

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK

By Chris Ballard, MPP
Newmarket-Aurora

This is my last column before Christmas. I hope you and your family have a very happy, healthy and safe Christmas.

Aurora Go Trains

Last week I was joined by Steven Del Duca, Minister of Transportation, at the historic Aurora GO Station to announce that, starting January 2, 2018, the province is introducing new midday and evening weekday service between Union Station and Aurora GO Station.

Combined with the existing service, commuters along this section of the Barrie GO line will now benefit from all-day train service, seven days a week. The service improvements include new hourly, two-way service between Union Station and Aurora GO Station during the midday and evenings, and extra morning, afternoon and late evening trips between Bradford GO Station and Union Station, hourly weekend GO rail service starting December 30, 2017, all GO trains will serve the new Downsview Park GO Station, connecting to the TTC Line 1 subway extension to York Region and timed GO bus connections providing customers north of Aurora GO Station convenient access to the new GO train services.

The new addition of these extra services on the Barrie Line is part of the largest rail project in Canada. More importantly, it is a response to the requests you have made as commuters, drivers and casual users of the GO system. Ontario is transforming to a regional rapid transit system and this change will bring weekly trips across the entire GO rail network from about 1,500 when the program began in 2015 to nearly 6,000 by 2024-25, with more all-day and 15-minute service coming to the Barrie Line. I am especially proud to be able to deliver on a promise I made to you in 2014.

Greenbelt Expansion

As residents of Newmarket-Aurora, we are very fortunate to have lovely green spaces to enjoy with our family, such as Fairy Lake and Sheppard's Bush.

Protecting the environment and our green spaces has never been more crucial and it is a priority for me and for the government. Significant growth and pressure from urban development is pointing to the need to expand the Greenbelt.

A new consultation is being launched which will include areas in the outer ring of the Greater Golden Horseshoe. Ontario's Greenbelt permanently protects 810,000 hectares of green space, farmland, vibrant communities, forests, wetlands and watersheds. Approximately 10,000 hectares were added to the Greenbelt in 2017, including 21 new urban river valleys and associated coastal wetland areas that connect to Lake Ontario. I have heard from you that it is not enough. Please find information on the Greenbelt plans and consultation by going to: ontario.ca/greenbelt.

For all of you who have made a passionate appeal for greater dedicated greenspace, I urge you to use this consultative opportunity to full advantage.

Hospice Palliative Care

Now that we have the Margaret Behan Hospice near Southlake, our first local residential hospice, it's time to focus on how to improve access to high quality hospice palliative care. All three parties at Queen's Park are working together to discuss what is needed to help make the conversation easier for anyone who is facing this challenge. Hospice palliative care is about living well to the natural end of life, and Ontario is a leader in Canada in providing care. But more needs to be done, especially given our aging population and the inevitable need for end-of-life care.

Licensed Child Care Spaces

One issue that I consistently hear from families in Newmarket and Aurora is the need for more child care spaces. I have heard your concerns and so has the province. Ontario is taking a significant step toward creating 45,000 new licensed child care spaces in schools, communities and other public spaces by funding almost 500 new child care rooms at 188 schools across the province. This means that more than 8,400 children and their families across the province will gain access to high-quality licensed care in a safe, convenient setting.

Access to quality and affordable child care is an essential part of the government's plan for a fairer, better Ontario. These new spaces will allow children to have a safe and caring environment to learn and grow, and allow more women to go back to work and pursue their careers, which is critical to closing the gender wage gap.

Supporting Inn From the Cold

Lighthouse Legal services and Market Brewing Company recently hosted J&B's Ugly Christmas Sweater party with all proceeds going to Inn From the Cold. The night was a lot of fun! Through the generosity of many local residents and organizations there was silent auctions, door prizes and, of course, a prize for the ugliest sweater, won by Newmarket Councillor Bob Kawpis.

The night included live music, food and lots laughter.

Inn From the Cold has been helping the homeless since it opened in 2004. Congratulations on a successful event.

Grants and Awards

The Ontario Trillium Foundation has changed its dates for grant submissions. All the details are available on the OTF website. The Ministry of Seniors Affairs is now accepting nominations for the Age Friendly Community Awards. For details go to www.ontario.ca and look for the Honors and Awards ? Community section.

I look forward to welcoming you all to my New Year's Levee at the Ray Twinney Centre in Newmarket, January 28 at 2 p.m. Join us for free skating, hot chocolate and refreshments and some good fun.