

No let-up in welfare caseload

By ROB KELLY

It's been an eye-opener for Councillor Jim Grieve to walk through the newly expanded Halton regional centre, and the reason has nothing to do with the ongoing renovations.

On his trek to various meetings Grieve, like everyone else, must pass the rooms where people sit waiting anxiously to have their welfare claims processed.

Monday at the regional health and social services committee meeting the Burlington councillor acknowledged that the short walk has affected him. His comments came on the heels of a report from social services commissioner Bonnie Ewart which painted a bleak picture of the current economic situation.

"We now (temporarily) enter the building where these people are coming in," Grieve noted. While "it used to be that there was a particular profile of the people on welfare," that has changed. "The people are well dressed, in

suits. There's a whole different segment of the community being injured and it really drives home the seriousness of what we're dealing with. It's a sad situation."

Fellow Burlington councillor Walter Mulkeiwich used the word 'depression' rather than 'recession' in reference to the current economic downturn. "The depression is affecting Ontario in relative terms far more" than other provinces, he said.

As far as the welfare caseload goes, "we're still on an upward trend," Ewart said. "It's not really levelling off or slowing down at all."

Ewart's department prepares monthly updates regarding the swollen welfare rolls. There have been few bright spots in any of them over the past year. The welfare caseload has shot up by 79 per cent so far in 1991 when compared to the first eight months of 1990.

There were 2,498 welfare cases in Halton in August (each case may represent a whole family). In July of 1990 there were 1381.

Ewart also noted that 64 per cent of the welfare applicants are considered employable, compared to only 51 per cent 12 months ago. And people are staying on welfare longer. In August of 1990 the turnover rate was 70 per cent. A year later it was down to 42 per cent.

Offering a revealing glimpse

inside the system, Ewart noted in her report that a "quick tally" of phone inquiries to the welfare department during two days in September showed an average 605 calls per day.

The Region has already budgeted for a substantial over-expenditure in anticipated welfare payments, as much as \$650,000 above what were thought to be the original grim estimates.

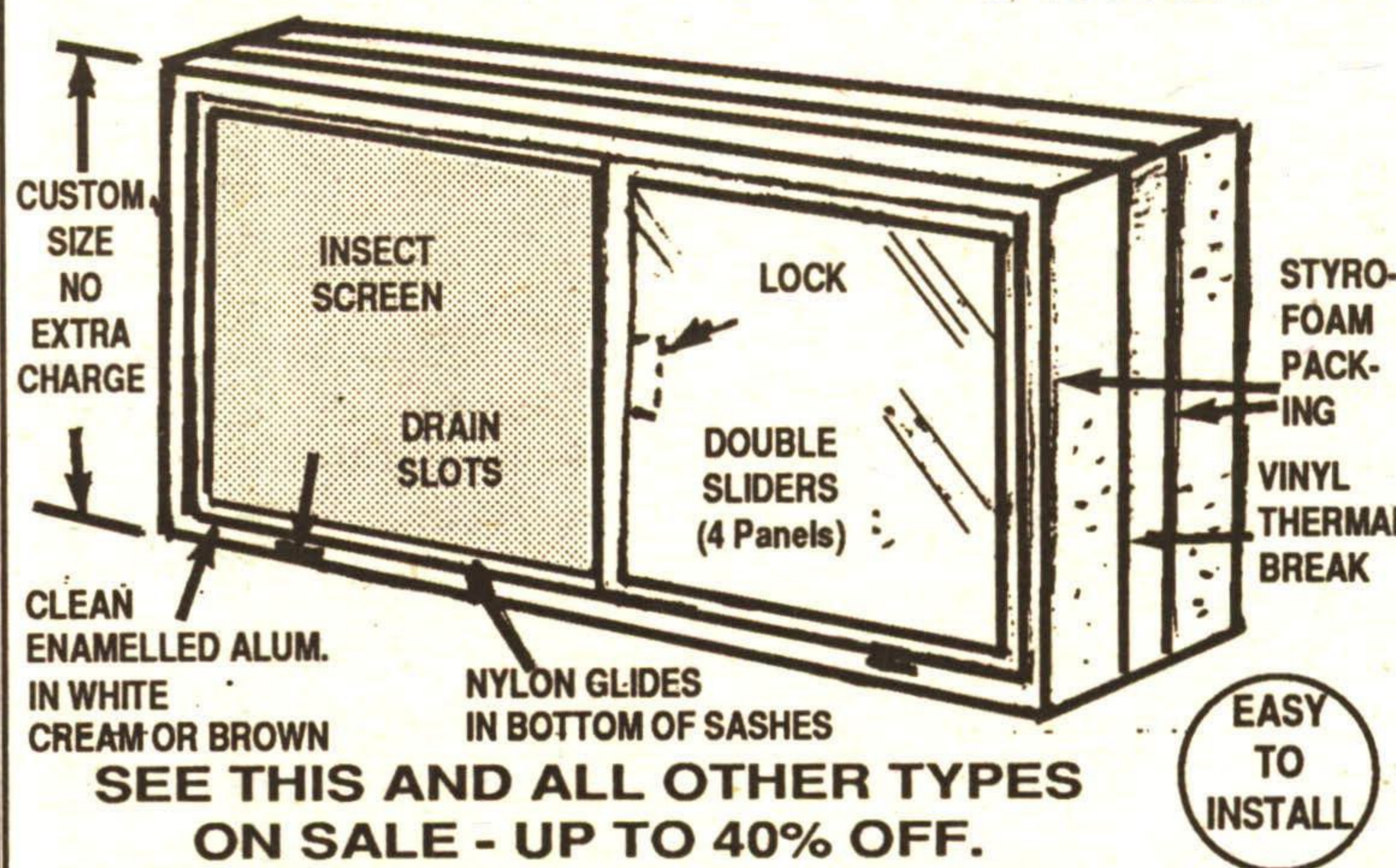
All told, welfare will eat up about \$19 million in Halton during 1991. For the most part, the Province pays 80 per cent and the Region the remainder.

Ewart expects the welfare caseload will "settle at a new base" eventually, one higher than the previously accepted norm. (Prior to the recession biting, in early 1989 for example, the average ran about 1,000 cases per month).

Although welfare eligibility criteria have been eased in Ontario, much of that higher base will be due to the "loss of jobs that will never return unless new industry comes in, which takes a long time," Ewart said.

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