

GO Transit's Aurora expansion inches closer in Budget

By Brock Weir

Expect to see some big changes around Aurora's GO station within the next 12 months, says Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard.

Last week, Finance Minister Charles Sousa introduced the Province's 2016 Budget and among the items impacting Aurora is a continued investment towards the end goal of an all-day, two-way rapid GO Train service from Toronto to Aurora.

It won't, of course, happen at the stroke of a pen, but the more money that is put aside for the project, the closer it comes to reality. The first step is a significant increase in the number of trips between Aurora and Toronto this summer, when GO Transit renews its pilot project for seasonal weekend service.

‘It is going to be expanded and this is the continual build up we have been talking about,’ says Mr. Ballard. ‘Until we are able to get to that 15 minute all-day GO service, we’re starting on the weekends and, in the years ahead, you will see us delivering on midday service throughout the week as well.’

The 2016 Budget, he says, reiterates Ontario's ‘continued commitment’ to making this a reality, a reality that is in the mix along with a number of other initiatives designed to get Ontarians on the move quickly and efficiently.

These initiatives include further lanes on Highway 404 up to Green Lane and continued collaboration with regional and municipal transit providers.

‘There are so many steps to get us to that 15 minute [goal], including double tracking, electrification, and you can see in this budget that dollars are set aside for that,’ says Mr. Ballard. ‘There are significant financial and technical challenges we have to overcome. There are a number of level crossings that we have to deal with between here and Newmarket, and obviously, here and Barrie, but they can get us here very fairly quickly. I believe we are going to see some significant construction around the Aurora GO Station in terms of a second layover track coming in, so we will see a lot of things happening over the next 12 months.’

Further GO Train service, however, could mean further parking problems and congestion in the vicinity of the transit hub. As these plans move forward, Mr. Ballard says he has brought together ‘a number of residents’ living in Aurora's Downtown Core and Metrolinx to discuss possible solutions. One project which might alleviate part of the problem is a second terminal for Newmarket built along Mulock Drive, which should eliminate congestion from several Newmarket commuters who use the Aurora station.

‘They are saying when we move to all day service, we may not see the same glut in the morning of parking requirements because people who have an appointment midday or later don't have to go down [to the station] at 7 a.m. They can go later and come home later, so there might be a more fluid use of the parking, but the issue we always have with parking is no matter how much we build, we will always need more. We need to come up with some creative ways of encouraging people to leave their cars at home or, better yet, carpool with their neighbours.’

Following the announcement, Mr. Ballard touted a number of key wins for the citizens of Ontario.

In a statement following Mr. Sousa's speech, he reiterated the Province's commitment to lowering hospital parking fees for frequent users, eliminating the \$30 fee for Drive Clean emissions testing, reducing auto insurance rates, and moving to expand beer and cider sales in grocery stores in the interests of ‘choice and convenience for consumers.’

Steps to make university tuition more affordable for families with incomes of \$50,000 or less will also have an impact on local households.

‘For those families, tuition will be paid for, but it also impacts families [who make up to] \$83,000 and a little bit higher,’ says Mr.

Ballard. ?Even for good middle class families in Aurora, there are a number of things that are good, including continuing to spend on infrastructure, which the experts tell us will create between 100,000 and 110,000 new jobs each year in construction and all the spin-off jobs that come from that.

We have a new program that is investing in job innovation and specifically small firms. Aurora obviously relies on automotive, but also aerospace is playing a larger and larger part in business life here [and there will be] continued investment in aerospace and continued investment in innovation in small business.

?Not a week goes by where a small business or a start-up comes to see me to try and partner the Province to secure some funding or secure some markets, so there are a lot of very innovative businesses here in the community that are looking for a hand up. There are programs in the budget that will be helping them.?

Have your say: What are your thoughts on Ontario's 2016 budget? Sound off by emailing letters@auroran.com.