

Mayor, MPP hail investments in health, business and broadband in Provincial budget

By **ROB PAUL**

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

On March 24, Ontario's Minister of Finance Peter Bethlenfalvy announced the 2021 Provincial Budget as the next phase of Ontario's COVID-19 response.

The budget brings the Province's total investment in health to \$16.3 billion and its total investment in the economy to \$23.3 billion.

Ontario's COVID-19 action plan now totals \$51 billion.

"You can't have a healthy economy without healthy people," said Bethlenfalvy. "For the past year, we have been focused on protecting people from COVID-19. Many challenges lie ahead. But with vaccines being distributed in every corner of the province, hope is on the horizon. We are ready to finish the job we started one year ago."

To help in the fight against COVID-19, the Province is making over \$1 billion available for a province-wide vaccination plan and aiming to make it safer for people to return to workplaces, businesses, and to every facet of their community with \$2.3 billion being invested in testing and contact tracing efforts.

Due to the economic impact of COVID, the budget will also invest in supporting workers and families through actions such as providing a second round of Ontario Small Business Support Grant payments; investing an additional \$400 million over the next three years in new initiatives to support the tourism, hospitality, and culture sectors; proposing a new Ontario Jobs Training Tax Credit for 2021; implementing a third round of payments to support parents through the Ontario COVID-19 Child Benefit; and proposing a 20 per cent enhancement of the CARE tax credit for 2021.

"The necessary public health measures have come at a cost for workers, families and business owners, but there is no question that they have saved lives," said Bethlenfalvy. "We recognize the sacrifices that have been made. We are taking further steps to provide additional relief and support to those who have been most impacted by the pandemic, including providing a third round of direct payments to parents, doubling the Ontario Small Business Support Grant, and helping workers with their training expenses."

Mayor Allan Thompson was happy to see that the Provincial government would continue to help the people of his community through investments in COVID assistance and improving internet.

"The Provincial budget tabled yesterday (March 24) offers critically needed additional supports for our hard-hit small businesses and another \$2.8 billion dollars in broadband funding. This brings the total funding for broadband to \$4 billion which will help communities like Caledon accelerate our goal of bringing high speed to every corner of our Town," said Mayor Thompson. "The pandemic has emphasized the need for reliable, affordable broadband to access jobs, healthcare and education, something we have long advocated for here in Caledon."

Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones believes that overall, the provincial budget was "absolutely" positive for the Peel Region and Caledon community. One major reason for Jones' positivity regarding the 2021-22 budget, was the efforts put forth by the Government of Ontario to help local businesses as they continue to feel the impacts of COVID-19.

"We're very focused on protecting people's health and ultimately making sure the businesses that cannot currently operate as they normally would are protected until we get sufficient vaccines to allow them to open safely," Jones said. "I don't think this is over, frankly. I think in Peel Region in particular, because we continue to be in a grey controlled zone, it's still very much in the throes of

the pandemic and we're still fielding that. We cannot have the activities, the businesses, and the restaurants open as much as we've seen in the past. The investment that the Province made to give additional support to those businesses immediately and directly impacted by the shutdown, means that they have that needed additional support until we can get to a safe re-opening.?

More specific to Caledon, Jones points towards the focus put on improving internet around the province?an issue residents in the Caledon community have dealt with and felt even more with people working from home and students participating in E-learning as a result of the pandemic.

?Related to Caledon in particular, I have to say that the additional investment in broadband that we've committed to? \$16.9 billion? is really incredible,? said Jones. ?The reason I say that is, COVID has taught us that access to reliable broadband is so important. Now with the planned provincial investment of 10 years, \$145.4 billion? including \$16.9 billion in this coming fiscal year of 2021-22? it's going to mean real expansion. Within Caledon we've already had it on Mount Wolfe Road and Centreville Creek Road in Albion, but that can be expedited with this investment.?

In this year's budget, she says there's a clear emphasis being put on the people in the communities with investments from the government that will be felt locally like the over \$50 million annually being put towards expanding the para-medicine programs in the province.

?It's very much an investment in people and an investment in the economy,? said Jones. ?An example I would give in Dufferin-Caledon, Dufferin County has had a community paramedic program for a number of years, where community paramedics can visit patients in their own homes and avoid the need for emergency visits because they see stuff emerging if there are problems. That community para-medicine program will now be coming to the Region of Peel, which is \$9.7 million. That's a real incentive for people who are perhaps waiting for a long-term care home, they can now safely stay in their own home and have those visits from the community paramedics.?