



## Taxpayers ante up — without griping — in drive to make London a health care capital

Lynne Swanson

Residents of London, Ont., appear to have few qualms about paying higher property taxes when they know the money will be spent to support local hospitals. And there's more than altruism involved. Local politicians say health care is an economic engine that can return huge benefits by making the city a "health care capital."

The city is contributing \$15 million over 7 years to a \$330-million restructuring of local hospitals. The \$15 million is part of a \$120-million community fund-raising campaign. The province is providing the other \$210 million — the largest restructuring grant in Ontario.

The cost on the average London home assessed at \$134 000 is \$13 per year, and this will appear as a separate line item on each property tax bill beginning in 2000. Because the hospitals serve a wider community than London itself, \$2.5 million of the total is conditional on matching contributions from other municipalities.

"We at city hall felt it was very important to recognize the integral part the health care industry plays in our city," says London Mayor Dianne Haskett. In making the contribution decision, Haskett says city council "focused not only on the health and well-being of our community but also on the economic well-being and the economic future. We believe there is every opportunity for London to ultimately be seen as a health care capital of Canada. We are already known for our health and medical research facilities, and we believe it's important to nurture that aspect of our economy."

Londoners' response has generally been favourable; the relatively few complaints received at the mayor's office have dealt mainly with the downloading of provincial responsibilities to the municipality. Haskett says city councillors struggled with that aspect of their decision and with their commitment to keep London taxes as low as possible, but they concluded that this contribution "will help spur corporate donations that are so necessary. . . . We felt this contribution was in the long-term health and economic best interests of the city of London and the people of London. We believe it is an investment that will pay great dividends.

"We also recognize it is part of a much more substantial sum that will spur the biggest building boom London has ever seen — \$330 million in capital construction."

Cliff Nordal, president of St. Joseph's Health Centre, calls the contribution the "major leadership gift to the en-

tire campaign." He says corporations often ask about municipal support before deciding to donate.

In addition to the financial benefits, Nordal says the \$15 million is "very, very symbolic in the sense of the city itself, with elected officials making a statement to the broader public that this is an important campaign. . . . It really helps to make the case as one is going forward to corporations and foundations as to the importance of this campaign."

Nordal says the commitment also "attracts a fair bit of public attention. It makes everyone aware that [the campaign] is coming up and that this is something we need to think about as a community."

Although other municipalities have made similar donations to their hospitals, the cooperation and collaboration among London hospitals seeking the city donation were unique. "It really demonstrates that the hospitals, the boards and the leadership are moving in harmony to implement the restructuring of the system and we've agreed with the restructuring and we're moving ahead on it," says Nordal.

By working together, he says, London hospitals eliminated the need for local elected officials to choose or make value judgements about which health care needs should receive priority. Instead, that responsibility remains with the health care centres.

John Schucht, chair of the London Health Sciences Foundation campaign, is optimistic the hospitals will have achieved 50% to 55% of their \$120-million goal before the public campaign is officially launched this fall.

This includes the city's donation, \$1.25 million from the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, \$1 million from Canada Trust and a \$5-million, 5-year commitment from the Ladies' Auxiliary of the London Health Sciences Centre. In addition, the *London Free Press* and Bowes Publishing have donated \$500 000 in advertising to support the campaign. Schucht agrees that the city's leadership will be critical in securing further corporate donations.

Capital building projects are expected to generate 9000 person years of construction work at the Health Sciences Centre (Victoria, South Street and University campuses), Children's Hospital of Western Ontario, St. Joseph's Health Centre, Parkwood Hospital, and the London and St. Thomas psychiatric hospitals.

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