$202-million hospital expansions ready to go

$20 million expected from development industry in question

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writer

It's all systems go for York Region's three hospital expansions, despite the fact local builders are refusing to chip in.

The work can't stop. More space, more beds and better facilities are urgently needed to serve the region, where explosive growth shows no signs of slowing.

"If there was ever a time the cliche 'life-and-death situation' is appropriate, it's now," said Southlake Regional Health Centre president Dan Carriere.

The region is putting up $62.5 million of the total $202-million price tag for expansion projects, with provincial funding at about $124 million and the balance to be raised by the hospitals' fundraising foundations.

'We were not terribly surprised the development industry said, 'Thanks, but no thanks.' They have agreed to help in other ways ...'

Two-thirds of York's share will come from tax dollars, the other third was to be financed from a $463 surcharge on every new home. But now that financing — about $20 million — is in question.

"We have committed the money one way or another," assured York Region chairperson Bill Fisch. "We were not terribly surprised the development industry said, 'Thanks, but no thanks.' They have agreed to help in other ways — anything but development charges."

Taxpayers could end up footing most of the bill, but Fisch said that's something most people won't mind. An Angus Reid poll commissioned by the region found 65 per cent of residents support the region funding hospitals.

"Will there be a tax hike? I'm not certain of that. But people have told us they are prepared to pay $12 or $15 extra every year to ensure we have good quality hospitals," he said. "If we can absorb some of that, we will, but there comes a time when we have to pay for the services we require and this is one area that's very important."

Southlake will tender a $109-million construction project, which will expand and renovate the existing Newmarket facility, by February. New wings will replace additions built in 1945 and 1955 and a new 250,000-square-foot building will be added to the 1966 and 1974 buildings, Carriere said.

"This facility was built in 1927. We're not delaying, we can't afford it. We're operating a facility that's borderline unsafe. This is a wood frame structure, there are no sprinklers, the rooms are small, the heat and ventilation is terrible. To not build it and keep sending people to Toronto on the 400 and the 404 parking lots is not the answer."

Carriere's sentiments are shared by Dr. Jim McLean, chief executive officer for Markham Stouffville Hospital. That facility sits in the middle of massive development, where the Cornell subdivision alone will soon be home to more than 30,000 people.

He said the provincial Health Services Restructuring Committee badly underestimated growth, especially in York Region.

"The need is for significantly more beds than what was planned for," he said. "We're operating now with more beds than the committee said we'd need in 2003."

That estimate was 115 acute care beds; the hospital is currently operating 125 and needs at least 75 more.

Markham Stouffville's proposal is a little behind Southlake's and York Central Hospital, McLean said, not coming to fruition until 2003-2004. He added costs may rise higher than the $30 million he estimates the facility needs.

"We have to figure out how to handle that," he said. "Already in 2001, we're beyond our capacity and the growth is not going to stop. The community needs those beds."

Things are no better at Richmond Hill's York Central Hospital, where a $69-million re-development project is already under way.

'With that comes people and people need services. Whether the development community likes it or not, they are part of that picture. To just say no is not good enough, it's not a reasonable solution to the problem.'

But president Frank Lussing said he's confident the funds will be there.

"If the region had not come through, that would be a stopper," he said. "But they have committed the funding, we haven't had any indication the support won't be there. It may just be a bit slower in coming."

Patrick O'Hanlon, the newly elected president of the Greater Toronto Home Builders Association, has made it clear the industry will not accept any voluntary surcharge on new residential development to pay for hospital growth.

Carriere slammed developers for not pitching in, saying they promote the region to industry and potential homeowners, enticing them to make the move north.

"With that comes people and people need services," Carriere said. "Whether the development community likes it or not, they are part of that picture. To just say no is not good enough, it's not a reasonable solution to the problem."

Fisch and all three hospital heads say they will continue to lobby the province for changes to regulations contained within the Development Charges Act. Before 1998, a portion of development charges could be used to fund capital projects for hospitals but developers fought it and that option was eliminated.

Frances Johnston, manager of the municipal finance branch of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, said there are no plans to re-open that debate.

"Our response is we made the changes with extensive consultation, including Ministry of Health participation," she said. "We continue to expand provincial funding for health. We have had similar requests and our standard response is the government has restructured and committed large amounts of funding. We're not opening it at this time."

But that doesn't sit well with Carriere.

"Does this hospital have to go to every Ontario Municipal Board hearing to stop development?" asked Carriere. "If we can't bring them to the table, we have to legislate it. It's not a problem that's going to go away."

DAN CARRIERE: Southlake Regional Health Centre president says developers should be pitching in to upgrade hospitals.

BILL FISCH: York Region chairperson feels taxpayers won't mind footing part of the bill for hospital improvements.

JIM MCLEAN: CEO of Markham Stouffville Hospital says the province badly underestimated growth, especially in York Region.

FRANK LUSSING: York Central Hospital president is confident funding will come through.

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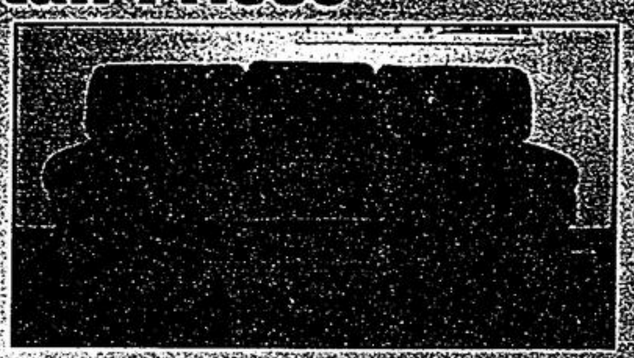

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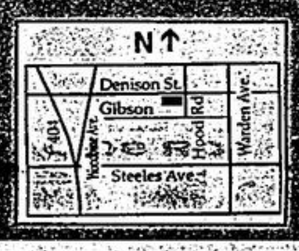

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