

Conservatives unveil 'prudent' federal budget

By Bill Rea and Chris Simon

Last week's federal budget gives local residents plenty to be thankful for, says Simcoe-York Conservative MP Peter Van Loan.

The proposed budget, which was introduced into the House of Commons last Tuesday, aims to reduce debt and taxes, while providing funding for struggling sectors of the economy. And items that should please most Canadians, like the new Tax Free Savings Account, support for the automotive sector, the hiring of police officers and increased transit funding, could impact local communities, said Van Loan.

"There are challenges on the horizon," he said. "Some would have us go down the path to higher spending,

higher interest payments and higher taxes. That approach is misguided. Our government is taking the path that requires focus, prudence and discipline."

Among the budget highlights, the government plans to create the tax free, general purpose savings account, and allocate \$10.2 billion towards paying down the national debt. The government would also allocate a total of \$1.6 billion in benefits to the auto industry in 2008 and each of the following five years, including \$250 million for an Automotive Innovation Fund.

And Ontario will receive millions of dollars in funding through the budget. Over \$358 million would be spent through the Community Development Trust, to help vulnerable communities

adjust to global economic uncertainty, and \$195 million over two years through the Public Transit Capital Trust. The province will also receive \$515 million for infrastructure initiatives, \$195 million for labour market training, \$13.4 million to alleviate financial pressures in the hog industry, and \$303 million through the Clean Air and Climate Change, HPV Immunization and Patient Wait Times Guarantee trusts.

"The Tax Free Savings Account is the first of its kind in Canadian history," said Van Loan. "It will provide all Canadians with a powerful incentive to save. An RRSP is primarily intended for retirement, but the Tax-Free Savings Account is like an RRSP for everything else in your life."

The Liberals have already

suggested they will support the budget. Failure to support it would trigger an election.

"This budget does not go as far as we would like in some areas, but it does not warrant an election that Canadians don't want, at a time when so much remains to be done in this parliament," said Liberal leader Stephane Dion in a press release. "With this budget, the Conservative government has begun to move in the direction that the Liberal opposition has been pushing. This government is obviously lacking its own ideas, which is why it has adopted so many of ours from funding infrastructure and manufacturing."

According to the budget, Ontario will also receive \$156 million over the next five years, to hire front line

police officers. About \$110 million will also be allocated to support mental health issues, and \$660 million for Aboriginal communities.

Ontario would also receive \$13.9 billion to address the fiscal imbalance.

York-Simcoe MPP Julia Munro agrees with several aspects of the budget.

"I actually thought there were a couple of things that were really good," she said.

Munro likes the idea of the tax-free savings accounts.

"Anything that encourages people to be looking at saving is a good thing," she said. "I think it's a really good incentive for people."

She also liked the idea of the money going to research and development in the auto industry, pointing out that will do more to make the industry innovative and

competitive.

In terms of flaws, Munro, who is the Progressive Conservatives' culture critic at Queen's Park, thought some more could have been done in that area, especially when it comes to preserving heritage. She pointed out it's hard for some local groups to afford insurance for some of their buildings, and she added some initiatives to assist museums would have been nice.

Van Loan says the budget is balanced and accurately depicts the current economic climate.

"Our government is taking the path that requires focus, prudence and discipline," he said. "This budget builds on our long-term economic plan Advantage Canada, a plan that is a realistic and responsible way forward."

Everton Bridge gets \$1.5 million fix

By Chris Simon

One of Gilford's main access points is finally getting fixed.

Town council approved a plan to spend nearly \$1.5 million for the replacement of Everton Bridge, a main route for emergency vehicles and one of the only ways out of Gilford for residents, during a meeting last week. As part of the plan, Everton

Drive will be closed from March 1 to Nov. 30.

"It's going to be an inconvenience to residents, but in the end it'll be a benefit to the residents," said mayor Brian Jackson. "It's always unfortunate construction causes some concern. But we're going to try and mitigate the timeframe. It's an attempt to inconvenience the population as little as possi-

ble."

Preliminary work on the bridge will begin once Everton Drive is closed, with road construction beginning in May. Work on the bridge is expected to be completed by March 2009.

In 2005, the town was granted over \$319,000 for the project through Canada Ontario Municipal Rural Infrastructure Funding.

However, poor soil conditions and problems obtaining federal permits have held up construction, said town engineering technologist Gavin Watson, in a report to council.

"A number of challenges have been encountered during the design of the replacement bridge," he said. "To obtain (federal) approvals, the bridge was required to be raised so that two metres of clearance was achieved above the average summer water level. This requirement forced the town to undertake additional flood line modeling to ... confirm the new structure and road did not impact flooding on lands upstream. Our soil consultant also found very

poor soil conditions in the area of the bridge, as well as a considerable distance north and south under Everton Drive."

Other requirements, like preloading the soil around the bridge and capping gas mains, were unexpected when the project was originally being planned, said Watson.

But the bridge needs to be replaced, and has already been reduced to one lane of traffic, he said.

"The existing Everton Bridge is in poor condition," he said. "The town should proceed with the project and take advantage of the current COMRIF funding allocated."

Councillor Lynn Dollin says the project is long overdue. The bridge has caused concern among local residents and town staff over the last few years.

"I'm glad to see we're ripping the band-aid off this,"

she said.

Council had expressed concerns over the initial length of time the bridge is expected to close and the required vehicle weight restrictions.

Staff have since reduced the project timeframe by about a month and a half, something that could slightly increase the overall project cost, said Watson.

However, delaying the project further would have caused construction timing problems and even COMRIF funding, he said.

"COMRIF funding for this project may not be available to the municipality in future years," he said. "Any further delay in commencing the project could result in the project not being completed within Department of Fisheries and Oceans (time-lines) or by March, which is the deadline to have all the works completed under the COMRIF agreement."

Park bridges funded

By Chris Simon

Innisfil Beach Park's bridges are getting a financial boost.

Town council approved \$25,000 for the installation of helical piles to support the pedestrian bridges in the park, during a recent meeting.

The town has already allocated \$97,000 for bridge work at the park, however soil tests have indicated the extra work needs to be done, said parks and recreation manager Rick Garner.

"Construction without the

proper footing for the bridge would provide an unsafe environment for our park users and therefore increase the liability risk if someone should fall or trip because of the shifting of the bridge abutment," he said, in a report to council. "It would also reduce the accessibility for disabled persons using our park, and would not be consistent with current Canadian pedestrian bridge codes."

The piles protect bridges and abutments from high water and runoff caused by flooding and ice damage.

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