

Board to use 'interim financing' to build schools

Gardiner says decision 'is way out there'

The Halton District School Board is moving ahead to build elementary schools in Burlington and Milton even though the Ontario Ministry of Education has told trustees to wait for impending funding formula changes in order to find the cash.

During a special board meeting Wednesday night, trustees voted 6-5 in favour of a motion, brought forward by chair Paul Tate, to build the Grades JK-8 schools, through "interim financing." The motion does not state specifically where the money would come from.



ETHEL GARDINER

Facing a cash crunch, late last month trustees voted to build the schools by using reserves from education development charges—which needed provincial approval—and money from a computer network upgrade project. A new plan had to be created after board staff told trustees Wednesday the education ministry turned down that Sept. 28 option.

"As of Friday (Oct. 7) the information we received from the ministry was two-fold: forget about the funding options we put forward (and) they would focus on the ministry funding of schools," Gerry Cullen, superintendent of facility services, told trustees, noting the province hadn't provided any other concrete funding solution. "They don't believe we have any other source of funding."

Some trustees disagreed.

Tate said the board, for example, has \$12-13 million coming from the sale of properties.

The board must build schools now to accommodate the hundreds of new students coming into the system next year, Tate said. He said the board can proceed this way because, referring to a section of the Education Act, it has the "power to determine the number and kinds of schools to be established."

"There is an abundant need for schools," he said.

Tate said he called the ministry prior to the board meeting to inform them about his proposed motion.

Halton Hills Trustee Ethel Gardiner voted against the motion, calling the move to go forward with building two schools under the circumstances "irresponsible".

"I voted no because I think trustees have a responsibility to the public, and if the money is not there, as a trustee, how do you commit those funds on behalf of your constituents?" said Gardiner yesterday (Tuesday).

She said she would have supported, however, the construction of the Milton school because she believes the board could have come up with those funds required through the sale of property and education development charges reserve.

Going forward with one school, she said, was "a small risk," but to build two "is way out there."

Gardiner said there's no question Milton has the greatest need for a new school, but she's "not convinced that Burlington needs a school more than Georgetown."

She said she didn't have an opportunity to discuss the need for a Georgetown school at the meeting because the vote was called before debate was finished, which she resented.

Gardiner said hopefully the new elementary school slated for Georgetown South will be constructed in 2007.

"But then again, who knows?" said Gardiner, stressing it could be bumped if the need in other communities is considered greater.

New Education Director Wayne Joudrie said approving the motion "does put the board at some significant risk" to ensure the money is available to build both schools.

The board has been in a wait-and-see mode since the ministry made major changes to the funding formula eight months ago. The province uses the formula to divvy up money for new school construction.

Changes announced in February no longer require boards to close schools to free up pupil spaces to qualify for new-school funding. School construction has become an urgent need for the Halton public board as it copes with a student population that is among the fastest growing in Ontario. So far the Ministry of Education has only said the funding parameters will come "soon" but there is no exact timeline as to when those changes will be rolled out.

—By Jason Misner, special with files from Lisa Tallyn, staff writer

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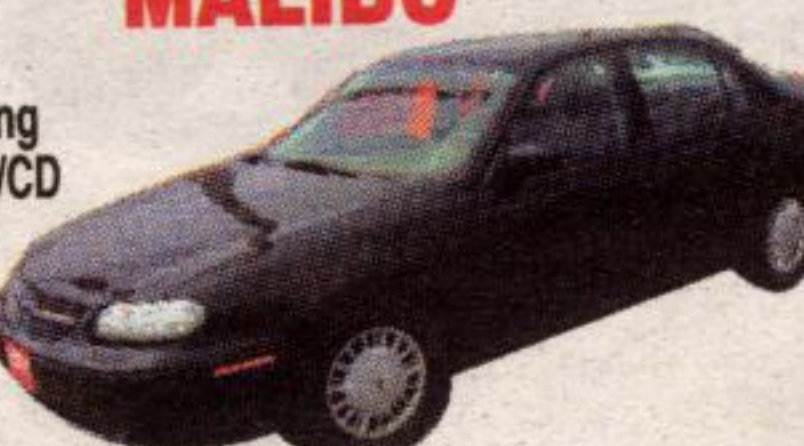
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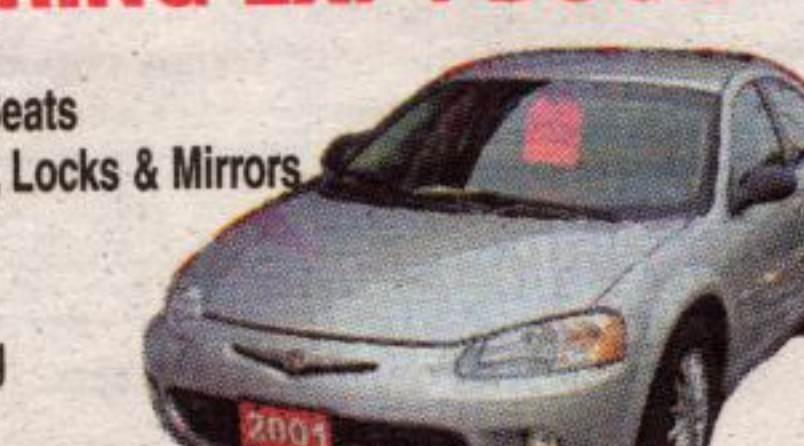
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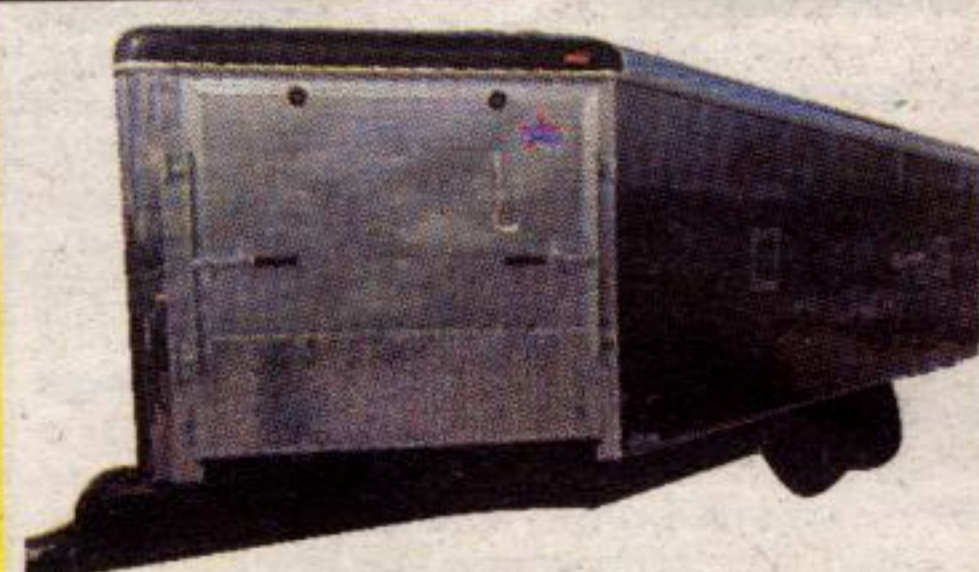
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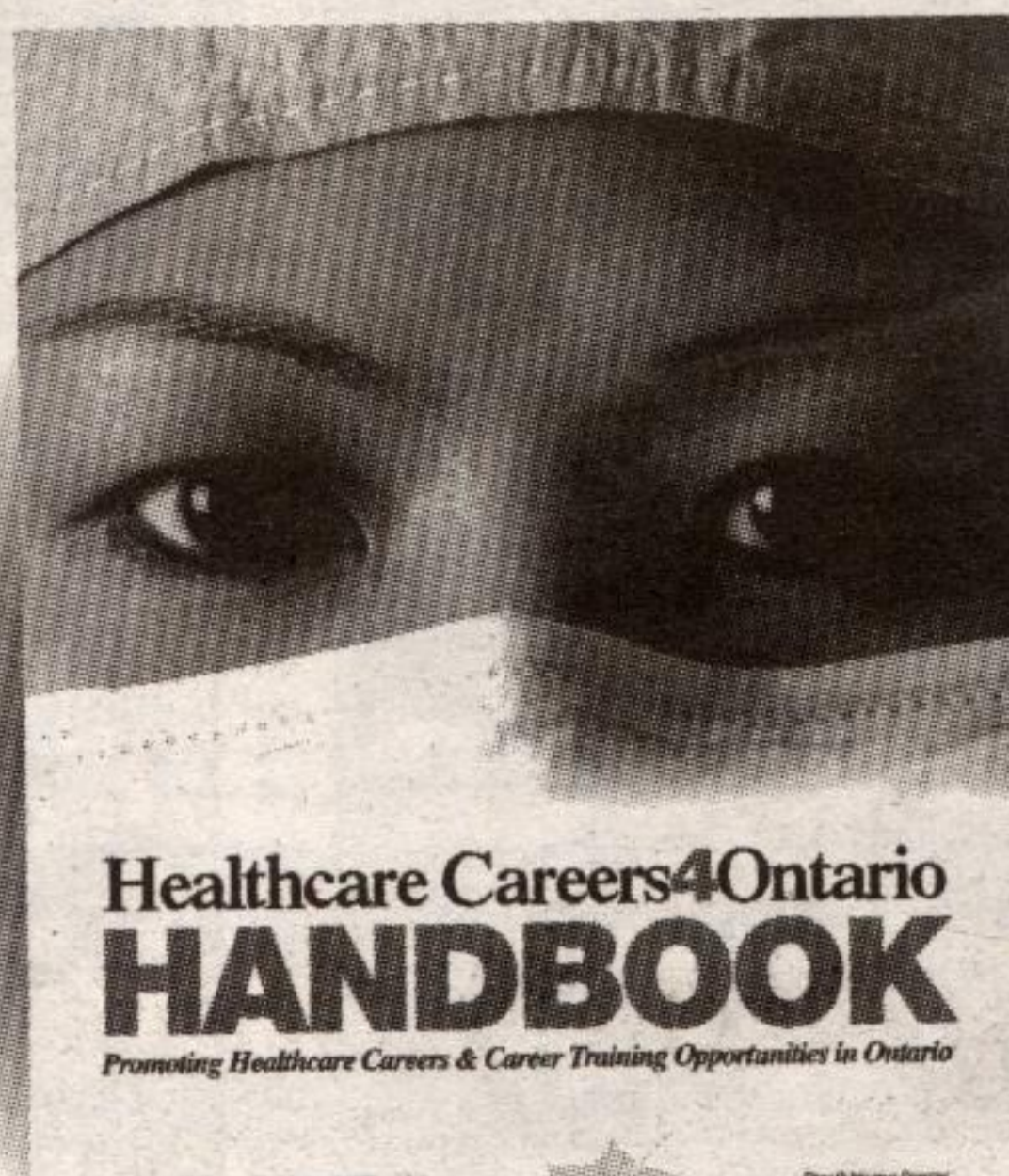
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