

Affordable housing, infrastructure top budget concerns: MP

By Brock Weir

Throughout January and February, local Members of Parliament held open houses across both of Aurora's ridings to take input from residents on what they would like to see in a new Federal budget from a new Federal government and this week, those who participated are able to see if their suggestions had an impact.

Finance Minister Bill Morneau delivered the Government's new Budget in the House of Commons on Tuesday afternoon.

Ahead of its release, Newmarket-Aurora MP Kyle Peterson told The Auroran he did not anticipate anyone who followed last year's Federal Election campaign, or any of the words from the Finance Minister since then, would be surprised by the budget, and residents could anticipate significant investments in infrastructure.

"I think there is going to be an investment in Canadians through infrastructure spending through hopefully more green and social [investments] and the long-term assets of infrastructure," said Mr. Peterson. "I hope that is in it, and I think it will be."

Ahead of the Budget, one particular tenet was leaked, namely the pledge to maintain retirement age at 65 rather than the anticipated change to 67 floated by the previous Conservative government. This was an issue Mr. Peterson said he heard voiced continually during the election campaign, with many Newmarket-Aurora residents expressing "worry" about the impact such a change would have on them.

But, everything comes at a cost, and well before Tuesday's budget, the Finance Minister announced deficits would be deeper than originally anticipated. In the weeks since then, Mr. Peterson says the "prevailing sentiment" from neighbours is "people don't mind the spending if it is spent on things that are worthwhile."

"I think it is more important to invest in things that don't seem as wasteful and I think people can live with deficits when they realise they are investments that are going to pay off in the midterm to long-term, as opposed to money we may never see a return on," he said.

Following the public input sessions, Mr. Peterson said common themes offered by residents were affordable housing, investments in infrastructure, such as broadband, as well as investments in green technology.

"A common theme I heard was whatever the spend is, or the investments are, make sure it either creates jobs or builds things we are going to need in the long-term," he said. "That was the overall theme I got because the promise during the election was to spend a lot of money, of course, and I think people are generally supportive of that as long as it is on the right thing."

"Transit is a big thing in Aurora and transportation is more than transit. It is not just something like the two-way GO train or anything like that, but it is also the overall approach to transit and how we can make transportation work for everybody. The more people take public transit, the less people [there are] on the highway and roadways, but we also have to improve the roadways and make sure they are serving the community as it grows."

"People even talk about there being more commitment to cycling and other green means of transportation as well, so that runs the gamut. There are also people who want to invest in affordable housing. Whether that is some way of encouraging builders to build more affordable housing and the mix when they are building new developments, or whether it is directly investing in some community groups that are already building housing solutions in the community."

Ahead of the Budget, the Aurora Chamber of Commerce echoed the call for increased infrastructure funding, sighting pre-budget submissions from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, which calls on the government to keep its commitment to infrastructure,

clarify the small business tax cut, and ?eliminate Ontario's Federal fiscal gap when it comes to EI funding.

Ontarians, they argue, contribute between \$9.1 and \$12.5 billion more than what they get back in terms of services. The Federal government ?must correct this fiscal gap, as the current funding calculation places the province at an economic disadvantage,? they agree.

?Following through on infrastructure investments in Ontario should be the federal government's top priority,? said Javed Khan, Chair of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors. ?The federal government has committed to investing in infrastructure and, in order for Ontario's economy to thrive, the province needs to see the federal government's commitments come to fruition in the near future.?