

Hospital expansion plan 'on track,' Health Minister argues

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But both Minister Tsubouchi and Health Minister Tony Clement seemed startled by the hospital's crusade, which also asks for support from area residents and businesses.

Minister Clement said he found the tone of the ad "quite frankly, shocking" and defended his ministry's actions, citing the fact legislation allowing the kind of public-private partnership the hospital is proposing was only passed in July.

"Ministry officials met with the hospital two weeks ago and the reporting I got back was that it was very positive," Minister Clement said in an interview.

"The hospital presented the proposal, we asked a few questions and they were to

come back with the answers. I thought things were on track and they're still on track as far as I'm concerned."

Minister Tsubouchi expressed similar feelings.

"I'm surprised to hear they think it's off the rails," he said. "It may have been a disconnect between the hospital and the health ministry. We've been going back and forth on how to fit the plan within the regulations of (the capital funding model) Super Build. We have been trying to push this and I have spent a lot of time trying to get it resolved as soon as possible."

Dr. MacLean said the hospital has done everything it's

been asked to do and more.

"We were asked to be creative and innovative and we've done that. But there is a significant gap between what has been allocated and what we feel we need."

In fact, the gap is ten-fold. The province has so far allocated \$10.8 million, the hospital needs \$108 million, he said.

Incorrect assumptions about population growth have also muddied the waters, Dr. MacLean said.

"Initially they used the wrong population numbers and underestimated the size of the project. Rapid growth and the aging distribution over the next five, 10, 15 years is our biggest concern."

Statistics highlighted in

the ad are cause for concern, never mind addressing future growth, pointed out hospital spokesperson Pam Brodie.

The hospital, which opened in 1990, was planned for a 1981 population of 77,000. Now there are more than 230,000 residents in the area. It was built to handle 1,800 births a year; last year staff delivered 2,722 babies.

The diagnostic imaging department (x-rays, ultrasounds, CT scans) was designed to provide 30,700 exams a year — last year it performed 108,233. Upon opening, the hospital was able to do 1,759 surgeries a year. In 2001, more than 8,000 took place.

And the numbers compared to the rest of the province are no better.

According to Markham Stouffville Hospital figures, Ontario spends an average of \$642 a year per person for hospital care. In York Region last year, the province spent \$326 per person.

Across Ontario, there are an average of 169.2 acute care beds per 100,000 population, but in Markham Stouffville, that average is 58.7 per 100,000 people.

"Even if we got approval today, it would be four years before we'd be ready to go," Ms Brodie said. "If we don't get moving, people in this community are going to have trouble with their health care."

The hospital's expansion proposal — in partnership with the Region of York and other, as yet unnamed, private sector partners — includes a integrated, long-term complex care facility which will free up acute care

beds in the existing hospital.

A new ambulatory care and wellness centre will house a freestanding surgical centre, ambulatory and out-patient clinics and alternative therapy providers.

Those new facilities will allow the expansion of the diagnostic imaging and emergency departments, and provide space for a new six-bed cardiac care unit in the existing building.

Both Ministers Clement and Tsubouchi said the proposal is a good one and they support it, but delivering funding takes time.

"I'd love things to proceed lickety-split, but it's complex. We have put it on the horizon. We know the needs of the community, that it's a growth area," Minister Clement said.

"The take-home message I want to give to your readers is this plan is on track."

While he would not commit to a firm time line, he said, "I'll be second happiest person if it happens within the next six months. (Dr. MacLean being the first.) I will not do anything to make it longer than six months."



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