

Budget is a mixed bag for Aurora, say lawmakers

By Brock Weir

The first budget by the Ontario Government led by Kathleen Wynne features increased infrastructure, transit dollars, and a few bucks to help people get back on their feet ? but it is a decidedly mixed bag, according to Aurora lawmakers.

The 2013 budget, ?A Prosperous & Fair Ontario? was tabled in the Ontario Legislature Thursday by Minister of Finance Charles Sousa. It promises nearly \$36 billion in infrastructure investments over the next three years, including a new pot of money to help smaller and rural towns build new roads and other infrastructure ? particularly focused on transportation, health care, and education.

In addition to new funding to infrastructure, the Go Transit system, and further high occupancy and transit lanes of the 400-series highways, there will also be new earnings thresholds for people on social assistance. This includes a \$200 per month earnings exemption to reduce barriers to employment, increasing social assistance to single adults without children on Ontario works, and helping Ontario Works recipients become more financially stable.

Increased support for individuals was one positive local representatives agreed on after some time to consider the budget. Although he came right out of the gate criticising the document as an ?NDP Budget? delivered by a Liberal Government, Newmarket-Aurora MPP Frank Klees said he was pleased that some recommendations from the Progressive Conservative caucus made it into the final document.

?We believe the [\$200 threshold] is obviously positive in helping people get back on their feet,? said Mr. Klees. ?There are some nominal issues as well that make some good common sense, such as the amount of assets that someone who is on Ontario Works can have. That is something we have been advocating for as well. Just because someone is experiencing a temporary job loss and has to rely on social assistance obviously it doesn't make sense for someone to have to become totally desperate before they can access social assistance.

?The concern we have is there is no indication whatsoever that the government understands the need to constrain spending. Even [NDP Leader] Andrea Horwath pointed out there are no accountability measures referenced in this budget whatsoever. That has been a huge problem for this government over the last number of years and it goes back to what I am very comfortable in referring to as literally billions of dollars of waste every year.?

While he said commitment for infrastructure funding is a positive, the question is whether the province can afford it. He also said he was disappointed there weren't more references to mental health when the document discussed healthcare, particularly the amount of time people have to wait to be treated, as well as children's mental health issues.

He added concerns over fiscal accountability and the fact the NDP are the kingmakers in whether the Ontario Liberals will be able to govern without an election are comments he has been receiving from residents, although he is confident Premier Wynne will have no difficulty securing the support of Ms. Wynne to be allowed to govern.

That gut feeling is shared by Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, who also supported the increased commitment for infrastructure funding. ?We will have to see how that will be divvied up, of course, but that is always good,? he said. ?We're always looking for ways to pay for those projects that cost a lot.?

Some of those costlier items include the planned Youth Centre for the Aurora Family Leisure Complex, as well as the recently approved new Joint Operations Centre for the municipal Public Works and Parks Departments. Mayor Dawe said he hoped this increased funding would help offset some of the costs for ?shovel-ready? projects such as these.

?We still have sewer work we wish to do and new buildings that are coming up and just from a cursory reading we should be able to apply some of that funding for shovel-ready projects,? he said, noting there were also areas he would have liked to have seen further

support.

?They have done an increase on people for support, and about a year ago I was at an ODSP and Ontario Works evening on how to make it better and one of the suggestions was we need to let people go out and earn some income and not negatively affect their benefits. That is still not enough of an incentive.

?I think to allow people to go out and get a job and start to recover some funds and, perhaps, some self-esteem is a start, but I would like to see more.?