

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Newmarket & Aurora Vigils

By Chris Ballard, MPP

Newmarket-Aurora

I have always known that we live in one of the most giving and caring communities in the province and once again, Newmarket and Aurora have proven me right.

January 29 is a dark day in Canadian history. A mass shooting at the Islamic Cultural Centre in Quebec City left six innocent people dead ? fathers, sons, grandfathers, brothers ? and 19 others injured.

All across Ontario vigils were held to remember and honour those who were affected by the cowardly shooting.

It was my privilege to have attended two vigils in our community, one in Newmarket and the second in Aurora. Both were standing room only and spilled into the hallways. I was deeply moved by the hundreds of residents who showed up at the vigils; who stood with their neighbours, friends and families, and showed support for the Muslim community.

I'm not sure I can clearly define what ?Canadian values? are, but I know they don't include shooting people as they pray.

Embracing our differences is what makes our country and province so great. There is strength in diversity. Our Muslim friends and neighbours need to know they do not stand alone, that we will not tolerate violence, and they should not be fearful to go to the mosque, to work, to school or to shop. Thank you to the hundreds who were in attendance. The challenge now is to build on the friendships we've begun these nights.

Chamber Breakfast and OSAP announcement

Last week, the Newmarket Chamber of Commerce hosted a breakfast with the Honourable Liz Sandals and myself. Minister Sandals is the President of the Treasury Board and has years of experience in many different ministries within the province, most recently as Minister of Education.

Minister Sandals talked about the responsibilities of the little known Treasury Board and took questions.

I wanted Minister Sandals to meet our local business leaders, given the critical role of Treasury Board in ensuring government funds are allocated and spent only after a very thorough vetting process.

As I have learned, getting a spending request through the Treasury Board is an exhaustive, and often daunting, process.

Treasury also spearheads the Program Review Renewal and Transformation program that examines provincial programs with an eye to ensuring government delivers top quality services at the best possible cost.

After the Chamber breakfast, we headed to St. Maximillian Catholic High School in Aurora for a tour and to talk to students about the new Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). We showed students how to use the new online OSAP calculator (at ontario.ca/osap) to see what grants and loans they might be eligible for to attend college or university.

The province is making college and university more affordable for students and families by making tuition free for over 150,000 students. Students from families with higher family income will also benefit from more generous grants and loans.

If the new OSAP does one thing, I want it to remove the financial barrier to post-high school education. A youngster in Grade 7 or 8 should not be discounting college or university because they know mum and dad won't be able to afford it.

Job Numbers

The January job numbers have been released and the province of Ontario's economy is continuing to grow.

Since this time last year, Ontario has created 90,100 jobs. Our unemployment rate of 6.4 per cent remains below the national rate for the past 22 consecutive months. Ontario's economy is doing well and we continue to lead Canada, the U.S. and all the G7 nations.

The province is continuing to build Ontario up by creating a positive climate for business that attracts investments and creates jobs now and for the future, like the recent investment in Honda. Many people in our area work in the auto-sector and by continuing to support companies like Honda, it can continue to support our community.

Community Events

Last Sunday, I had the privilege of attending the inaugural Newmarket Lunar New Year celebration at the Old Town Hall.

The celebration was made possible by The Federation of Chinese Canadians in York Region and Wasim Jarrah Real Estate Services, along with their sponsors.

The year of the Fire Rooster was kicked off with music, dance, including a traditional lion dance, an eye-dotting ceremony, and a visit from the God of Fortune. It was great fun to see friends out from Aurora and Newmarket enjoying this fun event. Make sure you come join us next year.

I also attended the Aurora Winter Blues Festival kick-off.

The festival raised funds for Blue Door Shelters, CHATS and AWBF ?Youth in Music? Program. This is the sixth year for the festival and it continues to grow and give back to our community. The musical acts are always superb and entertaining. If you have never been to the Aurora Winter Blues Festival, I encourage you to attend ? it's a great way to shake off the February ?blahs.?

As always, I invite you to contact me on any issue. Please call my community office at 905-750-0019, or visit my website at www.ChrisBallardMPP.ca. My email is: cballard.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org. I look forward to hearing from you.