

Region welcomes federal gas tax share

Little support for immigrants in Ontario: Sorbara

BY ROY GREEN
Staff Writer

The last time a minority government discussed gasoline taxes in a federal budget, it was kicked out of office.

Joe Clark's Conservatives crashed in 1979 when then finance minister John Crosbie introduced an 18-cent-a-gallon hike in gas taxes. Two days later, the Conservatives lost a non-confidence vote and were defeated in the subsequent election.

But this week's budget is giving instead of taking and will share 1.5 cents a litre of gas tax money — \$600 million in total — in the next year for public transit and other big-ticket municipal items.

The amount will increase to five cents per litre, or \$2 billion annually by 2009-10.

Even more significant, according to York Region chairperson Bill Fisch, is the pledge to extend the gas tax program indefinitely, beyond the Liberal election promise of five years.

"From this day forth, it means we'll have sustainable funding available to do projects on a long-term basis," Mr. Fisch said. "That's what we've been asking for."

York has been asking for reliable funding from the federal and provincial governments for its rapid transit program.

Because the money will be distributed on a per-capita basis, Ontario will receive \$1.9 billion over the five years. The government said municipalities will be getting more than \$9 billion over the next five years with the gas



BILL FISCH: Sustainable funding allows municipalities to plan long term, says regional chairperson.



GREG SORBARA: Ontario finance minister disappointed by funding for Ontario.

tax money, the GST rebate and the green municipal funds program.

"I'm delighted to learn (those programs are) going to continue. We'll be applying again," Mr. Fisch said.

The budget, widely char-

acterized as being crafted to please voters and not alienate the opposition, received only mild criticism from the Conservatives.

York-Simcoe Tory MP Peter Van Loan, who called for tax supports for seniors

'All this has done is to provide a token tax cut and one that really only takes full effect five years from now.'

Peter Van Loan
York-Simcoe MP

and working families in a pre-budget debate in January, said the government didn't go far enough.

"All this has done is to provide a token tax cut and one that really only takes full effect five years from now," Mr. Van Loan said.

He also criticized new spending levels.

"Funding to create bigger government has increased by an incredible 77 per cent since 1996-97."

Provincial Finance Minister Greg Sorbara, MPP for Vaughan-King-Aurora, said he was disappointed with the budget, even with the inclusion of an additional \$298 million over five years for the integration and settlement of immigrants.

"If you do the math, you'll

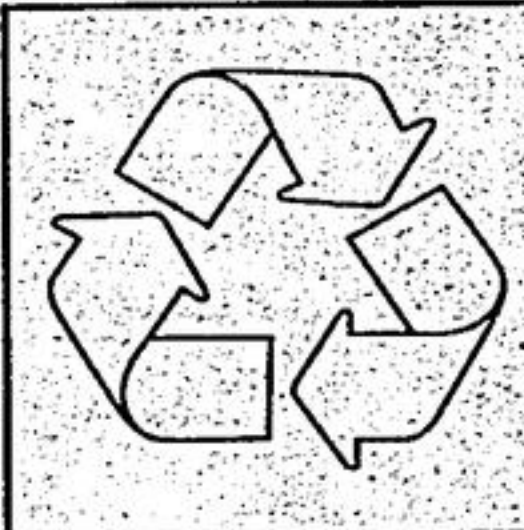
see it represents very little money for Ontario and does not address the gap between what Quebec gets for immigration and what's needed here," he said.

But Mario Calla, executive director of COSTI Immigrant Services in York Region, is "cautiously optimistic" with the funding.

"Finally, they're putting money aside to help immigrants overcome barriers when they arrive here," he said, adding 52 per cent of immigrants have college or university degrees but are unable to get jobs in their field. "If interventions aren't made now, we risk developing an underclass that is very poor."

Mr. Calla said 60 per cent of immigrants settle in Ontario and hoped the province would get its fair share of funding. But he is also concerned because the new funding may not find its way to immigrant services.

"Recent experience has shown that dollars from the federal government to B.C. and Quebec get lost in general revenues and are not targeted for immigrants."



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