

Amalgamation leads to birth of Halton Hills

A provincial government's desire to eliminate duplication and costs— at the expense of longstanding heritage and allegiance— forever changed the political landscape of Halton Hills in January, 1974.

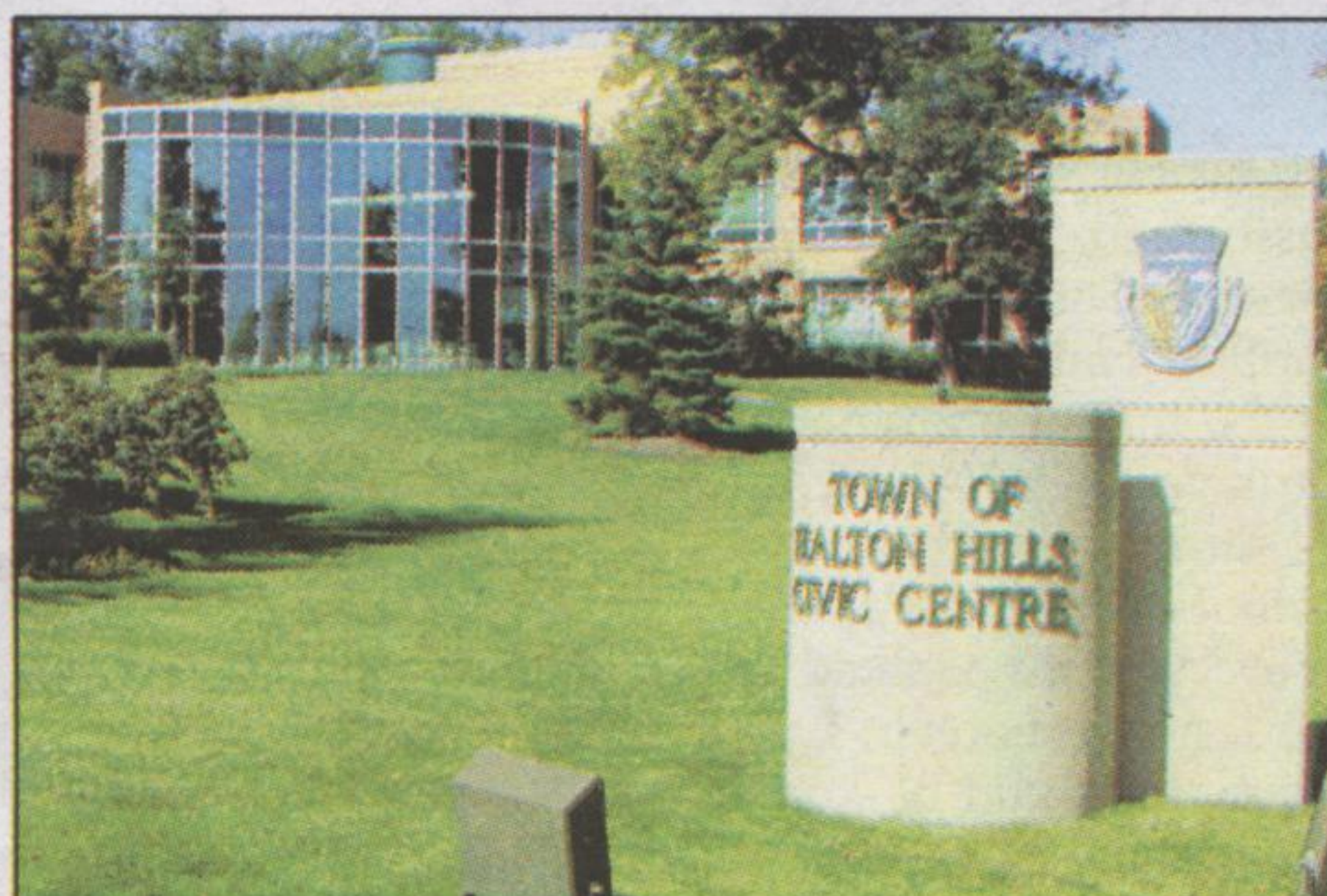
Six months earlier, the provincial Legislative Assembly passed The Region of Halton Bill that would amalgamate all the towns and townships of Halton County into one region. More importantly, it amalgamated the towns of Acton and Georgetown and the township of Esquesing, into one large municipality, the Town of Halton Hills.

At the time, The Georgetown Independent commented, "The merging of three historically established municipalities and several communities into a single one is certainly a historic event. Two decades ago local rivalries would never have allowed it and local loyalties would have bitterly opposed it. Today it is a legislative fact..."

At the inaugural meeting of Halton Hills council, the new mayor, Tom Hill, described the occasion as both happy and sad. The Independent reported he said the citizens are saying goodbye to a system with its origin in medieval England, and seeing it replaced by a system with its origin in a Ph.D. thesis.

"If we can form an allegiance to the new town as strong as the allegiance to the three municipalities (Acton, Esquesing and Georgetown), we shall have a united town," Hill said.

Representing the newly-created Halton Hills on the new regional council were Hill (Mayor), former Acton Reeve Pat McKenzie, former Esquesing Deputy Reeve Len Coxe, former Georgetown Reeve Ric Morrow and



former Georgetown Deputy Reeve Ernie Sykes— all experienced politicians at the county level.

These men also sat on the new Halton Hills council, along with the new "local" councillors: Joe Hurst, Les Duby, Russ Miller (eventually to serve almost a dozen years as mayor), Dick Howitt (eventually to become a longtime school trustee), Roy Booth, Ern Hyde, Harry Levy and Mike Armstrong.

At issue for many opponents to the new regional system was the loss of local autonomy and the potential for rising taxes.

On the first issue, an Independent editorial read: "Mr. Meen (Arthur Meen, architect of regional government) had a sound message, advocating patience to the residents of the new town of Halton Hills, until such time as the new region was operating smoothly. But he was on weak ground when suggesting the bogey of loss of local autonomy was untrue... it should be noted that local councils now have fewer local responsibilities than they did under the old form of government."

On the second issue of rising taxes, one of the first items on the agenda was to vote on new salaries— \$8,500 for each councillor and \$27,000 to the chairman. The Independent editorial read that week: "Proponents of regional government never tire of telling us how the new system will eliminate duplication, make governing more meaningful and less costly for the taxpayer... fat salaries for part-time work will hardly pare costs..."

The new town name also caused some concern for many residents and businesses using the mail system. Georgetown's postmaster warned in a newspaper article, residents should continue to use their old address— because "the post office feels chaos would be the result if Halton Hills is used."

There would be many more amalgamation-inspired issues that politicians and residents needed to debate such as the selection of a fire chief, the location of a new Civic Centre, where new recreational facilities were to be located and whether one community received more town money or services than another.

Amalgamation continues to provide fodder for debate. In the last act of Halton regional council in 1999, councillors decided that in 2000 they will begin a debate on whether to become the City of Halton. Cleaving Acton and Georgetown, to find new alliances with the cities of Brampton or Guelph has been suggested.

However, despite amalgamation, Acton and Georgetown and the smaller centres of Limehouse, Glen Williams, Stewarttown and Norval, have managed to retain their unique and historic characters— as well as their sense of rivalry. That is unlikely to change no matter what their place will be in Halton's future.

—By Cynthia Gamble, staff writer

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