Hwy. 400 crossing in Barrie could benefit from fed budget

Chamber sees little for city in plan

Linking Barrie roads means jobs, investment, new coalition says

Barrie Advance
By Jenni Dunning

One Barrie business owner is worried the city will miss catching a ride on new federal government infrastructure funding for the Harvie Road crossing. But Mayor Jeff Lehman doesn’t share that view.

The Liberals unveiled a budget Tuesday that included $11.9 billion for infrastructure projects.

“These projects the government is going to fund, they’re shovel ready. The Harvie Road project is nowhere near shovel ready,” said Barrie Garden Centre owner Warren Patterson.

The Harvie Road Crossing Coalition member said there have been “huge gaps” in the initiative’s planning, such as city staff getting a go-ahead to move forward with a request for proposals for the work, which was not done until six months later.

“Barrie city staff has not been moving forward and is now going to miss the opportunity. It’s frustrating for the whole city,” he said. “The city has an opportunity to really expedite this process. It would be a shame (to miss the funding). At least apply for it.”

Mayor Lehman called the federal Liberals’ spending plan an “incredibly welcome budget from the point of view of mayors” and said he does not expect the city to miss out on any potential funding for the Harvie Road project.

“The infrastructure plan is a 10-year plan, and the Harvie Road bridge is well within that 10-year period, (and) the feds are now saying that design costs can be part of the project eligibility,” he said.
This means the federal government will now pay half of design costs instead of the one-third it would have before, he said. “One issue may be whether or not a highway bridge is eligible or not. We don’t know that yet.” Lehman said the city is also already jumping on leftover infrastructure funding from 2015.

This includes applying for money for a series of stormwater projects to clean up Lake Simcoe and deal with climate change, and transit fleet replacement and accessibility initiatives. “We were really waiting to hear about eligibility criteria before we sent a definitive list. These were just a few ‘shovel ready’ projects or those that seemed to fit the areas of interest,” such as the environment and transit, he said.

Barrie Chamber of Commerce CEO Rod Jackson said he is concerned the federal government is focusing on ‘shovel-ready’ projects, which he perceives as easy. “Is it going to benefit the growth, or is it going to be a Band-Aid?” he said. “I don’t see anything specifically for Barrie or Simcoe County.”

About 75 per cent of workers in Simcoe County are employed by businesses with four or fewer people, so helping people find jobs and small businesses thrive should be key for the federal government, he said. “We’re lucky in Barrie, our economy … is fairly strong. We don’t have a huge unemployment problem,” he said. “I’d like to see more of a roadmap of investment.”

Included in the federal government’s 2016 infrastructure funding are $3.4 billion for public transit and $250 million for the category “supporting municipal capacity building.” First Nations communities are also slated to get $2.2 billion for water and wastewater infrastructure and $1.2 billion for social infrastructure.

Lehman said he expects Barrie to get some of this funding within the next year. For example, the allocation of some transit funding is based on ridership. “That could help buy buses,” he said. Lehman said he is also pleased with the budget’s doubling of affordable housing funding to about $1.5 billion and the inclusion of ‘housing first’ initiatives. “The feds have put that right in the budget. Pathways in Barrie is exactly in line with that. That’s something that could directly help affording housing funding Barrie,” he said.

Dale Biddell, CEO of United Way Greater Simcoe County, said the organization is pleased with the affordable housing funding section of the budget. “We’re hoping that’s going to trickle down to our region,” she said. “We’re specifically delighted that there’s $112 million more for the Homelessness Partnering Strategy.” The United Way administers the strategy’s funds and assisted 714 Simcoe-Muskoka families in the last year, she said.

Biddell added United Way understands families need access to more resources, and the organization will continue helping the federal government “understand the benefits of 211,” a sort-of emergency phone number for social needs.

“The budget is addressing issues related to poverty and is going to present opportunities for low-income Canadians,” she said.