Huge Town tax hike may be first of many to come

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One of those difficulties faced by budget committee and staff was the last-minute decision by Halton Region to split the GTA pooling dollars on a 50/50 basis. Previously, Halton residents have been levied taxes to pay for Toronto's social services needs. Last year the provincial government told Halton the pooling payments will be gradually eliminated by 2013, on the condition the money not paid go towards infrastructure improvements, said Perlin.

Last year, Halton Region which collected the taxes from residents, handed Halton Hills a cheque for $614,000, which the Town put towards the new fire stations. But this year, Halton Region decided it would only levy half of the dollars, and the municipalities would be required to raise the other half. While that meant Halton Region could lower their tax increase to 1.3 per cent, it forces the Town to collect the money and consequently raise its taxes on the Town portion of the bill.

Since the same amount is being collected (from two municipal governments instead of one), the overall impact on the whole tax bill remains unchanged. Amounts raised regionally will be used by the Region and amounts raised locally will be used locally.

Starting this year and continuing to the final phase-out of the pooling costs in 2013, the Town of Halton Hills will begin collecting the Special Infrastructure Levy. In 2008, it will be 2.7 per cent (or $614,000), and in the following years, it will be 1.3 per cent ($290,000). By 2013, $2 million will be built into the base budget to be directed annually towards infrastructure. The program is similar to the pavement management program (PMP), which is in the last year of its five-year 2 per cent levy. Each year, $1.6 million in the budget is now directed specifically to repairing Town roads.

The Town will direct the initial dollars from the Special Infrastructure Levy to the construction for the two fire stations, then towards construction/expansion of the new Georgetown library. Like the PMP, taxpayers will see each year in the budget what those dollars are being spent on.

Residents should also be prepared to budget for similar tax hikes in future years. Based on tentative numbers, hikes of at least 7.5 per cent ($80-$86) are already predicted for 2009 and 2010. Treasurer Ed DeSousa said in his budget briefing, assessment growth, one of the Town's biggest revenue generators, is predicted to grow at only 1 per cent in 2010 and beyond. Assessment growth since 2003 has been set at 3 per cent or higher. This year it was only 2.1 and until water and wastewater servicing constraints and growth decisions are settled, growth will continue to decline, and with it the money that refills Town coffers.

The final 2008 budget numbers will be approved at Halton Hills council on Monday, Jan. 21. The $25 million budget will change only slightly as staff was directed to come that night with suggestions on how to add $25,000 into the budget to accommodate staffing increases at the two Halton Hills Seniors Centres. The extra staff hours will be added into the budget— all members of committee agreed to that— but the only question is how. Some council members suggested membership fee increases, cutting the budget or a one-time reserve withdrawal.

'There is very little wiggle room.'

—MAYOR RICK BONNETTE

In an uncharacteristically quick fashion (two and half hours as opposed to the usual several days), budget committee sped through its examination of the budget book in a public meeting Monday night.

Bonnette announced at the beginning of the meeting, that, "There is very little wiggle room."

However the committee did find room to wiggle in $30,700 worth of programs: $1,000 to hire a consultant to prepare tax assessments on historical homes, $1,100 for historical plaques, $6,500 for ongoing maintenance of the Market St. house used by Halton Hills Public Library and $22,100 to maintain Sunday hours with part-time staff at the Halton Hills Library. The extras made little impact on the numbers from the start of the meeting.

Changes were approved to the ActiVan services, allowing users to purchase taxi scrips for their trips instead of booking and waiting for the ActiVan bus. The $20,000 cost to the Town will come from a Transportation Reserve and be eventually paid back from gas tax revenues. There will be no tax impact on the budget.

Committee also approved growth-related programs and staff additions totaling $380,300, which had been already incorporated into the 6.1 per cent base budget increase.

Inclusion of funds for the Town's new Green Plan was deferred until a report on actual costs is presented to council later this year.

Halton board to hold information nights for French students

The Halton District School Board will be holding upcoming information nights for its Immersion and Extended French programs for students beginning in Grade 1 (Early) and Grade 7 (Extended).

In these bilingual programs, elementary school students attend one of Halton's French centres where they receive half of their instruction in English and the other half in French. This provides students with the opportunity to achieve a working command of French and to acquire the personal growth, knowledge and skills expected in the regular program at the same time.

The Halton District School Board is currently preparing for September 2008 and information sessions have been planned at the Board's French Immersion centres.

Registration forms for the Immersion French program are available at any school in the Halton District School Board, including the French Centres at the schools listed below.

Applications should be returned to the student's home school by no later than January 21. All information evenings begin at 7 p.m., and will be held at the following French Immersion Centres:

Thursday, January 17

George Kennedy Public School, 75 Weber Dr., Georgetown

Robert Little Public School, 41 School Lane, Acton

(For Late Immersion Program entry point: Grade 7)

Parents with questions about the Halton District School Board's Immersion French program, or registration information, should contact Marcelle Faulds at the Halton District School Board 905-335-3663, 905-842-3014, 905-878-8451.

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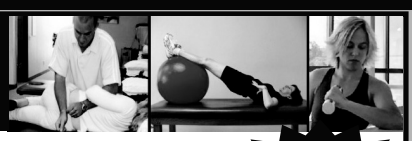

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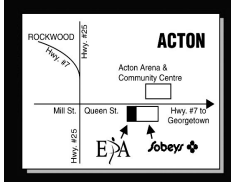

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