

Postcards from the 'burbs demand a tax bottom line

By BRAD REAUME

The Champion

Halton politicians took their grievances to Queen's Park Tuesday morning in the form of 18,000 postcards.

The postcards came from residents concerned with the financial fallout of downloading provincial responsibilities onto property taxpayers.

In an event engineered for maximum publicity about 10 large plastic bags were dropped at Premier Mike Harris' office by Halton politicians.

Those in attendance included Milton Mayor Gord Krantz, his counterparts from Halton Hills (Marilyn Serjeantson) and Burlington (Walter Mulkewich), Oakville's deputy mayor Stan Weir and Halton Chair Joyce Savoline.

Premier Harris has pledged on several occasions to keep any shifts 'revenue neutral' to municipal governments.

While municipalities have been demanding detailed financial information the province has not provided it, even though the shifts are scheduled to take place on January 1, 1998.

Mr. Harris said several months ago he would pledge revenue neutrality with "a pinkie swear", the same device he uses to make promises to his children.

"Well I'm sorry, you need more than a pinkie swear. We are not playing games," said Ms Savoline.

She said the event was "the proper thing to do" and that Halton has taken the lead, with council fulfilling its promise to bring local concerns to the legislature.

"If the plan is revenue neutral and such a wonderful story then share it," she pleaded. "We were promised extensive consultation and all we've received is tokenism."

Halton has estimated a \$400 average increase to property taxes across the region if the province follows through with plans to pool social service costs within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), and shift



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responsibility for some programs.

In return the province has agreed to pay 50 per cent of education costs previously borne by municipalities.

Ms Savoline said the postcards were included as part of a recent mailing to 137,000 Halton households and businesses outlining the provincial plans.

Oakville Mayor Ann Mulvale said the 18,000 replies are "a statistically significant amount." She said with the downloading issue on the Oakville ballot, turnout increased 7 per cent in the recent municipal election over 1994.

Ms Mulvale added she understands the need for financing services but pointed to income taxes as the proper source of those funds.

"The big disappointment is how little the Toronto media knows or cares to know about the area around Toronto," added Ms Savoline. "We understand Toronto's need and we are quite willing to pay for it through our income taxes but not on the property tax."

Halton chief administrative officer Barry Malmsten said municipalities agree with the goals of the provincial government but need to know the substance behind the plan in order to make it work.

In addition, Mr. Malmsten pointed out that several of the announcements of shifts, including making Highway 5 and Highway 25 local roads, have been

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Feared commission calls only for amalgamation

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"Only by entering this process in a positive frame of mind will we achieve the best results for both Milton and Oakville. "There will be issues to be resolved around how the board will be structured, how staff and administration will be dealt with and how the two medical staffs may come together."

He said it's too soon to tell if the amalgamation will cause lay-offs.

The new partnership is to be in place no later than July 31, 1998. At that point, the Ministry of Health's funding for the two hospitals will flow into the new corporation, to be named by the existing boards.

"We have already been in contact with the Oakville hospital and we both feel we can work well together to best meet the needs of the community," Mr. Flemington said.

But the commission's report isn't all golden for Milton, Mr. Halls pointed out.

It calls for the hospital to reduce its 55 acute care beds to 32. However, it recognizes future population growth and designates the number of beds to increase by 11, up to 43, by 2003.

"We are currently reviewing their report in more detail. We fully expect to have a number of questions and concerns for them about the number of beds they have allocated for our community and the budget figures they have come up with," the executive director said.

"Those are the more technical arguments and concerns we have. At this point, we expect to be quite supportive of the approach that the commission has taken with services in our community and the

amalgamation."

The hospital has 30 days to appeal the commission's findings.

The commission, which announced all of its directions for Greater Toronto Area hospitals in Mississauga Tuesday, expects the changes to be completed by the year 2000.

Elsewhere in Halton, Joseph Brant Memorial Hospital in Burlington will maintain its separate governing and management while Georgetown and District Memorial will amalgamate with Peel Memorial Hospital and Etobicoke General Hospital. The three sites will remain open.

Commission chair Dr. Duncan Sinclair said he believes the recommendations will lead to positive change.

"The measures will lead to improved quality and better access to a wide range of services for the residents of the GTA/905," he said.

"Our recommendations to re-invest in community-based services and to upgrade and expand facilities will ensure that the health system will be able to meet the needs of the community well into the 21st century."

However, the GTA/905 Health Care Alliance, representing 16 hospitals in Durham, Halton, Peel and York, said the commission will force residents to fill hospital beds in Metro Toronto before increasing services closer to home.

Alliance officials said they were particularly concerned that the commission did not recommend the expansion of specialty services in the high growth areas or adequate funding to meet existing and future needs.

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