

# Board deficit could hit \$950,000

*Provincial help needed to combat soaring utility costs, say school board officials*

The Halton District School Board's 2005-06 deficit could be as high as \$950,000 due in part, to rising utility costs.

A staff report recently revealed to trustees stated the board is looking at a deficit of between \$650,000-\$950,000 this year.

Factors impacting the budget include escalated utility costs, higher than projected payment of gratuities to retired staff and overruns from the Halton Learning Foundation and Centre for Skills Development and Training.

Utility costs for the budget are \$500,000 higher than had been projected, significantly impacting the board's bottom line. Also, electricity and natural gas rates were each expected to rise by three per cent. Instead, hydro increased by six per cent while natural gas costs jumped by 13 per cent.

With the board operating more than 90 elementary and high schools—two more elementary schools are set to open in September—lighting and heating costs are a constant financial issue.

Retirement gratuities have come in \$700,000 higher than the \$3.5 million budgeted for this year.

Meanwhile, the foundation and skills centre is projected to record a \$300,000 deficit.

Mitigating the overall deficit, are board savings of \$550,000 thanks to savings on computer lease buyout/software fees (\$250,000), reduced snow removal costs (\$200,000) and reduced short-term salary costs (\$100,000).

However, Steve Parfeniuk, the board's superintendent of business services, said utility costs

are an issue that needs provincial attention.

Natural gas prices have gone up 100 per cent over the past five years and the province has talked about users paying the full cost of hydro.

Costs on both fronts might rise another 6-10 per cent next year, representing hundreds of thousands of dollars the public board would have to cover, Parfeniuk said.

The board's total annual utility budget is approximately \$8 million.

"One of the things I think the province has to do is turn around and recognize those increasing costs and actually (fully) fund them... or the board will have to seek remedies in other areas of our budget,"

School board Chair Paul Tate said the board also has to deal with a \$2-million deficit from the previous year. He said last year's deficit was due to overruns from two-arm's length agencies—the Centre for Skills Development and Training, with an approximate shortfall of \$1.9 million and the Halton Learning Foundation at \$199,000.

"This (2005-06 budget) is what all boards are faced with and I'm pretty positive the province will help us with this one because if they don't, we have to take those dollars from somewhere else, which is very hard for us to spare," said Tate.

The Halton board can take a few years to pay off a deficit provided the province approves the board's payment plan.

Also, discussions have been ongoing about opening a 540,000-square-foot, one-stop shopping regional campus by as early as 2009. It would house the public and Catholic boards' head offices as well as headquarters of Halton Region and Halton police—accommodating a total of 1,900 staff.

Parfeniuk said the campus could lead to some energy savings.

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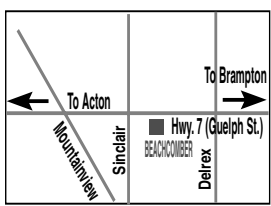
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