

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: It has been an honour

By Chris Ballard, MPP
Newmarket-Aurora

This will be my final column before the election is called. It has been an honour and a privilege to represent the residents of Newmarket and Aurora for the past four years. We've accomplished a great deal together.

When I was elected in 2014 it was on a commitment to you that I would work to achieve improved GO train service, contribute to a strong, local economy, protect our environment and improve conditions for families and seniors. Together we have made significant progress in all of these areas.

Four years ago, train service for those who commute hadn't seen whole scale improvement for many years. Commuters kept telling me that even just one more northbound train in the evening, a little bit later than what they had, would alleviate the stress of making that last train. There was no weekend service northbound or southbound.

So much has changed.

We now have earlier trains in the morning and more of them. We have earlier and later trains in the evening, and more of them. AND we have north and south bound service on weekends. Together we have convinced Metrolinx to address the severe parking situation in Aurora. We have also successfully made the case for a new station at Mulock and Bayview Avenue to accommodate the increased services and those yet to come.

It has been my pleasure to bring to the riding over \$6 million in grants to local groups through the Ontario Trillium Foundation since 2015. These funds have gone to organizations like Big Brothers and Big Sisters, Addiction Services of York Region, the Margaret Behan Hospice and Community Living Newmarket/Aurora for programs that create positive community change.

From planting trees to helping protect Lake Simcoe, my role as a local MPP has had a positive impact on the local environment.

In my role as Minister of Environment and Climate Change I have had the privilege of overseeing the implementation of the Cap and Trade program. On a local level that program has made it possible for local families to install improved levels of insulation and get new windows for their homes while getting significant rebates to help with the expense of these renovations. This has allowed people to contribute to the fight against climate change by lowering their heating bills and doing home improvements at the same time. This program has also allowed local business to flourish with increased work and as a result increased the number of employees they have in the community.

Importantly, in the last year alone, Southlake Regional Hospital has seen increases to their budget by over \$14 million. Southlake is the core to our health care in Newmarket and Aurora. The staff and volunteers of the hospital have worked exceptionally hard at providing quality care and making the best use of all resources. These latest increases will make it easier to deliver those services.

The hospital has also received an allocation of 12 new mental health beds; new beds that are very much needed.

Two years ago I sat down with our local police chief and he told me about the cases his officers are handling and how about half that case load is related to mental health issues.

That conversation led to more conversations and we are now at the development stage for a mental health hub in York Region. We are underfunded for mental health in this area and with the cooperation and support of the local LHIN and service delivery organizations we are well on our way to addressing that.

I am proud of what we have accomplished together and I hope to return to Queen's Park in June to continue that work. I am committed to seeing this community benefit by the all day, two-way train service that we deserve. It isn't enough to just get people to the city and home for work. We need to build our local economy by bring others here to visit and to enjoy the trails, markets, restaurants and cultural offerings we have locally. We need to work harder to get people out of their cars and into mass transit. Those are the underlying benefits to the all-day service. If we build that service, Newmarket and Aurora will benefit.

I am anxious to continue the work on the mental health hub. Four years ago, mental health was not an issue at the doors or in the media. Society has by necessity come a very long way in that short time. We need to bring our community services up to the capacity they should be and we need to introduce additional and enhanced services through the hub.

As a member of the government, I am proud to be a part of the decision to bring free drugs to those who are 65 and older and those under 25. I think it is important to recognize the help that the Healthy Home Program will bring to seniors-lead households. I know how hard it is for college and university students so making post-secondary education more affordable is the key to their future.

Our Community. Our Future. That is what I see as the cornerstone of the decisions being made in June. This is not a time for cuts. It is a time for us to care about our community and our friends and neighbours. It has been an honour to represent you. Thank you

for your honest dialogue, support and encouragement.