

ONTARIO SET TO DELIVER FIRST BALANCED BUDGET IN A DECADE

# Budget won't help York Region: Cousens

BY PATRICK CASEY  
Staff Writer

It's the old good cop/bad cop routine and Markham Mayor Don Cousens is growing tired of wearing the black hat.

When Finance Minister Ernie Eves rises in the legislature at Queen's Park this afternoon to deliver a provincial budget offering more tax cuts and new money for health care, it will also mark the first balanced budget in a decade — eliminating a deficit that was \$11 million when the Tories took office in 1995.

However, Cousens says the budget won't address critical issues in York Region, including a five-year property tax hike beginning next year to help fund construction projects for the region's three hospitals.

Furthermore, federal and provincial governments continue to ignore the growing transportation crisis that's crippling highways across Greater Toronto and, without adequate infrastructure dollars, Ontario's prosperous economy will grind to a halt, he said.

"This is a problem. The tax cuts have stimulated the economy, but the province is getting a clean bill of financial health while we could fall a notch or two on our credit standing," Cousens said yesterday.

"You can't have the province looking too good because there is only one taxpayer. Markham is vir-



**DON COUSENS:** York Region is facing critical issues, says Markham's mayor, including hospital funding



**FRANK KLEES:** Oak Ridges MPP says transportation funding is part of today's budget

tually debt free, but downloading means we continue to have a tough time keeping our costs down. It becomes a rippling effect and really puts us on a slippery road."

And without new money to invest in rapid transit and improved GO Transit, Cousens insists no amount of tax cuts will keep Ontario's economic boom afloat.

"Without that infrastructure investment, residents will never see transportation better than it is right now. That is the threat. Things are bad right now and they are only going to get worse," said Cousens, noting York Region will invest \$100 million in transportation improve-

ments this year alone.

"If it doesn't happen at the provincial and federal levels, get ready for the municipal government to find the money, but that is a false economy. Our budgets will not be able to cope with that."

Although he would not commit to a dollar figure, Oak Ridges MPP Frank Klees confirmed funding for transportation improvements will be part of the budget, but stressed the need for the federal and municipal governments to play a larger financial role.

"There is a provincial role to play because it is not just about moving people and products, it's about

quality of life. We all have a vested interest," said Klees, the Conservative party whip. "Canada is the only country where the federal government is not playing a major role in the transportation crisis."

"Not re-directing funds from massive federal budgets into transportation is a disgrace. I appeal to my federal counterpart and all 101 Liberal members to get to work so this province receives a fair share of its federal transit dollars."

In February, the Liberals announced a six-year \$2.6-billion national infrastructure program.

However, only \$450 million arrives in the first two years, with \$550 million coming in the final four years, following the next federal election.

Klees said the \$61-billion provincial budget will again include personal income tax cuts and the government will begin to tackle a \$121-billion debt that costs taxpayers more than \$9 billion a year in interest payments.

Calling Canada the most over-taxed country in the western world, Aurora Councillor John West praised the provincial government's continued commitment toward tax relief, even if it means a savings of only a few dollars extra each week.

"To the people making more than \$100,000 a year, I don't think an extra \$10 or \$20 will mean a lot, but to most people, every dollar they can keep in their pocket is an advantage," West said.

"Over the last 10 years, we have watched the money wasted under previous governments. No matter what you think about this government, they are doing work that will benefit people down the road."

Newmarket Chamber of Commerce general manager Terry Carter agreed tax cuts are important, but said transportation remains a top concern for York Region residents.

"The region has 6-per-cent growth, so you have to look at hard services, such as highways and solving our water problems," Carter said. "What's the logic in skimming on public transit like GO trains?"

Richmond Hill Mayor Bill Bell called provincial debt reduction a step in the right direction, but said the Tories' rumoured plan of financing the redevelopment of Toronto's waterfront is a mistake; the money would be better spent on GTA transportation solutions.

Georgina Mayor Rob Grossi agreed, noting the responsibility of municipal politicians has grown dramatically in the past five years because of downloading from Ottawa and Queen's Park.

## REGIONAL News Digest



### WHAT'S HAPPENING

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Kaitlyn Thornton (left) is Peter Pan to Laurie Painter's Tinkerbell in their school's production of Peter Pan. Tickets are \$3 and available at the door. Showtime is 7 p.m. Call 642-0224 for more information.

### Aurora seeks legal advice on controversial dump site

The Town of Aurora has sought legal advice about a controversial fill site some believe has been exceeding dumping restrictions.

Councillor Phyllis Morris says the town will "vigorously pursue" legal avenues to stop the fill operation, located at Bloomington Sideroad and Leslie Street, that she says is operating without a permit.

The town has also asked the Ministry of the Environment to test the soil at the site, even though last fall Mayor Tim Jones said soil and rubble being dumped on the land had been approved by Ministry of Environment inspectors.

But residents in a nearby subdivision have been worried about their well water and the destruction of wetlands that sit on the environmentally sensitive Oak Ridges Moraine.

The operator of the fill site has a 1997 permit, which was granted to dump fill in the abandoned quarry.

Under the permit, dirt and rubble — some of it excavated from the Air Canada Centre site and Toronto's new subway line — can reach a maximum height of five feet above Bloomington Sideroad.

The town is faced with enforcing a permit that was put in place after fill started being dumped in the pit nearly 20 years ago.

— Jennifer Brown

# Hospital chiefs would welcome more cash

BY JENNIFER BROWN  
Staff Writer

Ontario's finance minister may have made a billion-dollar promise to the health-care system, but local hospital administrators aren't counting on that money yet.

While they're optimistic that new health-care dollars will flow into high-growth York Region, they're convinced a portion of the funding will be used to pay for a new deal with Ontario's doctors.

"We don't know, we haven't heard anything, but most of us believe there will be more money for hospitals," said Markham Stouffville Hospital president Jim Maclean. "I think there are many, many pressures in the hospital system and that includes both high-growth pressures and in the teaching centres."

And Maclean cautioned the funds may be required to cover recent pay increases for nurses and the province's doctors. The deal struck last week with the Ontario Medical Association will see a number of changes, including a new primary care model, that will require investment, Maclean said.

"I would imagine it will be a substantial chunk of dollars to cover off that agreement."

The tentative, four-year deal would allow for fee increases of 1.95 per cent in the first year and 2 per cent in each of the subsequent years. Nurses in Ontario hos-

pitals have also negotiated a pay hike.

With their services constantly under pressure from growing populations, hospitals such as York Central in Richmond Hill, York County in Newmarket and Markham Stouffville are expecting big things from today's budget.

York Central serves more than 300,000 York Region residents. Every five years, an additional 72,000 people move into the hospital's catchment area.

The hospital is embarking on the first phase of a \$44-million expansion and renovation plan that includes a new nursing home, as well as new programs and services to meet the needs of its growing community.

"(The province must) deliver, they have to come through," said York Central president Frank Lussing. "They have no choice. We will not be able to meet the public's expectations for service without additional funding. The government has to commit big time."

Hospitals such as York Central and York County that were forced to become highly efficient amid growth and cutbacks in the mid-'90s say it's time their communities receive what they have needed for so long.

"There has been little recognition for our operating efficiencies — it's been 11th hour announcements on an ad hoc basis for some time," Lussing said.

"If they don't deliver, we will face difficulties, but I can't imagine they won't be responsive."

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