

Opinion

Building inspectors are essential to community

It's 1991 and this year's municipal tax rate increase is on the minds of many in Halton Hills. The general consensus among Town residents is that an acceptable tax rate increase will fall somewhere in line with the inflation rate or between five and seven per cent.

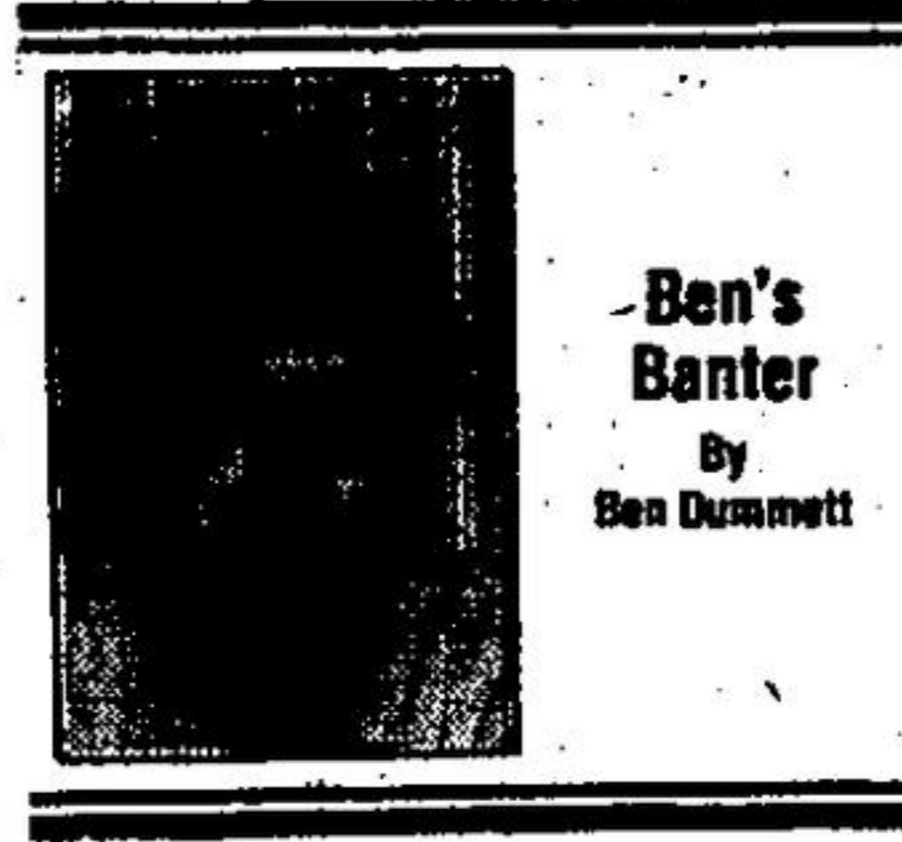
Several times during the last few months town councillors have acknowledged this fact and in response have taken steps to keep the Town operating costs down. One method council has employed to achieve this goal is not replacing vacated staff positions. Indeed, according to a recent council report the town has so far saved \$53,811 by not replac-

ing four staff positions.

I've found public reaction to be supportive of this approach. Why shouldn't the Town operate like any other business, and cut back during tough economic times, people say.

Despite various interpretations of some of the previous columns I've written on the subject of staff positions, I support Council's approach. I don't support, however, the idea Council apply this approach to all staff positions; more specifically when it comes to building inspectors.

Building inspectors are essential to the Town and its residents. Their work provides needed funds to the town and protects



Ben's Banter
By
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people from having to live in unsafe housing.

The town however has yet to fill a building inspector position that was vacated in the fall.

Town Building Director Ron Shettell suggests the hiring of a new building inspector could pay for him or herself. The Town collected in excess of \$15,000 from people who only ended up paying for a building permit after being ordered to by a building inspector.

In not refilling the position, Mr. Shettell predicts 30 building infractions in Town will probably go uncorrected because the cases won't be taken to court in time. The end result is a loss of revenue from fines and more importantly unsafe buildings. Mr. Shettell says six of the 30 cases involve illegal apartments currently occupied that may be presenting a safety hazard to the occupants.

People argue an additional building inspector is unnecessary now because the slowdown in the economy has meant little or no construction activity. However, according to Mr. Shettell, there are currently 15 industrial and commercial applications that can't be processed due to lack of staff. Translated this means a loss of much needed Town revenue.

The Town should be run more like a business people say, meaning in tough times cutbacks are the rule rather than the exception. At the same time, Town cutbacks should happen in non-essential areas of which construction isn't one.

Media must keep themselves in perspective

OTTAWA - One of the media's greatest problems, particularly in times of economic difficulties, is keeping themselves in perspective.

Take newspaper closures, for instance. When one folds and, say, 500 people are thrown out of work, it becomes a nationally sensational story. We're invariably treated to tearful pictures, quotes about the break-up of a loving family, accusations that management was cruel and uncaring. In short, an unqualified catastrophe.

Now, an industrial plant down the road can close, 1,000 lose their jobs, and it's a one-day incident. It's just a sign of the economic times or, in this case, the recession.

It wasn't long ago that 2,900 Air Canada employees lost their jobs. And, as I recall, CBC television ran a brief item on its national news, with some stock film on ticket agents at work and some mechanics checking an aircraft. It was one of the major stories of the day, taking up about 40 seconds of air time.

But when the CBC announced that 1,000 of its own employees would lose their jobs in a 10-per cent cost-cutting initiative, it was

not simply a major story. The network's national news devoted no less than 12 minutes to the story. The Persian Gulf crisis was made to look, by comparison, like a schoolyard spat.

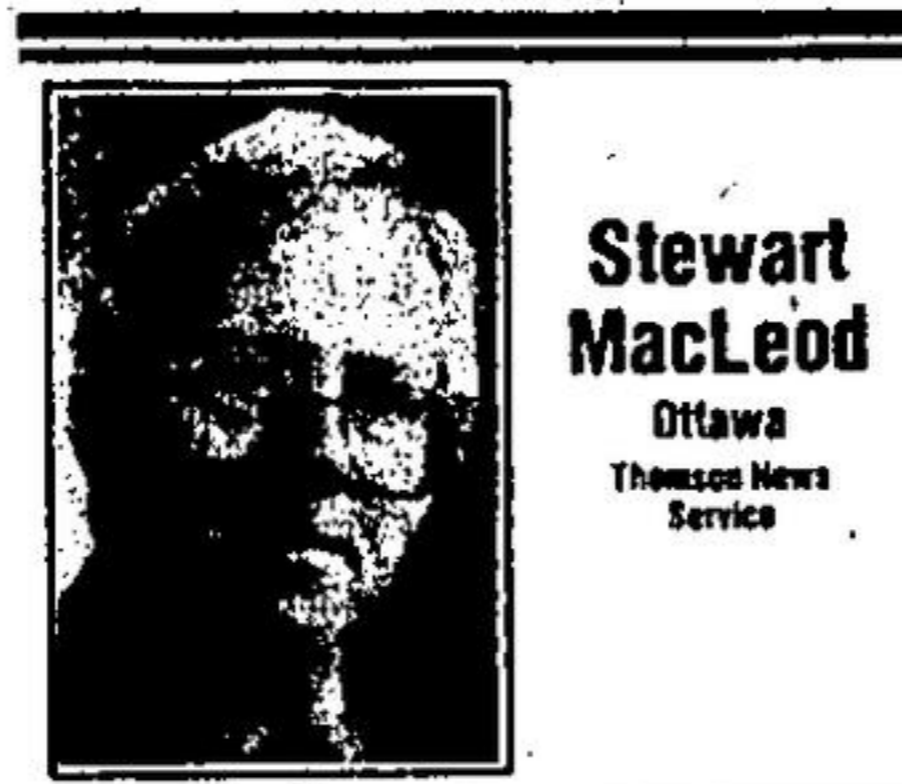
The subject dominated the Commons question period for a couple of days. Our constitutional crisis was pushed to the backburner.

A visitor from another country would surely think that, at the very least, an atomic bomb had been detonated in downtown Toronto.

BIG IMPACT

This is in no way to suggest the CBC cutbacks are merely incidental. A loss of jobs, in any field, is extremely painful, often devastating to those involved. And in cases like this, when a particular layoff is grossly over-covered, perhaps there is an upside - it might help us focus on the hundreds of others who lose their jobs every day in other fields. Many don't even make their way to newspapers or TV.

One thing is certain: If CBC President Gerard Veilleux wanted the cutbacks to attract maximum attention, and create a stir in Parliament, he clearly went about it the right way. He's



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been around long enough to know how the media feast on themselves and that nothing more infuriates MPs than the closing of local offices by some Ottawa, or Toronto, headquarters.

Mr. Veilleux knew, for instance, that every major newspaper in the country would have lead editorials about the loss of 1,100 jobs at the CBC, just as he knew that outraged opposition MPs would be demanding that local programming, and employees be reinstated.

He also was probably aware that most of the public anger would be directed at the Mulroney government, not the CBC. Even though only about

one-third of the \$108-million cutback is directly attributable to government restraint, the prime minister and his followers are the natural lightning rods.

But even Mr. Veilleux must have been pleasantly surprised at the journalistic and political reaction.

LONG EXPECTED

That the CBC was forced to make cutbacks comes as no surprise, although few expected such a swift and stunning blow. Immediately after the Mulroney government assumed office in 1984, Finance Minister Michael Wilson sent out the message. And his 1986 budget signalled the government would no longer give the corporation annual increases to cover inflation.

Then, last year, he announced government funding of the CBC would be reduced by \$140 million over three years.

Of course, everyone knows that advertising revenues have been dropping in the recession. The CBC has projected that ad revenue this year will be down by \$30 million.

Given the inevitability of cutbacks, where should they have been made? In national enter-

tainment programs? National news? International news? Sports coverage? Local and regional programming?

It's unlikely there could be unanimity on any of them.

So Mr. Veilleux, faced with a no-win situation, did the best he could. The axe fell heaviest on local TV operations, while the national programming schedule was left relatively intact. One supposes he was influenced by the CBC's mandate to provide national programming as an alternative to American imports.

It's a darned shame that so many people will be losing their jobs in the process, and that so many viewers will be losing favorite programs and personalities. But then, a lot of jobs and services were lost with Air Canada cutbacks, VIA Rail cancellations and the recent demise of the World University Services of Canada - just to name a few.

Unfortunately, we're going through tough times. And it's not always easy to keep things in perspective - particularly not when a subject is treated to a staggering 12 minutes of prime-time television news.

Close contact with the Feds can be dangerous

OTTAWA - Close contact with the many arms of the federal government can be a dangerous thing.

Just ask the thousands of Canadians who received compensation last year for lost or damaged property or personal injury caused by federal departments. Ottawa paid out \$14.5 million in damage claims, according to the Public Accounts, the annual tally of government spending.

Payments for accidents involving Crown vehicles made up a big chunk of the total. But there were plenty of more exotic incidents.

Like the \$7,740 payment made to the Port Renfrew Hotel in British Columbia after Environment Canada employees started a fire in one of the rooms. Or the \$12,936 paid by Environment after a collision involving an escaped bison.

A nursery received \$2,012 for the loss of plants detained by the Agriculture Department.

Canada's armed forces managed to do a lot of damage in defence of the realm. The Defence Department apparently forgot to call before it dug and it had to pay Bell Canada \$2,321 after damaging an underground cable.

SONIC BOOM

A sonic boom during an air show cost \$4,069 in damages while air force overflights brought a wave of claims, including \$10,000 paid to a fur farm. Compensation for a contaminated well totalled \$2,799 and the District of Chilliwick got \$1,828 for a damaged bridge. Damaged bridgework of another kind also cost the department money. A civilian dental clinic was paid \$3,350.

Our fighting men and women can also be a danger to allies. The Royal Bank of Scotland received \$36,775 for a collision involving HMCS Gatineau.

Fisheries and Oceans caused more than \$14,000 damage to

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fishermen's nets. Another \$22,000 was paid for lost or damaged rented equipment.

Public Works chipped in with \$2,025 for damage caused by ice falling from a government building. The same department handed over \$8,274 to the RCMP for water damage to exhibits.

In turn, the Mounties paid \$4,015 to Indian and Northern Affairs for property damage. Meanwhile, someone stole a \$2,000 rented cellular phone from Correctional Services.

Transport Canada had the usual run-ins with trains and boats last year. There was \$107,408 paid to Pacific Western Airlines and \$58,468 to Air Canada for aircraft damages. American Airlines got \$11,109 for disturbance to operations.

SALES LOST

An accident to the vessel Isole brought a \$50,000 claim. CN Rail got \$1,893 for damage to the Grand Narrows Bridge on Cape Breton Island.

Even the benign bean-counters at Statistics Canada got into the act. A photographer was reimbursed \$1,500 for lost future sales after StatsCan irreparably damaged a transparency.

The government also made a number of nugatory payments, described as those "for which no value or service has been received, but for which a liability is recognized."

These included such oddities as \$805 paid by Parks Canada for

flood damage to exercise mats. The Fisheries Department provided \$2,812 to a fisherman whose vessel was damaged while assisting in a whale rescue.

Then there were ex gratia payments that involved no government liability but were made "as an act of benevolence in the public interest."

This means such things as the \$102 compensation Agriculture Canada paid "for sweater which disappeared over the weekend." Or the Immigration Department's \$6,000 payout to a client accidentally struck on head by a flagpole.

An Energy Department employee received \$525 for items stolen during a trip to the Soviet Union. Transport paid out \$232 for food spoiled in a defective Crown-owned freezer.

Even Parliament Hill proved to be no safe place. A tourist received \$100 for emergency medical services after an accident on the Hill.