

Mayor, MPP look at local impacts of Economic Statement

By Rob Paul

Last week, Ontario's Minister of Finance Peter Bethlenfalvy released the "2021 Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review: Build Ontario."

The plan goes through in detail how the government plans to build the foundation for Ontario's recovery and prosperity by getting shovels in the ground on critical infrastructure, attracting increased investment, and restoring leadership in auto manufacturing and other industries while also protecting Ontarians against the COVID-19 pandemic.

"As we continue to protect the hard-won progress against the pandemic, our government is looking forward with our plan to build a better and brighter future for families, workers and businesses in Ontario," said Minister Bethlenfalvy. "By unlocking critical minerals in the North, harnessing our manufacturing capacity and building critical infrastructure, our plan will drive our economic recovery and prosperity for every region of our province."

Mayor Allan Thompson said he was pleased to see the funding put towards healthcare given the state of the province as COVID-19 continues to make an impact.

"I was glad to see a number of healthcare enhancements in the Province of Ontario's Fall Economic Statement," said Thompson.

The province also reaffirmed its commitment to expanding and building highways in the Fall Economic Statement. This includes committing funding to build and advance both the Bradford Bypass and Highway 413 (the GTA West Corridor).

Knowing the impact that the highways will have environmentally both on the province and Caledon with the Greenbelt set to be affected, Thompson said he would like to see alternative options and strategies to the current highway plan.

"I also noted that the Province is directing funds to the design and construction of the GTA West Corridor and that has a big impact to Caledon," he said. "I would like to see us take a role in advocating the Province for a Green Transportation Corridor that will both service the growth we will be experiencing in the next 30 years and still contribute positively to the carbon neutral goals in our Climate Change Action Plan."

"The emerging theme of the recent climate change summit in Glasgow is that the world needs to look different in the future, so why not a different type of transportation corridor. One that features innovative green technologies to move people and goods across the GTHA?"

Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones says she is excited to see the commitment to people in the Fall Economic Statement by prioritizing health, transportation, and cost of living.

"Residents in Dufferin-Caledon have demonstrated the Ontario Spirit by working together to do their part in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic," said Jones. "The [Economic Outlook] is our government's plan to support Ontarians by protecting our progress, building Ontario and working for workers, so that the province and all of our communities in Dufferin-Caledon can emerge stronger than ever."

With Highway 413 being the most polarizing topic that impacts Caledon in the economic statement, Jones wants to emphasize that though the government is committed to building the highways, it's also committed to expanding public transit opportunities.

"The big thing and the thing everyone is talking about, of course, is our commitment to move ahead with the 413 corridor," she said. "What is most telling about that is that our spend on transit is three times what our spend is on infrastructure for highway and road"

construction. To suggest we don't understand the value of public transit just doesn't show in the numbers.?

Some of the top highlights for the Caledon area in Jones' eyes are the investment into William Osler Health System to enable future development of an emergency department, the investment into high-speed internet, and the funding of Highway 413 to help with the potential increase of commuters over the next decade.

?For Caledon in particular, moving ahead with the phase two redevelopment of the William Osler Health System is big news and healthcare always rises to the top in terms of concerns for people,? she said. ?There's also an infrastructure build on the Grange Sideroad in Caledon rebuilding a bridge. Finally, for many families and people who have been working remotely from home during the pandemic, a commitment to continuing to expand internet broadband connectivity for Dufferin-Caledon. The top three things I'm most excited about are healthcare investment, expanding internet, and moving ahead with the 413.?

The government has committed \$4 billion over the next six years to making high-speed internet accessible and affordable to all by the end of 2025. It's an investment that Jones suspects will be met with plenty of positive feedback from those in Caledon.

?Over the last year and a half, a lot more people are saying that internet and broadband connectivity are not optional things anymore, we need it, and we need it for our businesses and our families,? she said. ?That has been an ongoing topic and I think that the interest will expand as we announce where the expansions will occur. We've been able to expand over the last few years with some expansions being announced north of Bolton and throughout Dufferin-Caledon, when those neighbourhoods know they're getting the expansion that's when excitement hits because it's not just an announcement, they know it's actually coming.?

The pandemic has put the vastness of the healthcare system into perspective for many, says Jones, and that's why the \$342 million investment into health and long-term care workforce to add 5,000 new and upskilled registered nurses and registered practical nurses as well as 8,000 personal support workers is one of the biggest positives of the economic statement.

?Health care impacts so many of us in very direct ways, whether you're looking after an elderly relative, have a sick child, or whether you just want to get that annual done,? she said. ?Everybody has a story and an impact when it comes to healthcare and there's no doubt that the COVID pandemic has shown where our challenges are. Suddenly we understood how critically important personal care workers are and how important they are for looking after people to allow them to stay in their homes or to have good quality of life in a long-term care facility. I think the pandemic has really highlighted for people these areas that they may have not spent as much time thinking about prior to the last year and a half.?

With cost of living becoming a growing issue, as part of the economic statement the government is proposing to increase the general minimum wage to \$15 per hour effective January 1, and to eliminate the special minimum wage rate for liquor servers by raising it to the general minimum wage.

?There's been a dramatic change in cost of living, particularly in the last six months when we see where gas prices have gone and the ability for people to have a living wage has really been impacted,? Jones said. ?At the end of the day, employers are looking to hire and keep people and the determination of wage will be made by whether they can keep and bring those staff into their places of business, but having a set way to approach minimum wage and tying it into the cost of living I think is a reasonable, and frankly, a non-political way to make sure people have some confidence in how the minimum wage is going to be set. Particularly, we're moving the lower special minimum wage for liquor services to bring us in line with other provinces.?

One of the most important aspects of economic recovery coming out of the pandemic is filling and finding jobs and to have people trained for those jobs. As such, to make sure Ontarians have every opportunity there will be a \$90.3 million investment in the Skilled Trades Strategy and an extension of the Ontario Jobs Training Tax Credit which would provide an estimated \$275 million in support to about 240,000 people, or \$1,150, on average.

?You don't have to go too far in Dufferin-Caledon to see the amount of businesses hiring today and looking for employees to know that there are lots of opportunities for those who need and want a job. Something else in the Fall Economic Statement was more

training opportunities," she said. "We're extending the Ontario Jobs Training Tax Credit which means that there are going to be individuals benefiting from training. If you want to learn a new skill or trade, there are going to be assisted opportunities through the Fall Economic Statement to make that easier for people."

With all of the governments investments to create jobs and fund training, Jones says the next step is seeing Ontarians take on the opportunities as they present themselves to fill the employment needs in the various sectors.

"Governments can talk about building and infrastructure, but if we don't have the employees, the skills and trades, and the workers to do that then we are very much stymied. That's why I think it's really about both parts. We'll make the investments as a provincial government to ensure that our infrastructure is there when we need it, but in order to do that, we need the people to do the jobs. That's why the provincial government really wants to be there to give those opportunities."