

Proposed increases run from 1.5 to 4.8 per cent

Region takes first stab at '93 budget

By **ROB KELLY**
Special to the Independent/Free Press

Halton Region's senior bureaucrats are recommending a proposed property tax hike ranging from a high of 4.8 per cent to a low of 1.5 per cent for the 1993 budget.

The preliminary report, which was to be discussed Thursday, is the first of what promises to be many documents related to the tough looming budget decisions regional council will face during the run-up to final approval of the 1993 budget next March.

The spread between the proposed high and low percentage increases is the difference between an inflation-level hike at 1.5 per cent, and the anticipated cost of carrying on business as usual next year - an additional 4.8 per cent, or about \$15 for the average Halton household.

If regional councillors tell their financial experts to come in at 1.5 per cent, or perhaps even less, the number crunchers will have to begin trimming regional operations to hit that target. Monday Bonnie Ewart, Halton's acting chief administrative officer, said that "is going to be very difficult."

Ewart called the 4.8 per cent increase "realistic" and what is needed to run "a very tight ship" but added "we're anticipating that's not good enough" for some councillors, who may demand tax increases held to 20-year low inflation levels.

Last year's regional tax increase was 7.6 per cent.

To date Halton has avoided laying off any of its approximately 1,000 workers. Instead programs and discretionary spending have been axed, and people who leave often either haven't been replaced or only replaced several months later. It's expected to save roughly \$570,000 - about one per cent of the regional tax budget - through the end of 1992.

Ewart skirted the question of possible layoffs Monday, saying "I'm not going to comment on that." But she did add that she would "like to think" Halton could maintain its no-layoff policy. She called the current method of letting attrition cut costs "very successful" and "more humane."

Regional ratepayers can expect to be charged on average an extra \$13.47 a year on their water bills too, up to about \$370 a year from

the current \$357. That's an estimated increase of about 3.8 per cent.

Halton is currently contemplating an 11 per cent increase for improvements to regional roads, seen as a high but necessary expense from Rinaldo's perspective given the need for repairs. Road and sign improvements are pegged at \$1.8 million.

Other major capital projects figuring in the budget outline include: The \$18 million facelift underway for Halton Centennial Manor in Milton; a proposed \$6.4 million infilling for the Bronte Harbour area in Oakville, to be followed by a \$12 million longer-term revitalization program; a \$6.5 million upgrade for the Halton Regional Police radio network.

In addition, over the next 12 years Halton is expected to spend \$173 million on utility system improvements, although it's believed that developers will figure prominently in the financing for that.

Halton Region is expected to have gross tax-related expenditures of almost \$136 million in 1993, with an anticipated \$59,541,000 to be collected in taxes if the increase is to be held to about 4.8 per cent.

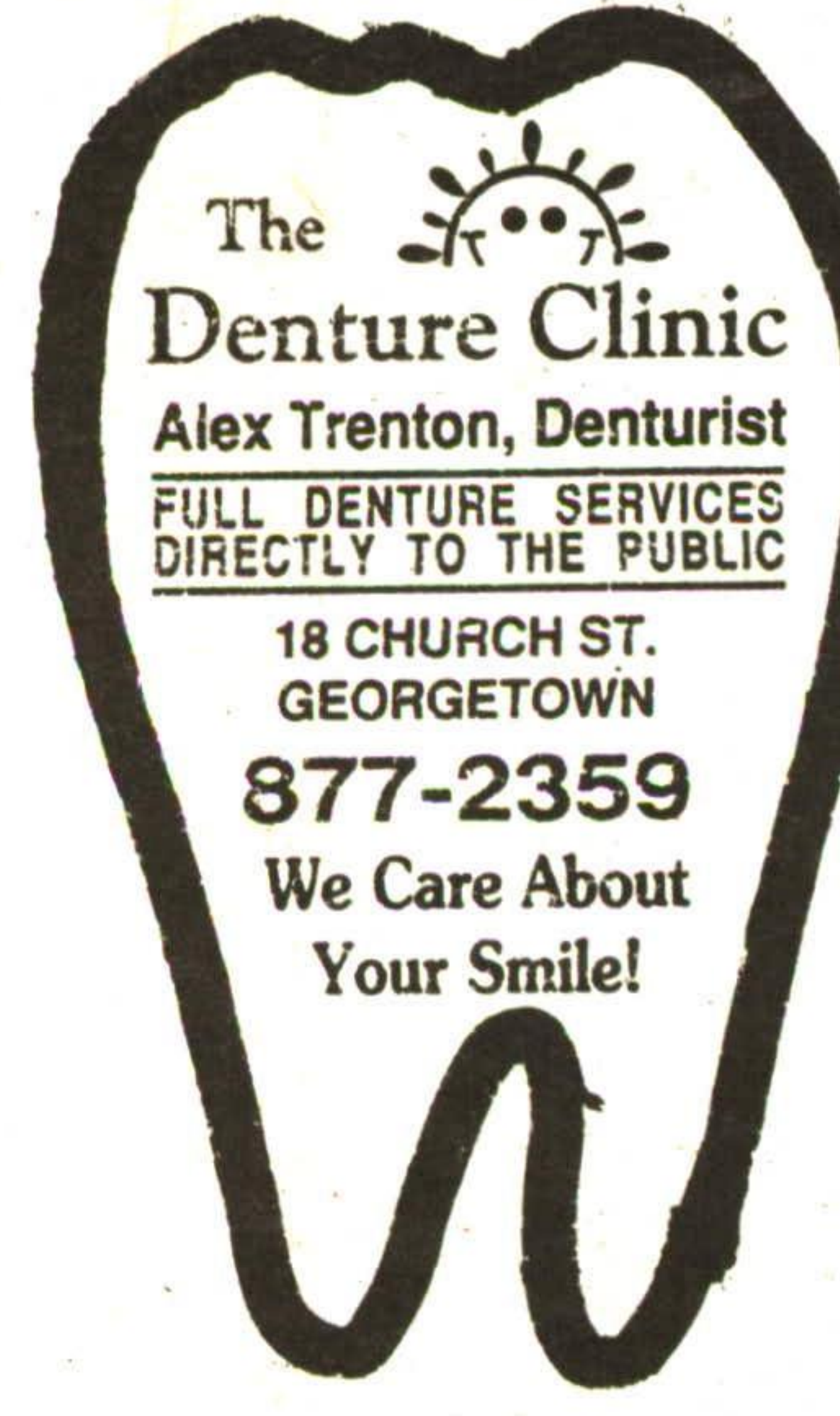
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Item 4, #63-0020/0026-0 -
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