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Fate uncertain

Holy Rosary work stalls amid fears about money

By CAROL BALDWIN
Special to The Champion

After two hours of non-stop debate last Tuesday night, the fate of three Halton Roman Catholic schools parents say are in dire need of repairs is still uncertain.

At the end of the evening, the trustees referred the issue to the Local Education Improvement Commission (LEIC).

No date has been set for that meeting. The debate surrounds replacing Holy Rosary in Milton as well as upgrading and adding on to Burlington's St. Patrick and Ascension schools.

Although trustees unanimously agreed these three schools were in need of replacement and upgrading, the price tag of \$10.3 million proved to be a stumbling block.

Superintendent of Business Services Joe Birett tried mitigation before the debate got going, stressing the uncertainty of future finances to the board.

"From January to August (1998), the payments (from the province) will be constant but the number of students will increase," he said, noting that the same amount of money will also have to cover increased operating costs and inflation.

"And the board can no longer increase the mill rate to offset the decrease in payments. The source of funding will be entirely under the control of the province," he said.

Mr. Birett said the board does not know what funding it will receive or how it will be distributed. He said funding for junior kindergarten, transportation, general operating expenses, trustees, capital maintenance and loan repayments is uncertain.

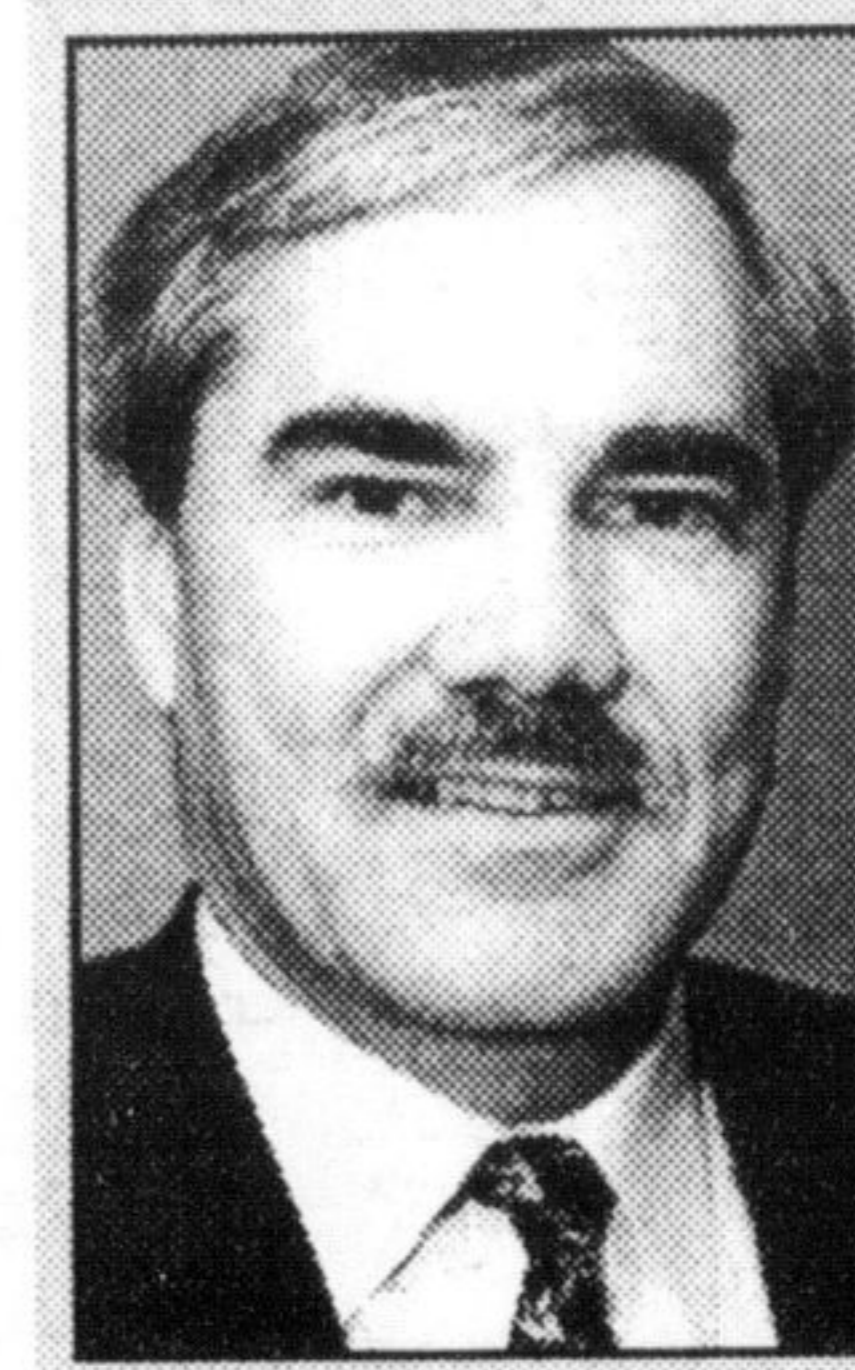
"We don't know if the board will be able to issue debentures. EDC (educational development charges) funds can only be used for sites, not for buildings any longer," he continued. "The only certainty is uncertainty."

Yet, despite his warnings of uncertain financing, many trustees were determined to go ahead with plans to renovate or replace the three schools heading the capital project priority list.

Deoni insistent

Milton Trustee Joe Deoni was most insistent, explaining that he had talked to two resource people at the provincial Education Improvement Commission (EIC) who recommended the board proceed with its application for capital upgrades, accompanied by a letter of support from the LEIC.

"Anything you do that is going to involve expenditures now or in the future should have the approval or recommendation of the EIC," he said. "He (the EIC resource person) said, 'I will guarantee you, 99 per



"We've got approval, if we can fund it with the money that we are going to be allocated, but we don't know what those dollars are yet."

-- FRED SWEENEY

cent sure, that there will be no funding formula until late March or early April. The Ministry (of Education) is anxious to get requests from boards."

Fred Sweeney, director of education, said funding for new schools was discussed at a recent meeting of education directors.

"We've got approval, if we can fund it with the money that we are going to be allocated, but we don't know what those dollars are yet," he said.

"We would be foolish to go ahead before we know that."

Foolish not to wait

Mr. Birett agreed. "If we submit an appropriate business plan, we will get approval to go ahead, if we have the funds."

And, it was that last phrase, "if we have the funds," that kept stalling Mr. Deoni's appeal to proceed with the construction plans for the three schools.

"These projects are the three most needy projects," said Oakville Trustee Gerald O'Halloran. "We need to do structural changes in order to give these students what they need. Let's get behind these projects and move them along."

Discussion down to dollars

However, Burlington Trustee Krys Binkley brought the discussion back to the funding.

"I am concerned with the money we are spending in a three-year time period (the three capital projects will take three years to complete). I don't feel comfortable with this money being spent, so I have the option to stall," she said. "At this stage of the game I'm still cautious and I'm not prepared to say 'yes.'"

"What we are proposing tonight was defeated at a joint committee meeting (finance and property committees)," added Ken Norman, a Halton Hills trustee. "I have a problem going ahead in principle when I can't rationalize how we are going to pay the debt. We will have more financial certainty once we have the formulas from the ministry some time in the fall. I would be prepared to move to table it until the fall."

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