

# Budget committee wants freeze on utility bills

Halton's budget review committee voted down a proposal that could have hiked the region's utility bill by six per cent, instead opting for a tax rate freeze.

The bill will stand at \$407 for water and wastewater services. However, they left themselves an option to increase it by the rate of inflation— 2 per cent. The rate budget is expected to be approved by late November.

Staff had predicted that capital projects could force the bill up to \$430— or six per cent. The committee quickly turned that around to recommend a tax freeze with an option to increase at the inflation rate.

Expenses related to work on the Skyway sewage treatment plant, plant and equipment maintenance and systems operation would be responsible for the added budget pressures in the coming year, said a staff report.

But councillors should understand what projects are being left out of a tax-trimming budget, said Joe Rinaldo, Halton's finance commissioner.

He asked for permission to pre-

pare a list of the necessary projects and bring it back with a budget following council's directions.

"It is important that we identify needs and if you elect to go to zero, that is a policy decision," he said. "The requirements are as much as six per cent."

Councillors should know the consequences of the budget they endorse, agreed Halton Chair Joyce Savoline.

"I think it is a staff decision to put it before us and a political decision what to do with it," she said. "We don't want staff making the political decisions."

Bringing in a low or no tax increase may be politically savvy, but not at the cost of leaving out important projects, said Oakville Councillor Kathy Graham.

"I don't have any problem with the rate of inflation. I think that is an admirable way to go," she said. "But I think we have a responsibility."

Asking for a budget to come in at a certain rate is just playing with numbers, said Oakville Councillor Keith Bird.

"So what we'll end up saying is here is the rate of inflation that we

picked out of the air because it gives us a warm, fuzzy feeling," he said. "We're playing a political game here."

It is crucial that the region maintains a top quality water system, said Bird.

"We're playing a little bit of a mug's game. At the end of the day, it has to be done," he said. "I'll be supporting a budget that reflects the needs of supporting a first-rate water system."

But "sustaining a system isn't the same as adding to it," observed Burlington Councillor John Taylor.

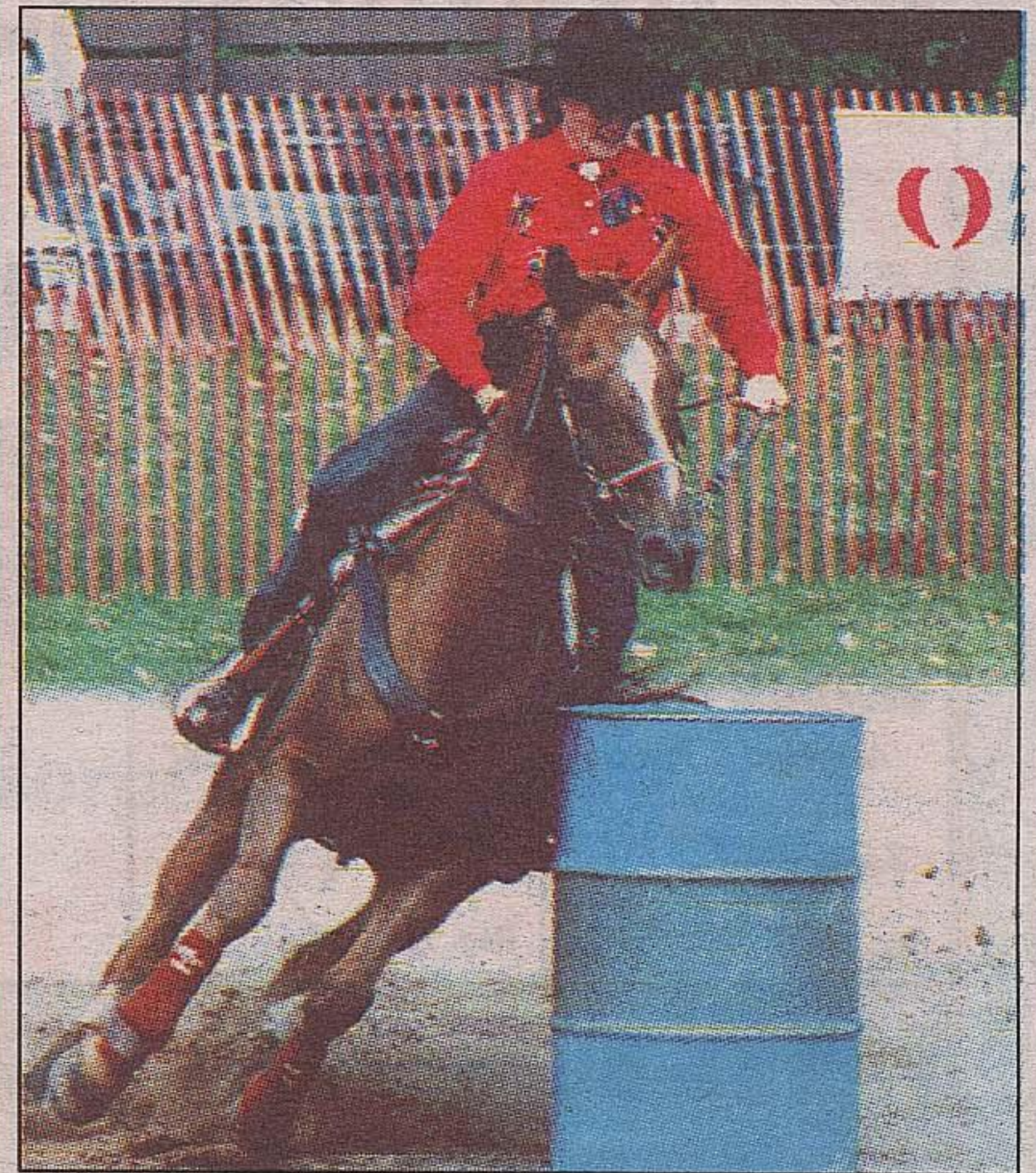
"The added monies would be for growth factors, not maintenance," he said.

Residents should understand the value of Halton's water system, said Savoline.

"One thing we may have done in the past is underplayed to the residents and set a false expectation of what it really costs," she said. "Maybe it is time for a reality check. I think people have to understand the business that we are in."

—By Irene Gentle, special

## Fun at the Fair



Lisa Grey on board Ticket To Ride navigates a barrel during the youth barrel racing competition at the Georgetown Fall Fair this past weekend.

Photo by Yvonne Gaynor



Halton MP Julian Reed was the winner (loser?) in the Kiss-a-Cow competition.

Photo by Yvonne Gaynor



Outgoing Georgetown Fair Ambassador Sheena Butler (right) presented newly chosen Ambassador Arden MacLean with her tiara and sash as she was crowned Friday night at the fair. A total of five contestants took part, presenting prepared and impromptu speeches to vie for the title.

Photo by Ted Brown

## What You Said

*'The Halton Board of Education is taking steps towards bringing back Junior Kindergarten. Do you support its return?'*



Tracy Brouwer, nurse, Acton



Pam Gray, housewife, Cheltenham



Tracy Tate, office manager, Georgetown



Ken Glaude, carpenter, Georgetown



Scott Lale, theatre manager, Georgetown

"Yes I do support junior kindergarten. It's a good chance for kids to learn to interact with other children, and great for parents."

"When my kids started school they didn't have that opportunity, but I think it's wonderful, because by starting that much earlier they can learn so much more."

"When it comes to daycare, I feel kids need that interaction with other children, and they learn so much. Although the learning aspect is the most important, it's also a break for moms and dads."

"I support it. It gives the parents a break, and helps the kids learn since those are the most important years that they learn."

"Absolutely. When I look for child care, I look for a school-like system, where the children actually learn. I prefer to see a government-run system for Junior Kindergarten, with some sort of structured curriculum to allow the children to learn."

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