

York Region private university dream awakens

Provincial announcement allowing private post-secondary education revives bid for new university in Queensville

BY GIANNI COLAVECCHIA
Staff Writer

The province's announcement it will allow private post-secondary institutions has reignited the drive to bring a university to York Region.

The announcement removes a major obstacle to a long-standing bid to bring a privately funded university to Queensville.

"We've been waiting a long time for this," Dr. Bette Stephenson, president of the Gwillimbury Foundation for Post-Secondary Education in York Region, said. "I talked with (Colleges and Universities Minister) Dianne Cunningham last night and it's a go."

The non-profit group is to begin raising \$150 million to bring a university on to an 80-

acre site in East Gwillimbury. Stephenson, a former education minister, said her group will call on private sector donors to raise the cash.

The fundraising drive ends nearly 15 years of frustration for backers of private post-secondary institutions, who ran into large roadblocks from the David Peterson and Bob Rae governments.

Area observers have often noted there are only a few colleges in Toronto's suburbs and only one college campus in York Region.

Stephenson said the announcement will allow people to have more choice in where they go to university.

She rejected criticism, with the backing of large companies, private universities will end

up draining money from their publicly funded counterparts.

"The public institutions certainly have the big boys on their side," she remarked, before noting billions of dollars have gone into Ontario's public universities.

"They will tell you that they've suffered, but none have ever suffered painfully. We think they need competition."

Al Duffy, former mayor of Richmond Hill and a member of the foundation, noted York Region is one of Ontario's major technological centres and local companies need an institution that will educate workers for the new information-based economy.

"We probably are the sole reason the legislation has changed. Certainly for our popula-

tion, we think more universities are needed," he said.

Duffy praised the province for its move, adding it might help stop the brain drain.

Many Canadian students choose to attend private schools in the U.S., but don't return to their native country after their education, he said.

Authorities will offer students at private post-secondary institutions financial aid through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP).

But provincial officials have promised they will not put taxpayer dollars into any privately funded college of university, saying taxpayers will continue to fund the public institutions.

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