magnetic resonance imaging machines.

Witmer also hinted there would be more announcements in the next few weeks that would bring relief to hospitals.

But Lussing is maintaining a wait-and-see attitude.

"I'm delighted, of course, that the government is seeing fit to send more money to hospitals," he said, but added that he expects a lot more.

"We're hoping the money will roll in and it will be enough. But my feeling is it won't be."

Lussing said the projected 25-per cent hike in his hospital's budget is due to enormous population growth and the costs of new services, such as dialysis. In comparison, the hospital's budget has only increased 11 per cent in the past five years.

Meanwhile, York County president Dan Carriere is hoping to balance the hospital's operating budget this year, thanks to provincial funding.

The hospital is seeking relief for its \$12.4-million deficit.

"Any additional money is good news, especially when you consider that the environment over the last two or three years has been very difficult. No amount is too small, and this is not the final announcement," he said.

"My expectation is that we will be able to balance the budget given (Thursday's)

announcement and what may be announced in the next few weeks."

Carriere is expecting the province to infuse more money into priority programs such as cancer and cardiac care, including the hospital's catheterization lab.

During discussions with Witmer afterward, he also learned hospitals can expect growth funding to be permanently built into their budgets.

In the past, the province has only given one-time funding for growth.

"We had no idea that funding would be repeated," Carriere said, adding that planning will be easier now that he knows the funding is permanent.

"When we were looking at our deficit, we were including those dollars not being there."

Although hospitals still don't know what the exact breakdown of growth funding will be, Carriere is confident the province will take into account Newmarket's high population growth to date.

"The government is going to do what they said they were going to do — bring new money to the table," he said.

"I don't see the downside to it." Carriere suggested York County is beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel after being one of the hardest hit by restructuring and downsizing a few years ago.

Officials from Markham-Stouffville Hospital did not return phone calls.

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