

# Funding dispute leaves HRCA in financial quandry

By BRAD REAUME

Special to The Independent/Free Press

In the end, Halton Region will have to capitulate, but at least the province will know firsthand what funding cuts are doing to the municipal level of government, regional councillors decided.

Members of the region's administration and finance committee decided recently refused to honor the Halton Region Conservation Authority (HRCA) levy request for 1994 hoping to force provincial authorities to listen to their pleas for an end to funding cuts.

The HRCA operates much like a school board, in that it sets its own tax levy to pay for programs, but the money is incorporated into the regional levy on local tax bills.

The HRCA — facing a \$71,000 budget shortfall — due primarily to a withdrawal of provincial funding through the conservation land tax rebate program, has suggested in its \$7.1 million budget that this amount be covered by a levy increase.

The provincial rebate system covered conservation authorities by paying 100 per cent of property taxes for non-revenue producing lands owned by the authorities. The program was withdrawn last year.

"Imagine Halton Region without Hilton Falls, Kelso, Mountsberg, or Crawford Lake," said HRCA chairman Brian Penman to the committee. "Until recently, all of these properties were in private ownership. I'd hate to think we would have to sell such tourist jewels. The HRCA has one of the largest holdings of provincially significant lands."

Penman told the committee that acceptance of the budget as presented would give the HRCA the whole of 1994 to solve the funding problem.

If the Authority had a \$71,000 shortfall, Murray Stephen, HRCA general manager, said, "Some programs would be targeted (for cut) and it could affect employment." However he could not be specific.

Penman said there would be possible cuts to children's education

programs.

Several solutions were offered to the dilemma. Burlington mayor, Walter Mulkewich, suggested the HRCA and the region split the difference.

Milton mayor, Gord Krantz, suggested the possibility that the HRCA not pay their property taxes. After three years, municipal government would assume default ownership.

Both suggestions were discarded.

"The HRCA was the meat in the sandwich. They got a double hit from the region and the province," said regional CAO John Burke.

Regional finance commissioner, Joe Rinaldo, said including the \$71,000 shortfall on the regional tax levy would increase taxes to the extent that taxpayers would still get a small tax break from last year, but not the anticipated 0.4 per cent.

"We have no issue with the HRCA," said Rinaldo.

"It's off loading by the province as they ask us to pick up a bigger piece of the pie."

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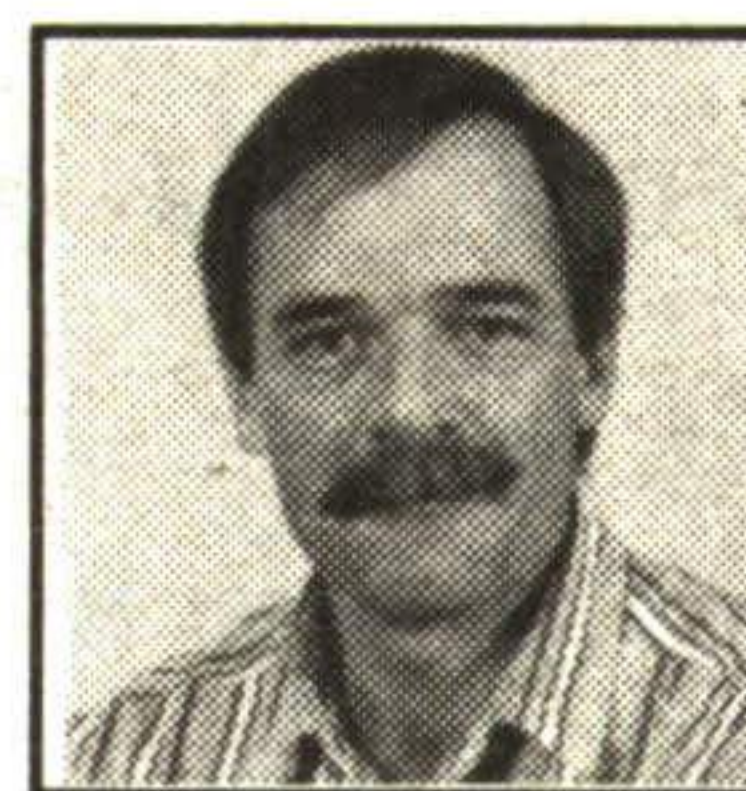
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