

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Moving Ontario Forward

By Chris Ballard, MPP

Newmarket-Aurora

During the provincial election I pledged to be a strong voice at Queen's Park for improved GO Train service to our riding of Newmarket-Aurora. I have good news to report.

The government is bringing Regional Express Rail (RER) to the Barrie GO Train line, which serves our communities.

In its Moving Ontario Forward plan released as part of the 2015 budget, the government has committed to significantly improve GO Train service to our riding in the next five years. And, within ten years, the plan calls for the arrival of all-day, two-way, electrified GO Train service to Aurora, running every 15 minutes.

Within that same time, Newmarket GO Train commuters will get 30 minute peak and 60 minute off-peak, electrified, two-way, all-day service to Union Station.

Transportation Minister Steven Del Duca has told me GO faces challenges getting 15 minute service to Newmarket within 10 years because of the need to address at least four level crossings on major Newmarket roads. Construction will be time consuming, expensive and must be intricately planned to minimize traffic disruption.

The five-year plan outlines that both towns can expect to see two new weekday peak trips (morning and afternoon); 20 new weekday off-peak trips (midday and evenings); and 24 new weekend trips (typically Saturday). I will continue to advocate that this improved service arrives earlier.

I've believed for many years that improved GO Train service to our communities means more than making it easier to commute to Toronto. As Chair of the town's Economic Development Committee, we saw improved transit as key to an improved local economy. Although improving the GO Train commute is very important, this revolutionary change to GO Train service will mean economic growth and new jobs for our towns, as Toronto based companies look to locate to less expensive areas with a quality workforce ? but still have easy access to the city.

It will mean fewer cars on the road, especially during commute times. This should make the commute easier for those who must still drive to work, and for our local manufacturers to get their product to market and get raw product to their factories.

Studies show congestion in the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area (GTHA) costs Ontario's economy between \$6 billion and \$11 billion each year.

Electrification of the rail line is important for at least three reasons: electric trains accelerate faster and will cut travel time by an estimated 20 percent; electricity is much cleaner than diesel burning locomotives; and electric trains are quieter than diesel trains. Funding through Moving Ontario Forward will also be used to build priority rapid transit projects that will connect to GO Transit and other systems across the GTHA.

On April 16, Ontario moved ahead with its plan to unlock the value of public assets. Together with other asset optimization strategies, this would provide Ontario with \$5.7 billion, or about \$2.6 billion more from asset optimization than previously assumed. This increases Ontario's total commitment to Moving Ontario Forward from \$29 billion to \$31.5 billion. This is part of the province's plan to invest more than \$130 billion over 10 years in public infrastructure, which represents the largest infrastructure investment in Ontario's history.

It is expected the investment will support over 20,000 jobs per year, on average, in construction and related industries.

Construction of a second track on a section of GO Transit's Barrie line between York University GO Station and Rutherford GO Station is part of the RER initiative. Grading, bridge and culvert work is underway, with construction expected to be complete in 2017.

Currently, there are 70 weekly trips on the Barrie line. Over the next five years, that number will grow to more than 200. Over the next 10 years, weekly trips across the entire GO rail network will grow from approximately 1,500 trips to nearly 6,000.

Maximizing the value of public assets is part of the government's plan for Ontario. The four-part plan is building Ontario up by investing in people's talents and skills, building new public infrastructure like roads and transit, creating a dynamic, innovative environment where business thrives, and building a secure retirement savings plan.

Under Moving Ontario Forward, about \$16 billion is being allocated to projects in the GTHA. Transit expansion and improvement projects already underway in the GTHA include Union Pearson Express, Eglinton Crosstown LRT, York VIVA Bus Rapid Transit and Union Station Revitalization.

If you would like to contact me on any issue, please call my community office at 905-750-0019, or visit my website at www.chrisballard.ca. I look forward to hearing from you.