

Region eyes 2.8% tax hike

By **CHRISTINA COMMISSO**
Metroland Media Group

Regional staff are predicting a 2.8 per cent increase to residents' 2012 tax bill, but warn there's a good chance that percentage can change depending on October's election results.

"Provincial funding is the biggest uncertainty," said regional treasurer Jane MacCaskill during last week's budget review meeting.

Provincial funding made up 28 per cent or \$118.5 million of Halton's 2010 budget and staff caution that Ontario's deficit continues to put pressures on cost-shared programs such as EMS and affordable housing.

The report notes that discussions are still underway with the ministry of health regarding 2011 EMS subsidies and \$60,000 in expected provincial funding for a seniors' convalescent care program never materialized.

MacCaskill said updates to Halton's transportation and water and wastewater master plans will place further pressures on upcoming budgets, with \$4.4 billion worth of infrastructure needed by 2031.

The budget committee, made up of six councillors and Regional Chair Gary Carr, raised concerns over Halton Police's and conservation authorities' budgets, which are assembled by the organizations' respective boards

and approved by council.

During 2011 budget deliberations, councillors questioned Halton Police's request for a 6.9 per cent budget hike and asked that future increases be kept around the rate of inflation, which currently sits at 3.7 per cent.

MacCaskill said she's been meeting with the police board to discuss their budget, "my understanding is they're respectful of their forecast and the desire of council to continue to improve on that."

The report shows Conservation Halton is forecasting a 7.2 per cent increase in 2012 and police have predicted a 5.9 per cent budget increase.

Regional staff have also forecasted 5.1 per cent increase in the water and wastewater rate, which is heavily influenced by a reduction in water consumption and significant increases in the cost of utilities, chemicals and steel products and infrastructure maintenance. The budget report predicts increases in water rates will hover around the 5 per cent range until 2020.

Regional taxes, including police services, have increased an average of 1.5 per cent annually over the last five years.

The 2012 budget business plan will be presented to Regional council in November.

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