

Final axe ready to fall on school board budget debates

By **KIM ARNOTT**
Special to The Independent/Free Press

It's taken several weeks worth of marathon meetings, but the end is finally in sight.

Halton public school board trustees could finalize a 1996 budget as early as next Tuesday night.

However, it's unlikely the budget will satisfy everyone, admits trustee Tim Kingsbury, chair of the board's finance committee.

"You cannot guarantee that there will be universal happiness," he says. "Ideologically, we're in completely different times than we've ever been - we're in uncharted waters."

The budget will mean layoff notices for at least 400 Board of Education staff.

For the board's 43,000 students, it will mean cuts to classroom computers and supplies, buses and school support services.

And despite all the cuts, local ratepayers may still see tax hikes.

Trustees need to reduce the proposed \$286 million budget by \$16 million in order to keep taxes from rising.

At this point, they've chopped about \$7.5 million, which would mean a 4.39% mill rate increase for taxpayers. That translates to a \$60 tax increase on an average residential assessment of \$6,700.

Final budget numbers won't be known until Tuesday, when trustees debate a motion to ask for \$6 million worth of salary and benefit concessions from teachers and other unionized employee groups.

If that motion passes, approved budget cuts could total about \$14 million.

The finance committee will also look at the possibility of transferring \$1.4 million from board reserves to cushion the tax impact.

So far, trustees have agreed to

eliminate school lunchroom supervisors, cut more than 80 administrative and secretarial positions and lay off 25% of the counsellors, therapists and instructional assistants who provide support services to students.

They have also cut the budgets for classroom computers, staff training and school renovations.

But the finance committee has backed away from some of the most controversial money-saving proposals being floated.

Trustees rejected a plan to make kindergarten a full-day, alternate day program to save on transportation costs.

They have also turned thumbs-down on proposals to eliminate busing for French Immersion students and urban high school students.

All decisions made by the finance committee will require final ratification by the entire board.

Early meeting for council

Halton Hills council will meet an hour early (6 p.m.) Monday to discuss a resolution to come up with a restructuring plan for governance and service delivery in Halton recently supported by regional council.

The goal of the restructuring is significant savings for taxpayers, improved accountability and more effective representation, and

enhanced customer service and accessibility.

The province must support the restructuring plan and restructuring is to be accomplished by the end of the current term of council.

Included in the resolution passed by regional council is an invitation to the region's four area municipalities to become equal partners in devising the restructuring plan.



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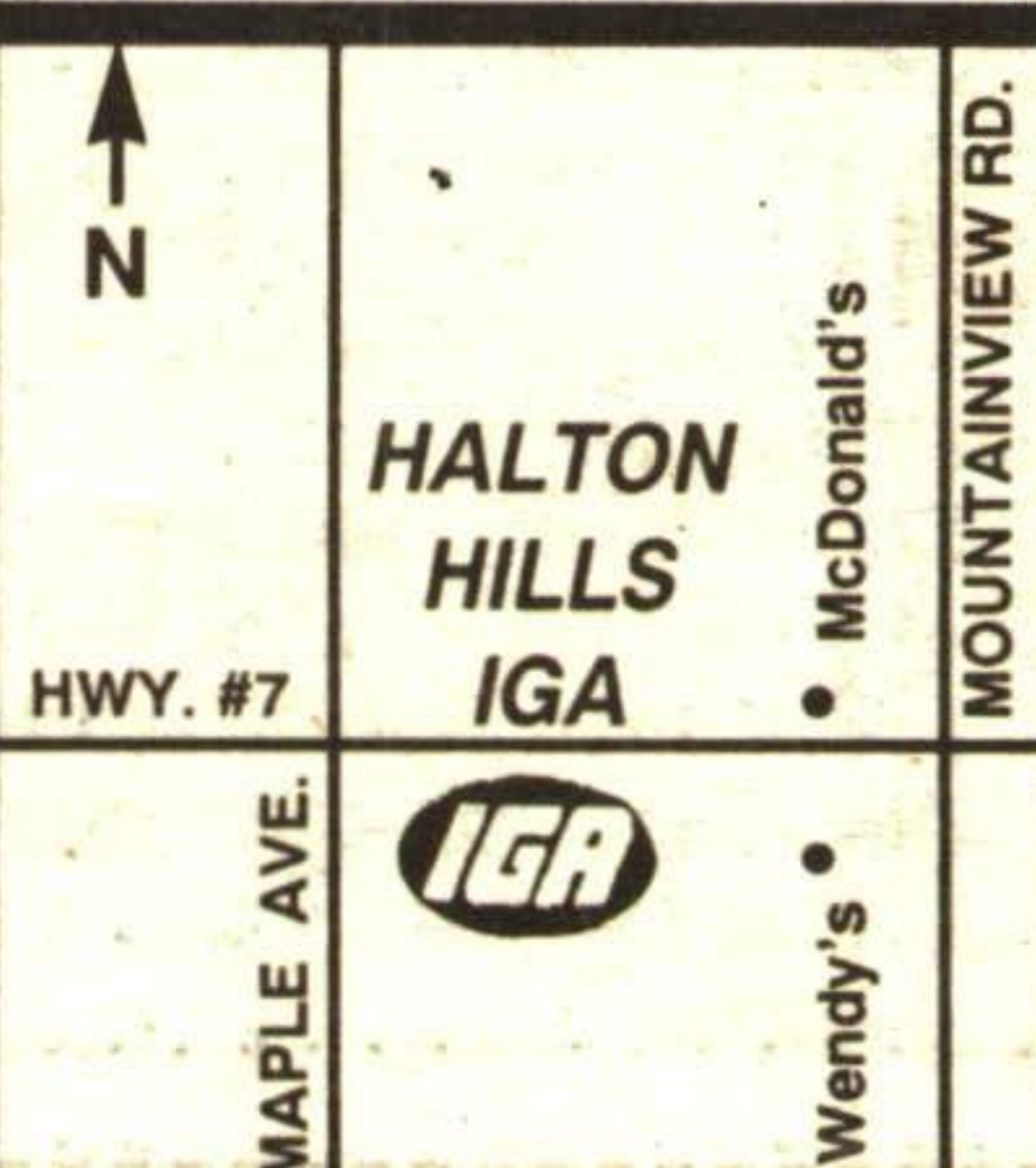
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