

Pay the rent or feed the kids?

There is an acute and growing shortage of quality, affordable housing in Halton that may one day become a reality for many of us. Whether it is a neighbour who is looking at downsizing from their current residence, to graduate students looking for their own place to call home; to workers at the local grocery store, to youth, young families and seniors: affordable housing is an issue that affects everyone.

Gerry Rosenboom, a 40-year old man, had it all, a wife and two beautiful children. Then one day, his life was turned upside down with the loss of his job and the breakdown of his marriage. Moreover, he was left to care for his two young children, with no support from his spouse.

Gerry and his children moved in with his parents for a few months, until he found a small, two-bedroom apartment in Milton. Gerry chose this apartment, due to its close proximity to his parents, whom he relied on for support with the children. The only problem with the apartment is that the rent is \$875 a month and Gerry only receives \$892 from Ontario Works. Gerry is left with less than \$20 to buy food, clothing and other basic necessities for himself and his two children. He is forced to visit food banks to feed his children, and resorts to buying inexpensive junk food for himself, which is having an adverse effect on his health.

"Is there any hope?" asks Gerry. "I've been on the waiting list for social housing for five years. People shouldn't have to wait that long, but there just isn't any extra housing available. It's just not right when a parent must choose between paying the rent and providing their kids with a nutritious meal."

Recently, Gerry graduated from Halton's Personal Support Worker Program and is working for the Red Cross, providing care for the elderly. He feels optimistic for the future, but is still concerned about the high cost of rent; each day hoping to hear that a social housing unit has become available.

There are many other stories like Gerry's. One of the findings from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities Quality of Life Report Series is that over the last 10 years in Halton, an increasing number of people with low incomes, such as sole support parents, youth, seniors and the working poor, are spending over 30 per cent of their income on shelter, leaving insufficient funds for other necessities. The lack of affordable housing and declining supply of low-rent units has severely impacted the quality of life for low-income earners and raises their risk of homelessness.

"Halton is not the only municipality facing these challenges - there is a real need for sustainable and long-term funding from the federal and provincial governments for housing initiatives to succeed," said Regional Chairman Joyce Savoline. "The Region is currently engaging residents in the community to develop a housing strategy that will provide a range of housing options for residents. Fundamental to the strategy, is the principle that Halton residents should be able to remain in Halton, despite changes in their circumstances."

Halton Regional Council committed to developing a comprehensive housing strategy as one of its goals for the 2004-2006 term. The strategy will address three key areas: creating a housing supply; protecting the housing supply; and meeting individual housing needs. A steering committee, comprising the Regional Chairman and members of Regional Council, a member of the Halton Housing Advisory Committee and Regional staff has been tasked with developing the strategy. Stakeholder consultation has been integral to the development of the strategy. In April, members from the various Regional Human Services Advisory Committees came together and presented housing issues to members of the Comprehensive Housing Strategy Steering Committee. On May 17, a Visioning Session was held with various stakeholders including developers, community agencies, the faith community, and local and regional Councillors.

Additionally, Ipsos-Reid, a nationally known public opinion research firm, has conducted a telephone survey and focus group testing to determine the community's



awareness of housing issues in Halton.

A public information session and open house was held on Tuesday, June 14 at Halton Regional Headquarters in Oakville. Data gathered from these events will be collated as part of the strategy and once final, presented to Regional Council in the fall.

"The recent signing of the Canada-Ontario Affordable Housing Agreement is certainly encouraging and a step in the right direction," added Chairman Savoline. "However, for people like Gerry, who are barely making ends meet today, it can't come soon enough."

For more information, visit Halton's website at www.region.halton.on.ca <http://www.region.halton.on.ca>, send an email to housingstrategy@region.halton.on.ca, email housingstrategy@region.halton.on.ca or call 905-825-6000.

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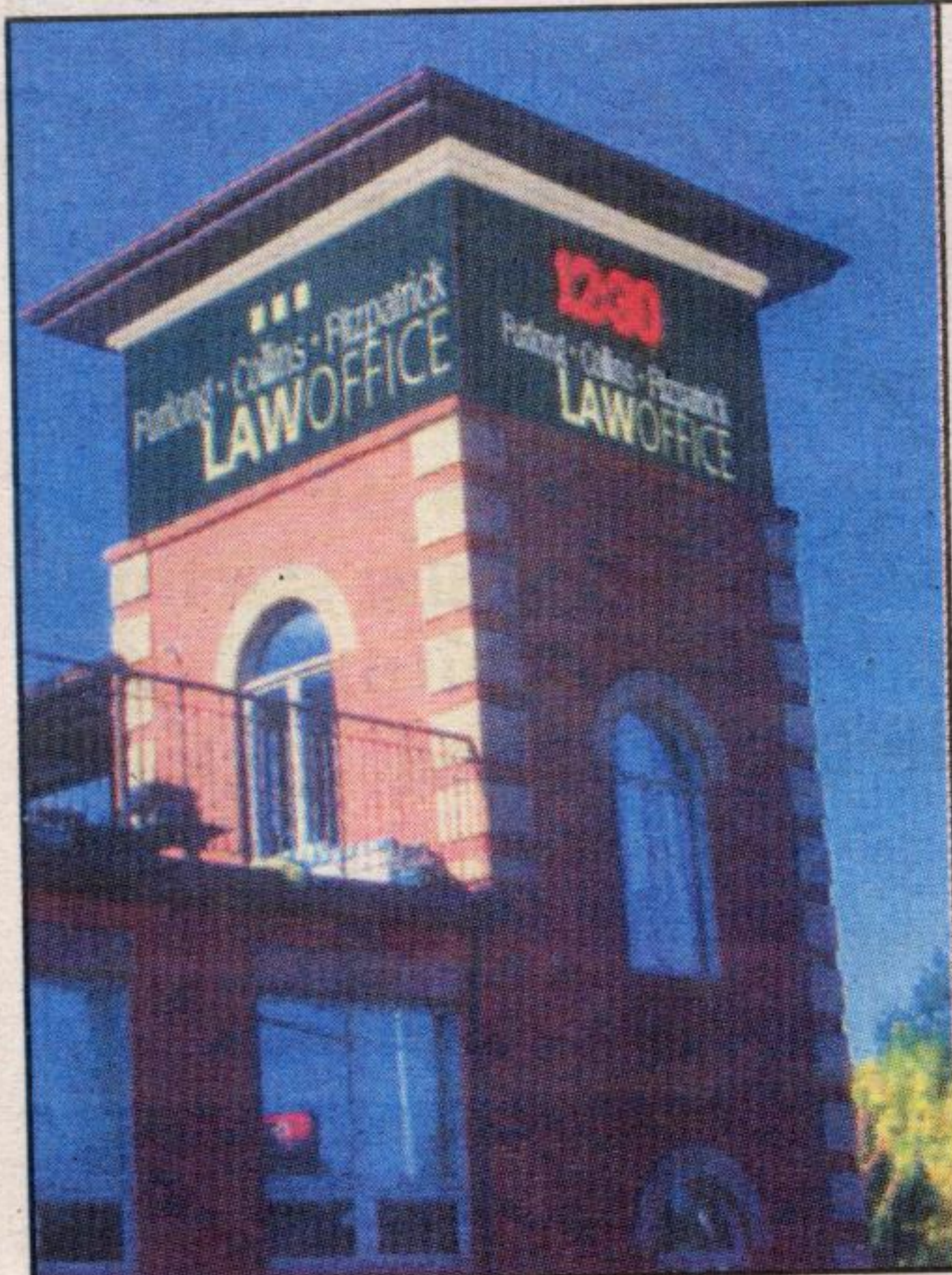
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