

York Region made 'significant progress' in 2013, chairman says

By Mark Pavilons

The past year has been one of 'significant progress' at York Region, according to its chair.

Bill Fisch said some key regional initiatives included the opening of the first 2.5 kilometres of bus rapid transit in Richmond Hill from Bayview Avenue to Highway 404.

'I am proud to say we opened this segment four months ahead of schedule, surpassing our goal and providing enhanced service to our growing ridership,' he said.

In the past year, York made great strides toward enhancing safety initiatives, including the approval and activation of red light cameras at 20 intersections throughout York Region. This initiative is intended to help save lives and prevent injuries by modifying driver behavior.

In 2013, regional council approved plans for an annex, a new eight-storey office building to be built at the corner of Yonge and Eagle Streets in Newmarket. The annex will allow York Region to consolidate several office locations in leased space into a building the Region will own, saving millions of dollars over time and avoiding future costs.

This term, York approved a new development charge bylaw that increased the development charges for new retail properties. While York Region incurs debt to finance the infrastructure needed for growth, the region collects DCs to pay the principal and interest associated with debt.

One of the biggest challenges York Region will face in 2014 and beyond, is the continued implementation of infrastructure projects to manage expected growth and the debt required to finance infrastructure.

'York Region communities cannot grow without first putting in place critical infrastructure. To support our rapidly growing communities, York Region plans on issuing \$2.7 billion in debt in support of capital initiatives over the next 10 years, the majority of which will be repaid through development charges.'

Much of the Region's infrastructure-related construction is occurring in some of the busiest corridors. This comes with its challenges, but will yield many future benefits that will well-serve this rapidly growing community, Fisch observed. Construction on the vivaNext rapidways in Richmond Hill continues into 2014, adding 3.9 kilometres of rapidway from Highway 404 to Warden Avenue.

The extension of Highway 404 into Keswick is currently scheduled to be complete in the fall of 2014. Originally scheduled to open to traffic in 2012, Fisch said he's eager for this critical piece of transportation infrastructure to be completed.

The province announced its plans to extend Highway 427 north through Vaughan to Major Mackenzie Drive. Construction on the 6.6-kilometre highway extension is proposed to begin in 2016/2017. The extension of the 427 would open up Vaughan's employment lands and help facilitate the expansion of business in the area.

Both the federal and provincial governments have set aside roughly \$41.5 million to improve some 26 kilometres of Highway 400, from just north of Canal Road to Innisfil Beach Road. This improvement to Highway 400 will help improve commuter travel times and into York.

Fisch said advocating for affordable mixed-use housing will continue to be a priority for York, not only in 2014 but beyond. York Region's Housing York Strategic Plan 2012-2016 will be used as the framework to guide York Region through this period of exceptional growth.

York is a large geographic region and Fisch assures that every municipality has a voice and is respectfully involved in the decision-making process.

'We are fortunate to have a cohesive council, committed to exploring, discussing and supporting what is best for our residents and businesses at both a local and regional level,' he said.

'Regional council is committed to supporting all communities, including the specific needs of the region's rural communities.

Council's investment in water and wastewater capacity to support growth in rural areas is a testament to this commitment, investing approximately \$355 million to increase water system capacity in northern York Region.'

King has voiced its concerns regarding broadband access, especially in rural areas.

York understands the importance of connectivity to support infrastructure and spur economic development. Fisch said they're working with the northern six municipalities, to explore broadband solutions that will enhance and extend network connections across the Region.

'This partnership is key as economic development and retention in King Township has been identified as one of Mayor Pelligrini's top priorities,' he said.

Ensuring regional services are accessible in King Township continues to be a priority. In January of this year, YRT/Viva launched a new King Local route to accommodate customers travelling to and from the King City GO Station.