

Don't cut programs and service! Coalition wants tax hike

By **TIM WHITNELL**
Special to The Independent/Free Press

A coalition representing the unions that comprise the majority of Halton Board of Education employees said a property tax increase, not program or service cuts, is the way to deal with decreased funding.

Declaring that the board's proposed budget of \$285 million for 1996-97 is already "lean," the Coalition of Concerned Halton Public Education Employees stated in a press release last week that 29 cents a day is all that is needed from taxpayers to ensure passage of the proposed budget.

The coalition arrived at the 29-cent/day figure by taking the \$104 per household property tax increase (7.64 per cent mill rate hike) which the board administration has said would be needed to meet budget demands if no program or service cuts were to be made, and dividing it by the 365 days in a year.

Though the coalition hasn't specifically mentioned the 29-cent figure in its representatives' meetings with board director Bob Williams and chair Linda Glover, one coalition rep said it has been made known to other board members.

"We have sent each of the trustees a letter communicating this in effect," said Erica Andrew, president of Halton Women Teachers Association and the Halton Elementary Teachers Association.

"We think a modest mill rate increase is a small price for taxpayers to pay to maintain the quality of education in Halton," Andrew said.

Another member of the Halton board's employee coalition also believes a mill rate increase is the proper route to take, even if recent history doesn't bear out the need for such a measure.

"The board has been expressing concerns about the mill rate but I look at the increases over the last number of years when (government) grants have been going down and the mill rate is going down, too," noted

Kathleen Carroll, president of the local unit of secondary teachers, one of seven employee groups within the coalition.

Carroll said one reason the education mill rate has been going down (it's actually gone up and down slightly over the last five years) at the same time grants have been reduced might be because board administration has managed to make cutbacks in its own department.

Carroll said a mill rate increase would be preferable to the implementation of other measures such as user fees for the parents of students. "Everybody should pay because everybody benefits," she said of the education system.

Though the coalition described the 29-cent-a-day increase needed to avoid program or service cuts as less than the cost of a cup of coffee, the chair of the Halton public school board doesn't think that makes it an easy suggestion to swallow.

"It may only be 29 cents per day, however it's 29 cents this year and how much is it going to be next year and the year after that?," wondered Linda Glover.

The board chair said administration and trustees need to look at all possible avenues in the financial restructuring of the public board.

When asked if they had been approached by administration about the possibility of taking unpaid days off or accepting wage rollbacks, both Carroll and Andrew said their respective teacher unions had not been contacted on the subject.

"As far as I'm concerned, any changes would have to be done during collective bargaining," Carroll stated.

Even though both teachers' unions recently negotiated settlements with the board, talks will begin again soon on hammering out new agreements. Andrew said the elementary teachers go back to the bargaining table for preliminary talks on April 24. Secondary teachers resume negotiations in May.

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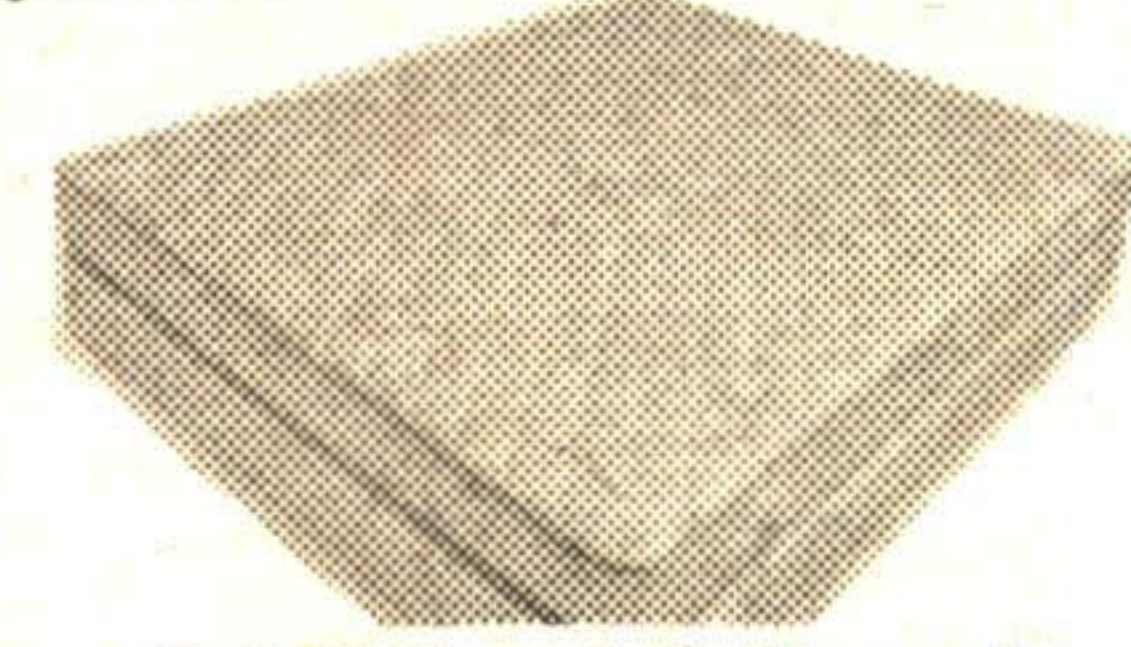
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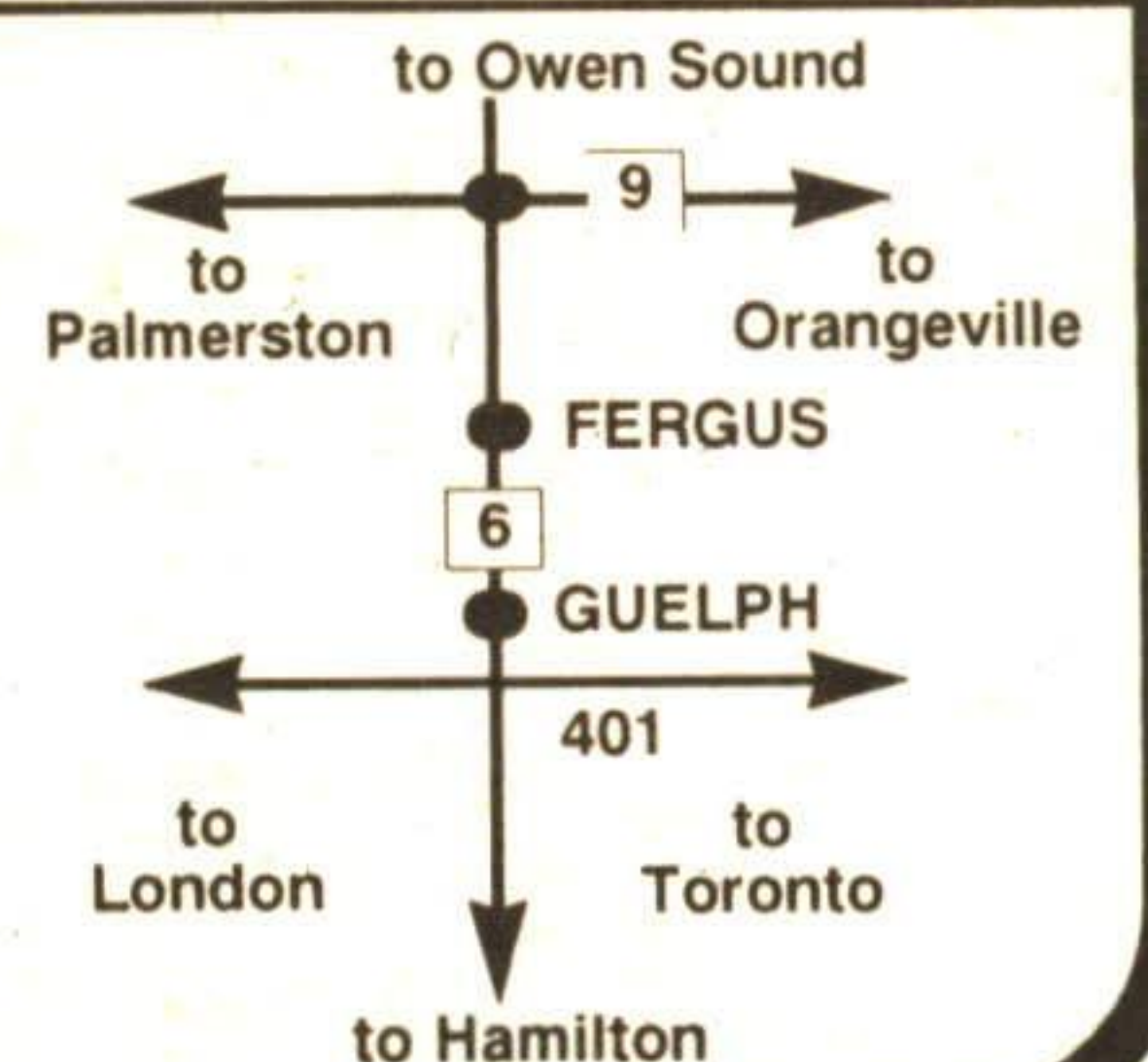


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