

# HALTON ALARMED BY PROVINCE'S MERGER PLANS

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Halton officials are shocked and concerned by the province's plans to amalgamate Ontario's health units and ambulance services into 10 large regional agencies.

The Ford government's 2019 budget proposes replacing Ontario's 35 public health units with 10 regional public health entities and 10 new boards of health by 2021 - something that came as a "total surprise" to Halton staff, said chief administrative officer Jane MacCaskill.

"Much of what was in the budget was signalled by the province in advance, but the public health changes were quite unexpected," she told regional councillors at their most recent meeting.

In a statement to Metroland Media, Halton medical officer of health Dr. Hamidah Meghani said she's "concerned about the lack of detail in the provincial budget announcement that proposes significant restructuring of the local public health system, along with the proposed \$200 million reduction in provincial funding over the next two years."

She asserted that the decline in funding for public health "will have a definite impact on service levels in all communities across Ontario."

"Halton has benefited from having public health fully integrated with other municipal functions," she continued. "Our relationship with our community, and the strong partnerships we have in place with schools and other key organizations serving families, ensure we are able to de-



Metroland file photo

**Halton CAO Jane MacCaskill says Region staff weren't expecting the sweeping public health changes contained in the 2019 provincial budget.**

liver the programs and services that meet the needs of the Halton community."

MacCaskill said no details have been released yet regarding the proposed geography of the 10 regional health units or how they would be funded.

She deemed the \$200-million reduction in public health dollars "a significant concern, given we have been identifying funding shortfalls in public health funding for many, many years."

Paramedic services also slated for amalgamation

Following the budget announcements, a second bombshell was dropped via an urgent memo from the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), which revealed the province also plans to amalgamate Ontario's 59 paramedic services into 10 by "integrating emergen-

cy health services into Ontario's health-care system."

"We are monitoring this issue closely," said Halton director of paramedic services Greg Sage, who oversees Halton's team of more than 250 paramedics. "We have a close working relationship with the province and will review the proposal when more details are provided by the province."

During a recent news conference, Premier Doug Ford said the province is currently reviewing ambulance services and that "nothing is carved in stone" yet.

"There's always going to be the same number of paramedics. That's a guarantee," he said. "We're going to consult with them and see how we can deliver the service a lot better than we're doing right now."

Back at the regional council table, Milton Coun. Colin Best, who sits on the AMO board of directors, said the association is "very concerned" by the announcements and is doing an in-

depth analysis of the budget implications.

Burlington Mayor Marianne Meed Ward asked exactly how much the \$200-million reduction in Ontario public health funding will impact Halton, but MacCaskill said no details on that have been made available yet.

"We have long been advocating for the province to live up to their historic funding commitments and they haven't," Meed Ward noted. "We subsidize the province regularly on that."

Halton's \$80-million health department budget, divided about 50/50 for public health and paramedic services, was calculated with an expectation of 53 per cent funding from the province this year and the balance coming from local property taxes.

The region's 2019 budget plan laments that the public health subsidy from the province has not kept pace with actual program costs for some time, with a projected shortfall of \$9.2 million this year.

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By Cory Soal  
R.H.A.D.

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