

Oakville Beaver

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Town offered more time to consider hospital deal

More delegations will be heard Wednesday night

He asked the Province for more time to consider the issues surrounding the funding of Oakville's new hospital.

Now Oakville Mayor Rob Burton has that time, provided council wants to take advantage of it.

Oakville MPP Kevin Flynn announced during Monday night's council meeting that Oakville can take until April 24 to decide whether it will agree to a \$200 million funding request from Halton Healthcare Services to help fund the new Oakville hospital, which is planned for the corner of Third Line and Dundas Street.

Council had been expected to make a decision Monday, but Burton asked for three additional three months. He said lack of information about what the \$200 million is actually paying for made a deferral of the issue essential.

The deadline has since been clarified as April 24 with Flynn saying this is the latest the decision can be put off without disrupting the process of finding a consortium to build the hospital.

"That will give you between six and eight weeks from this day forward to have that full consultation that will help clarify some of the questions that we had between us and some of the staff at Queen's Park," said Flynn.

"Certainly I think you have the luxury of time. I think you have the time to engage in the proper discussions that are necessary and I ask you to keep in mind that this is something you will probably do once in your lifetime, something of tremendous importance to the community. I will work as cooperatively as I can to ensure you have all the answers you need to make the right decisions," said Flynn.

Halton Healthcare Services President and CEO John Oliver had voiced concerns the consortiums, which have shown interest in building the hospital, might lose that interest if the project was delayed for three months. However, he said a decision to delay until April 24 would still give Halton Healthcare Services time to prepare for the Request for Proposal (RFP) on May 27.

The issues surrounding the hospital and the size of the funding request have been a source of concern for many, which was apparent Monday with more than 100 people packing council chambers forcing many to stand.

Unfortunately, no decision was reached Monday night because Council was unable to hear all the registered 34 delegations.

The remainder of the meeting will be held Wednesday in council chambers at 6 p.m.

At the heart of the issue for many is the tax increase that would take place if council agrees to give Halton Healthcare Services the requested \$200 million.

One payment scenario would see an escalation in property taxes from \$15 per year per \$100,000 of assessment in 2015 to \$35 per year per \$100,000 of assessment over 30 years.

Another payment scenario would see a flat mortgage style payment of \$140 per year per \$500,000 of assessment beginning in 2015.

On the other side of the issue is the current condition of Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital, which Oliver said must be replaced, as it can no longer accommodate Oakville's growing and aging population.

While the meeting presented residents with an opportunity to speak, it also gave Oakville councillors an opportunity to get their questions about the hospital answered.

During one barrage of questions Oliver said it was unlikely Halton Healthcare would ask Oakville for more money for the hospital as provincial law places the risk of going over budget for these projects on the private sector.

During this question period Oliver also revealed that he could not guarantee the expanded programs planned for the new hospital would not be reduced and that the Oakville Hospital Foundation has to date succeeded in raising \$11 million of the \$60 million needed for their portion of the \$530 million local share.

A public consultation campaign, undertaken by the Town throughout early January and mid-February, showed Oakville residents were divided on the hospital issue.

A report presented to council on the campaign stated that as of Feb. 21, the Town had received 819 completed web surveys, 1575 completed mail surveys and 600 completed telephone surveys.

The Town also received 74 emails on the subject of the hospital while 88 people attended a public meeting on the issue.

Jane Courtemanche, Oakville's Director of Strategy, Policy and Communications stated in the report that feedback was largely positive when it came to the question of supporting the new hospital or acknowledging the need for a new hospital with positive responses from 86 per cent of residents surveyed by phone, 87 per cent of residents surveyed by mail and 91 per cent of residents surveyed by the web.

This support diminished significantly for the survey question of whether residents supported a \$200 million Oakville contribution to the hospital.

For this question support dropped to 65 per cent of web survey respondents, 57 per cent of mail survey respondents and 47 per cent of phone survey respondents.

With such a slim majority supporting the \$200 million contribution Pollara Strategic Insights, the company hired by the Town to conduct the phone survey, advised it might be necessary to take the time to achieve broader public support.

This mixture of public opinion on the hospital issue became crystal clear when it finally came time for the delegations to speak.

Oakville resident Blake Taylor voiced a number of concerns about the lack of information presented concerning the \$200 million payment plan and the impact it would have on others.

“What kind of debt will we be leaving to our children and youth for the next 30 to 35 years. One of the largest debts in our history,” said Taylor. “I received very little information tonight about the facts that have been asked of our local staff. How are you going to make a decision as councillors when you don’t know the facts? You are asking the citizens of Oakville to take on a burden of \$200 million when we don’t have any facts.”

Other speakers found it strange so many people were putting money above their health.

“The enjoyment of our lives depends on our health and state of well being. Having our health is critical to everything we do. Most often we take our health for granted and place other things as our priority until something happens to change that,” said Loren Francis, Oakville Hospital Foundation board member and Oakville resident. “You cannot enjoy your health without your wealth and you cannot go to your grave holding your tax dollars. Quality of care should be our priority and if there is one thing I am willing to pay for it is the best health facility available. I’m not going to suggest this be at any cost, but what is currently on the table, I’m okay with.”

Oakville resident John Kay said he had a problem with the provincial process, which will require Oakville to make a commitment to the hospital project on April 24 followed by final agreement made in 2011 with decisions on how to pay the \$200 million local share falling to the council of 2014.

More public consultations are necessary, said Kay, who added he knew many people who threw out the hospital surveys without realizing what they were.

He ended his remarks by asking council to get more information and if they can't get it to say, 'No.'

Oakville resident Mohamed Bhamani said a new hospital is necessary because while the OTMH staff is great the surroundings are not.

On one visit to OTMH Bhamani remembers a nurse telling him not to allow his baby daughter near any of the other new-borns in the ward due to the possibility of spreading an infection.

"If asking patients nicely to not to spread an infection is our community hospital's plan to stop the spread of infections, I think it is clear to see that that facility is not built for today's realities," said Bhamani.