

The Acton Free Press

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Mandatory penalties make a lot of sense

Word from police forces across the nation, including Halton, that the number of people nabbed for impaired driving this holiday season is down substantially should be viewed as a great holiday season blessing.

Finally impaired drivers are getting the message. They don't belong on the road. This makes the streets a little safer for everyone else.

This drastic decrease in the number of impaired charges might lead some to think that tough new penalties for drunk drivers from the federal government and the insurance industry's plan to make impaired driving charges cost you dearly in future premiums aren't all that necessary.

But, a decrease in impaired drivers at a time of the year when there is overwhelming and effective advertising against the practise, as well as beefed-up enforcement which is highly visible by police everywhere, doesn't mean the problem of drinking drivers is disappearing. They're just being more careful when the odds of

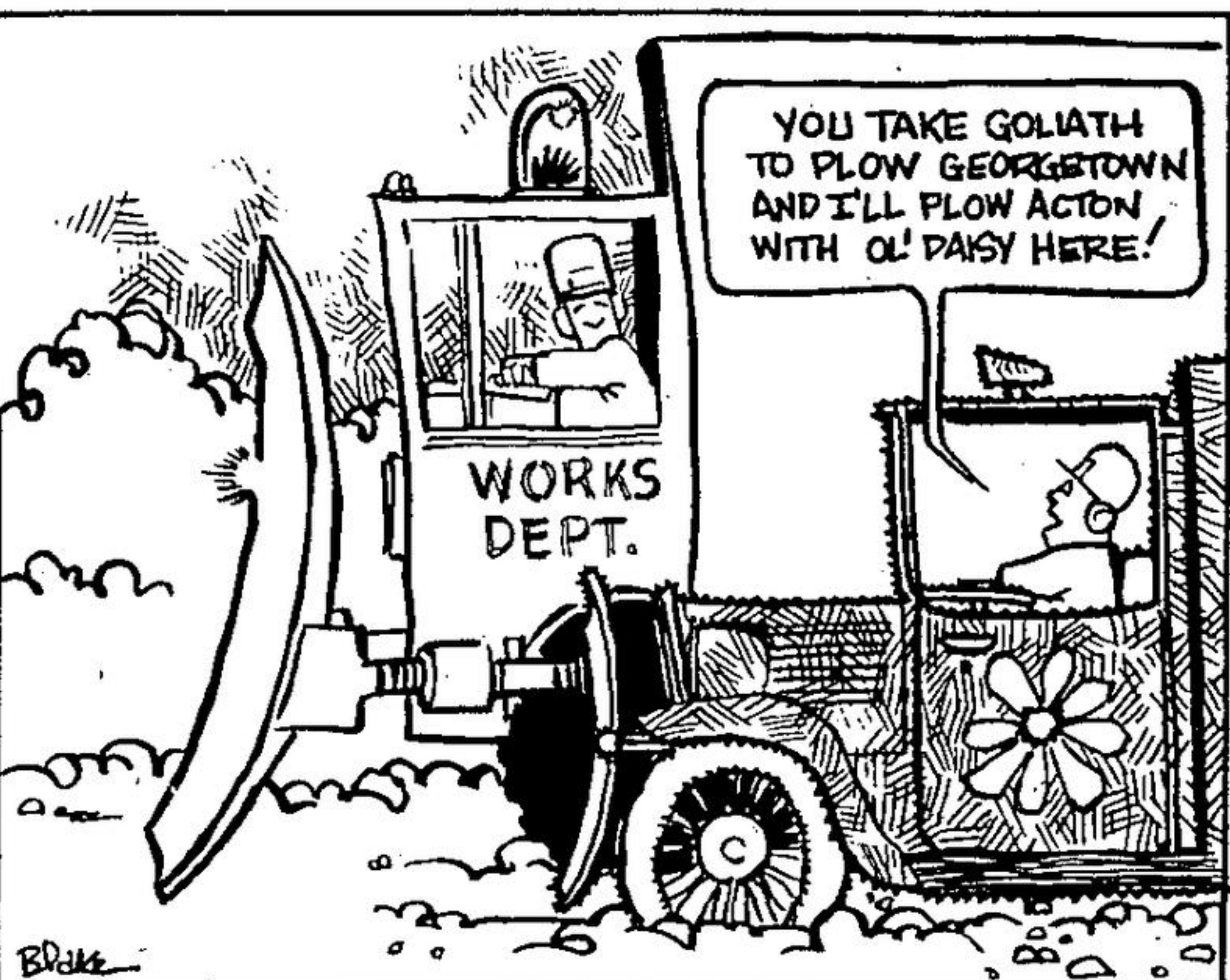
getting caught are increased.

Mandatory jail terms, fines and licence suspensions for drinking drivers are in place now in this province and the feds seem prepared to make them even stiffer.

Mandatory jail terms and other compulsory penalties depending on what the impaired driver did, such as killing or seriously injuring someone, also make sense.

No doubt there are readers who wish there were more mandatory sentences on the books and less discretionary powers for the judiciary.

The reaction of readers to the recent 60 day jail sentence for the person behind the wheel of a car in a dangerous driving case in which one Actonian was killed and another badly injured, ranged from shock to outrage to contempt for our courts. This case didn't involve excess drinking, but it was still extremely serious and would seem to have been a good spot where a mandatory sentence on the books would have been helpful.—G.M.



From the editor's desk Mood of animosity here

I wish I had a buck for every time a politician or civil servant has told me that our readers should be going to them not to us, when we call to get an opinion about a concern brought to our attention by the public. The mostly unaided implication is that people who don't go to the source aren't worth listening to, by the paper or government, that they don't think it's our job to raise issues publicly.

We can understand this view. It must be darned frustrating and annoying for government to hear a beef from us and not from the complainers themselves. But, like it or not, one of the functions of the local press is to get answers out of government to questions the people won't ask themselves. Also, like it or not, our readers consider it part of our role to stand up and fight for them and they believe the paper should mirror their concerns.

Because Acton's so small and the staff is so visible (not just the people in the news end either) we get a tremendous amount of feedback. Public officials will be glad to know we field complaints about our own product.

There's no single reason why people don't go to the source of their concerns, the politicians and senior bureaucrats. Some are intimidated by their elected representatives and government staff; some don't feel comfortable discussing issues with them because of the jargon and terminology used by government and they feel their "plain talk" won't stand up; some feel it will do no good, nobody's listening; some, especially those working in government, believe (far too frequently they're right) that their employer will frown upon political activism or just plain speaking out; some are weary of fighting government; and for some it is just far easier to complain to the paper and wait for us to do something about their concerns, than to go to government themselves.

It's the same with letters to the editor or government. Lots of people want to write letters expressing a viewpoint, but lack the confidence in their writing skills. You'd be surprised how many people ask us to write the letter itself for them, using their thoughts and ideas, and then they'll sign it. We decline.

One other thing, people seem turned off to the system when politicians refer them to staff. Taxpayers rarely want to deal with bureaucrats, they feel they have no control in the matter. However, they do perceive they have some control over their elected representatives, through the ballot box. In a lot of cases you'd have a tough time ever proving that perception, but it is widely held.

Often people's reluctance to go the source, to rely instead on the press to carry the issue forward into public light, is branded cowardice or apathy. I don't think Acton lacks courage or that there's that much apathy. At the same time I think the desire not to stick one's neck out too far doesn't mean people forfeit their right to at least see the issues they're talking about raised.

morning one of our office personnel informed me she'd received a call at home from a reader wishing to tip us off that downtown Georgetown was receiving better snow removal service than Acton.

What with people shopping downtown during the pre-Christmas days and wading through slush or climbing over snow banks, the complaints just mounted up from there. I heard the complaints, Helen did, Hartley did, even Mark, who covers mostly sports, did. Our office and advertising people heard the gripes too. Many working in Metroland's production departments in this building with the Free Press brought the complaints to our attention. A common thread running throughout was why wasn't the paper jumping on this for the people of Acton.

I must confess for the first little while I tried to duck it. After all, we'd raised complaints about snow service other winters and the widely held belief that Acton's treated not quite as well Georgetown before too, to no avail or solution. This question's never going to be settled or proved, it's always going to be a case of conflicting opinions. Why rehash it all again? Heck, I was telling people to go to the source, not to us, and those annoyed about sidewalks I told to go to the property owners.

I guess two things finally prompted us to write a story. People kept asking us what their own councillors had to say about the situation. And there was a couple of new wrinkles in the tales this year. A few people are actually going to Georgetown to examine conditions before voicing an opinion to us and a few people claiming they were told by municipal staffers they know that in fact there was snow removal after the first storm in downtown Georgetown and none in Acton.

As I expected, we once again got conflicting opinions on the quality of snow service Acton receives, compared or not with Georgetown. All the story accomplished was to get more people talking about the subject, upset some Town workers with what some people said, and upset more readers with what their councillors said.

The feedback about snow service here has even gone the reverse direction. Ross Knechtel told me the other day one merchant mentioned to him someone from Georgetown complained that downtown Georgetown was in better shape after storms than Acton.

And here's another view passed on to me by a reader Monday morning. The back street or subdivisions of Georgetown are a mess compared to Acton's, while downtown Acton's been in worse shape than downtown Georgetown. So it's all just some odd reverse trade. We're going to follow Ross' suggestion (see his letter on this page) and ask Town staff this month for an inside look and repeat again the problems facing the staff.



by Gord Murray
Free Press editor

incidentally the Town staff—the people running our pools or driving works trucks, etc.—in short the whole system.

You'll be surprised when I tell you this fresh suspicion and animosity towards our system of local government wasn't, I believe, sparked by the Stevens' property purchase or the municipal complex issue.

No, I think it was Councillor Knechtel's responsible and proper revelation that Acton was being royally shafted and paying perhaps collectively a 1/4 of a million dollars more than we should be. While that didn't outrage people in itself, people here have long complained they pay too much tax in relation to service received, it did light the fuse, I believe, of the deep discontent that's burning now so brightly in Acton and parts of Esquesing too.

The Section 63 property tax and assessment reform issue may be on the back burner for now, but it wasn't long after that subject hit the front page that Actonians, many who had given up the fight years ago and are now back in the fray, really started questioning a lot of things about Halton Hills and the actions of council and senior staff in a wide variety of areas.

People aren't mad at the people doing the work, they're mad at the decision makers, the councillors. I think they're trying to say if there are good reasons for Acton's snow service appearing poorer than Georgetown, for example more snow falling here because we sit on the top of the Niagara Escarpment, don't tell us the reasons for the difference, just put your spending priorities in the right place and give the staff whatever it needs to do an excellent job after each and every storm. They want actions, not explanations. And continually be monitoring the situation yourselves. A lot of people think that's what they elected councillors for in the first place.

I'll reply to Eldon's letter briefly by saying that while I detest speaking in public and am extremely poor at it (just ask any of the policemen I sweated all over when making a speech at a conference a couple years back) and don't really think this is the proper role for the editor, I am willing to participate in his suggested debate. I think I may be able to persuade Hartley to be a panelist too. And it's an excellent idea to involve the politicians, since it will be the councillors who decide one way or another if Halton Hills will be a nuclear weapons free zone, not the press.

By the way Eldon, I will admit I didn't do further research into the subject before writing my column, I thought it was obvious I was basing my opinion on the remarks you made, as well as Knechtel's and Mayor Russ Miller's comments about our proposal.

You may have more information now, I recall you weren't able to answer all the councillors' questions that day, so I'll gladly listen to further arguments. However, for the moment I must remain on the side of the councillors who were at drop-in that day.

Back issues

10 years ago

January 3, 1974
Halton Hills councillors will be sworn in today (Thursday) in the new council chambers prepared especially for the group in the former Esquesing township hall. Everything was in readiness at the first of January and the new council will hold their regular meetings every other Monday starting January 7.

There was plenty of festivity in Acton Monday night, but noise was for New Year's not Acton's centennial celebrations. Two centennial committees and a bash to celebrate Acton's 100th birthday were abandoned and the only planned project for the Town is the Lion's Club Pool.

20 years ago

January 2, 1964
On the 12th night of Christmas the Town's Christmas trees will end their brief span of beauty in a monster bonfire. Mayor Les Dudy and Chamber of Commerce president Paul Nielsen will light the fire on a lot between the Glenlea subdivision and the dump.

Eight people were left homeless New Year's Day when they were forced to flee their dwelling places when fire broke out in the duplex owned by Al Reimer, on Mill St. West. Fire Chief Mick Holmes was not positive of the cause but he suspected a heat lamp in the basement used to keep pipes from freezing was probably to blame.

An Acton man, 22-year-old Herman Kuhn, jumped clear of his car moments before a train demolished his vehicle. Kuhn was attempting to climb a hill on the south side of railroad tracks near Acton Limestone Quarries when his car began to slide on the slippery surface. He began to reverse down the hill and then stalled on the tracks. When he heard the train and couldn't get his car off the tracks he jumped clear of the car.

50 years ago

December 28, 1933
A casual survey shows that Christmas trade of 1933 showed a slight improvement.

The committee in charge of providing the annual Christmas Tree for the children of Acton have decided to cancel the event for this year. The money will be donated to the Acton Welfare Board.

On the program of the Baptist church Christmas concert were Shirley Kentner, J. McMullen, J. Darby, Jessie Coles, Mrs. Anderson, Lawson McCutcheon, Victor Bristow, Mrs. Hugh Reid, Bessie Reid, Merle McCutcheon, Wilma and Helen West, Bertha Bristow, Helen West. The energetic superintendent of the school, Mr. Ernest Coles, presided.

Walker Lodge's new officers were duly installed: Arch McNabb, H.L. Ritchie, C.A. Darby, George Gordon, V.B. Rumley, R.A. Winton, F. Salt, W.M. Cooper, C.A. Conway, R.M. McDonald, C.W. Wilson, Dan Taylor, R.E. McCleary, Cecil Cripps, John Jennings.

75 years ago

December 31, 1908
Christmas was spent here with a commendable measure of Christmas spirit. Hundreds of citizens were away from home taking in happy reunions, and hundreds of visitors were doing likewise.

Reeve Swackhamer and D. Gray are in the race for the reeve following the nomination meeting. The friends of both candidates are confident of victory. There are only three to take their seats on council, Messrs. Bell, Hunds and J.H. Denny, so another nomination meeting will be held. School Trustees Messrs. Grindell, Dr. Ault and A.E. Nicklin were elected by acclamation. Mr. Jno. Cameron was elected chairman of the public meeting.

In Esquesing the contest for Reeve is between Reeve McGibbon and ex-Reeve F.S. Near. Deputy Reeve is William Thompson by acclamation; councillors T. Cook, Jno. Bingham, Geo. Wriggieworth, W. Mullin and James Brown.

100 years ago

January 3, 1884
The constable has posted notices throughout the town, notifying our citizens that all parties neglecting to have the snow cleaned off the sidewalks adjacent to their premises by ten o'clock each morning, will be fined according to the By-law.

Acton Building Association has several good brick residences to rent in their terraces on Bower Ave. The carnival at the rink on New Year's Day had fewer customers than usual. The Ornet Band discoursed sweet music.

Our readers write

Snow removal will always be expensive and contentious subject

Dear Sir:
The current issue of the Free Press has an article of great interest to all of us snow removal. I hope that the following comments will be useful.

Last Thursday morning (December 22) I drove through downtown Acton and the street were only in fair condition. I then decided to visit Georgetown—basically Main Street, Mill Street and Highway 7. The only difference between the two towns was that there was substantially less snow on Main St. Georgetown than on Mill St. in Acton. Obviously they had received more rain and less snow. There was no evidence of preferential treatment. The sidewalks in Georgetown on Main St. were in better condition than Mill St. in Acton. However, we can't blame that on the Town staff. On Guelph St. (Highway 7) in Georgetown the road was in good shape, mainly because there is room to plow the snow off the pavement. I should add that most of the sidewalks on Guelph St. were a disaster.

As you know on Thursday night the Town staff trucked away all the

snow from Mill St. (38 hours after the storm). Downtown Georgetown was done the same night after Acton was done. I suppose what we all want is instant snow removal—provided someone else pays for it.

In Halton Hills snow removal will always be an expensive and contentious subject. We have many problems that some communities don't have. Let me list a few: narrow main streets; over 100 miles of rural roads; many school bus routes, both urban and rural; sometimes we are grading gravel roads in the south of the Town and sanding icy roads in the north.

May I suggest that in all fairness you should have a first hand look at the way the Town staff make decisions about when and how our roads are maintained in the winter time. Perhaps you could arrange with the Town engineer to look at the problems from the inside. They do have limitations with equipment, personnel and money. How about a trip with a plow—talk with the crews themselves. I'm sure your readers would find it instructive and interesting.

Ross Knechtel,
Councillor

Eldon wants debate on nuclear weapons free zone proposal

Dear Sir:
Back to "The Editor's Desk"

Your column (December 28) entitled "Nuke free zone ridiculous" seems designed to invite response. I can't bear to disappoint you.

My first impulse was to refute your article point by point. That seemed logical since they were largely based on shaky pre-suppositions or, having run out of rational argument, consisted to derogatory innuendo. All can be

classified as alibis for non-performance.

Here's a better idea. Would you accept a challenge to a public debate? It need not be a one-on-one event. Guest panelists (politicians, et al) could be invited and audience participation invited. How about it? I would work with you to set it up.

I await your response with "baited" breath.
Sincerely,
Eldon Comfort