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New Centre Grey Hospital “a priority”

By Don Crosby
For The Standard

The Deputy-Premier of Ontario spoke encouragingly last week about the future of the proposed new hospital in Markdale. George Smitherman said the next step is to get more detailed planning done to make the Markdale hospital project more construction ready. “There’s a very high degree of awareness in our government of the necessity of doing that in Markdale. I’ve seen that facility myself. We did give them some money to get the first bit of planning done but we know the community is ready to move to the next level. I’m looking, along side my colleague David Caplan, to find the capacity to do that,” Smitherman said during an interview following a turf- turning ceremony for a new recreation centre in Hanover on Friday, April 3.

“The Centre Grey Hospital as an example stands as a priority for the government of Ontario. We haven’t yet been able to identify the funding in that community but no one can quarrel that there’s a need there. As we make infrastructure investments, Markdale, as one small example, is a place where additional revenue would be required,” said George Smitherman, who is also the Minister of Energy and Infrastructure. Maureen Solecki, the interim president and chief administrative officer of the Grey Bruce Health Services, agreed that there are more planning steps needed to go through in order to get to the final approval for the project and the hospital corporation is awaiting the ministry’s permission to move on to the next planning stage. “The functional program is with the ministry of health and under consideration by them. At this point, we don’t have approval of the functional program yet so we can’t go on to the next step,” Solecki said.

Only about one third of the money promised by Smitherman in 2006 to pay for the planning and design of the new hospital has been spent. “We’ve only received about \$ 1 million of the \$3 million grant... that was to get us to submit our functional design program to the ministry of health... There are a number of phases yet to go...in order to be ready for construction,” Solecki explained.

Markdale is fortunate to have a planning and design grant and Solecki noted that she is encouraged by Smitherman’s commitment to the project.

“There are lots of communities in the province with desires to do major renovation projects or rebuild projects, and they have not received approval for planning and design grants, and we are very pleased that we have received that. Another huge factor for the rebuild of Centre Grey hospital has always been the huge community support of the project,” she said.

The minister said the Ontario government in the next two years plans to spend an additional \$7 billion on additional hospital construction He said that in the last five years the Liberal government has invested more money in hospitals than the last

five governments in Ontario combined.

“Yes, as we make infrastructure investments, the Markdale hospital, as one small example is a place where additional revenue will be required. We’re going to keep building,” said Smitherman. “It’s a top of mind issue. Lots of places can make a strong case for why they need investment and Markdale can make a very, very strong case for that, so we hope to be in a position to show some progress for that community,” he added. Solecki is aware of the huge pressure and demands on the province for hospital rebuild plans and other infrastructure projects, and recognizes the need to be patient as the Centre Grey Hospital winds its way through a very complex approval proposal process.

“It’s good to know that this project remains well known to the minister. We’re thrilled with that because you know the community is concerned and anxious that the project go forward as soon as possible,” she said.

Grey Bruce Owen MPP Bill Murdoch said he was heartened by Smitherman’s candour when asked about the plans for the new hospital.

“He said it was right up there near the top. . .and as long as he keeps talking about that way it will get done. . . to my mind he seemed quite genuine. I think it’s all positive,” said Murdoch, who believes Smitherman has a degree of personal commitment to the project.

“I’ve always felt that way. I always felt George was committed to it. . .He has been right there from the start. . .and today just proved it when he spoke the way he did,” Murdoch said.