

Neighbours come to aid

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difficult for him to go outside to smoke as he usually does, he had permission to smoke in the basement and burn incense to dissipate the smell.

"Incense is not supposed to be able to start fires," McGinn said. "But that's all they could find as a cause, - a spot in the couch when the whole burner appears to have tipped over."

McGinn says insurance will cover their repair bills but she having trouble finding a way to thank all the people who have helped them such as the veterinarian who took in their ailing dog and loaned them a carrier for their cat. Neighbours put out food to entice their missing cat, Hooters, who disappeared when she was dumped outside during the fire. Friends took in Katie until McGinn drove home from work in Wednesday's ice storm. An Acton High School teacher is tutoring Bob despite the drive to Guelph to do it.

"The house doesn't look bad from the outside," McGinn said, "but the wiring and water pipes are all melted to nothing so they'll have to be replaced. The beams in the cellar are charred pretty badly too. The damage (estimated at \$50,000) is mainly from smoke and heat but it will probably be at least eight weeks before we can get back in."



WAITING IMPATIENTLY: Katie McGinn, 13, with Hooters, Bob McGinn, 15, and Sandra are waiting for their bloodhound, Toulouse Lautrec, to return from his stay with the veterinarian. The family are living in a Guelph hotel after fire gutted their home during the night Feb. 18. - Maggie Petrushevsky photo

School officials unsure of plans

By **MAGGIE PETRUSHEVSKY**
The New Tanner

Crisis looms for the Halton District School system as staff and trustees wrestle with a lack of information on which to base its future, parents were told at a recent public meeting at McKenzie-Smith-Bennett school.

"There are a lot of unanswered questions and our timelines for getting answers are extremely short," said Paul Anthony, Superintendent of Staff Services for the board. "In order to staff the

system adequately and follow an appropriate budget process we need clarity from the (provincial) government on the funding envelopes as soon as possible."

Anthony was the guest speaker at the first of a series of monthly meetings arranged by North Halton trustees Ethel Gardiner and Erica Andrew. The meetings will be information forums as well as opportunities to hear public concerns.

The province has mandated average class sizes of 1:25 for the elementary level and 1:22 for the secondary

level.

"The trouble is we have no idea how to calculate that," Anthony said. Are the averages supposed to be school-wide, board wide, or even province-wide?

Given an enrollment of roughly 25,000 elementary pupils, for instance, they would appear to need 1,000 elementary teachers, he explained. But does that include principals, vice-principals and special education teachers? No one knows. Depending on whom the ratio includes, Halton's staffing cuts could range from substantial to almost nil. To meet those class sizes by September, decisions need to be made now both board-wise and school-wise based on those numbers.

The second solid piece of information is the mandated instruction period - 1300 minutes for elementary pupils and 1350 for secondary students - in a 1500-minute week. May the board use those optional periods to maintain existing programs? How does teacher planning time fit into the picture? What discretion does the board get? Again, there are no answers.

The government has been talking about giving each teacher 200 minutes of planning time per week. Halton teachers only receive 160 minutes in their existing collective agreement. If the government is serious about that 200 minutes, "they have already set us up for the next round of contract negotiations," Anthony said.

Flu fells record numbers

By **FRANCES NIBLOCK**
The New Tanner

One hundred and seven students - almost one-third of the population at Robert Little Public School was absent on Friday - most of them at home sick with the flu.

"I've never seen it like this," school secretary Joan Parker said in an interview on Friday as she coughed, struggling with a cold and waiting for the final bell to ring.

Monday morning Parker was one of four staff felled by the flu and at least 41 students were still absent, a majority of them reporting colds and flu.

The culprit of one of the worst flu seasons in memory is believed to be the Sidney strain of influenza A - a flu bug first identified in that Australian city last summer. There's no confirmation that Acton children are suffering from that particular strain, but confirmed cases of influenza A have been reported in Halton.

Although the other schools in Acton report slightly higher absentee rates than normal, none had a significant number of students away. St. Joseph's Separate School reported "a fair number of students" absent,

but no more than normal for this time of year. Thirty-seven Acton High School students were away on Friday, but the absentee rate was back within normal levels on Monday.

At McKenzie-Smith Bennett staff reported approximately 15 to 20 students were absent with colds and flu, an only slightly higher than normal number of this time of year.

Staff at the Acton Medical Group is very busy, but that's typical for this time of year. Staff said patients do seem sicker with this winter's flu strains.

The preventive message from health officials includes frequent hand washing and the use of tissues. For those already ill it's the old standbys.

"Drink plenty of fluids, rest in bed and see your doctor if the symptoms persist," advised Halton's communicable diseases program manager Mary Anne Carson in an interview on Friday.

"It's not just the schools that are getting hit hard but also the nursing homes, daycares and seniors centres. Parents, if your child is sick, keep them at home," Carson said, adding recovery can take between five and seven days.

Impaired Acton man rams cruiser

An injured Halton police officer was off duty for several days after his parked cruiser was rammed from behind by a pickup driven by an impaired Acton man in Milton last Thursday night.

The officer was sitting in his cruiser with the roof lights on, making notes, when he noticed the truck speeding at him from behind. The officer attempted to get out of the way but the truck slammed into the back end of the cruiser.

The accused ran from the scene after the crash but was chased and caught by the officer who had suffered minor neck injuries in the crash.

Charges against the Wallace Street man include impaired driving, having

over 80 milligrams of alcohol in 100 millilitres of blood, dangerous driving and fail to remain. He appears in Milton court March 30.

Stolen car abandoned

Police are still looking for the driver of a stolen car that was abandoned after slamming into a CN Rail crossing standard at Churchill Road-Glen Lawson Road south of Acton at 3:05 Sunday morning. The ignition of the car, registered to a Guelph resident, had been punched out.

A CN Rail maintenance crew was called out to repair damage to the crossing barrier.

Police checked local hospitals and are still searching for the driver.

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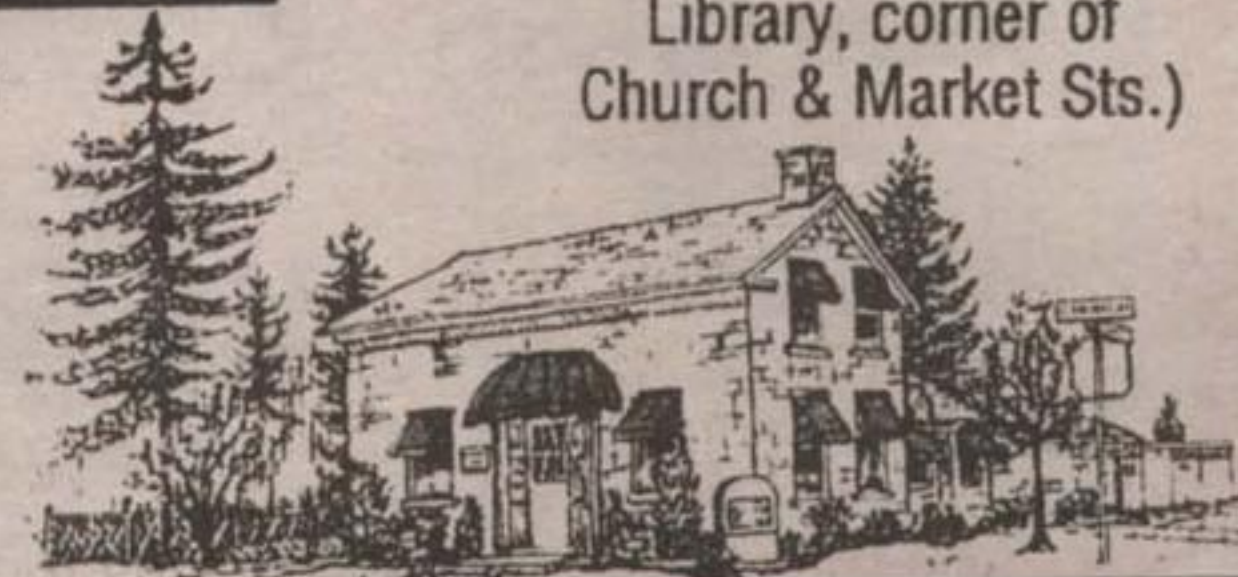
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