

Status quo accepted at first blush, but problems looming

By IRENE GENTLE

The Champion

Halton Region will likely play it safe when it comes to supplying ambulance services.

A final regional staff report has recommended sticking with Halton's two current suppliers when the Region takes over downloaded ambulances January 1 of next year.

That means Halton-Mississauga Ambulance and Halton Hills Ambulance Service will likely still be driving the Region's front-line health care into the year 2000.

Renegotiating contracts with the current suppliers will make the transfer of ambulances from a provincial to regional responsibility as painless as possible, explained Halton's chief medical officer, Dr. Robert Nosal.

"We clearly heard that (councillors) wanted a smooth transition with no risks to the community," he said. "This provides us with time and flexibility to really look at longer term options."

Under the Ambulance Act, the Region has until September to inform the Province of its plan for ambulance services.

The Region will then climb into the driver's seat on January 1, 2000.

The report was unveiled at a recent Halton Area Services Review (HASR) subcommittee meeting.

HASR, which is comprised of area councillors, mayors and school board representatives, approved the recommendations.

The report will now be passed on to the regional health and social services committee before landing at council for final approval.

At first blush, reaction seemed muted at the HASR meeting, with some councillors indicating they'd save

comment for the next go-round.

An exception was Milton Councillor Wally Hunter, who objected to the direction of the report.

Keeping the status quo would just mean a continuation of poor service in Milton, he argued.

"If human life is at stake here and we say the status quo is where we're going, I'm not sure that's doing anything for us in remote areas," he said.

Dr. Nosal reminded the HASR subcommittee that the staff recommendation buys time for more long term decisions to be made.

"The issues are complex," he said. "Tackling them will take six years, not the six months we have."

The response didn't appear to soothe Mr. Hunter, who opposed the recommendation, along with Milton Councillor Rick Malboeuf when it came time to vote.

They were vastly outnumbered by the remainder of the subcommittee.

The report was meant to give Halton direction in its first steps as operators of an ambulance service.

It also served as a heads-up in terms of costs.

According to the report, the service will cost the Region about \$4.5 million annually at the outset. That figure will only increase as Halton grows.

In 1998, Halton's 13-unit fleet responded to 27,800 calls. That number is expected to jump 41 per cent to 39,200 by 2004.

Traditionally, ambulances have crossed jurisdictions to achieve speedy response times.

While that was no trouble when the cheques were all signed by the Province, it could cause complications with Halton at the reins, said Dr. Nosal.

By responding to fewer out of jurisdiction calls than

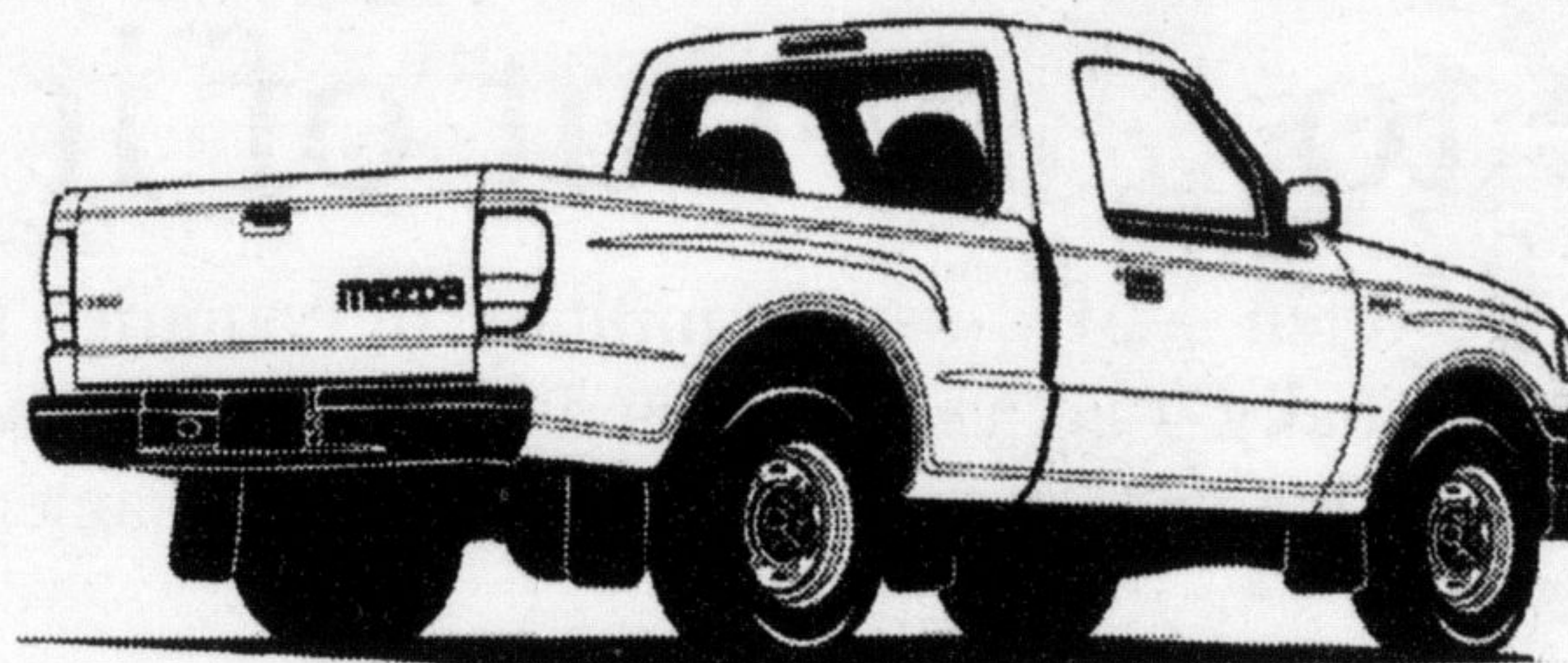
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Wally Hunter

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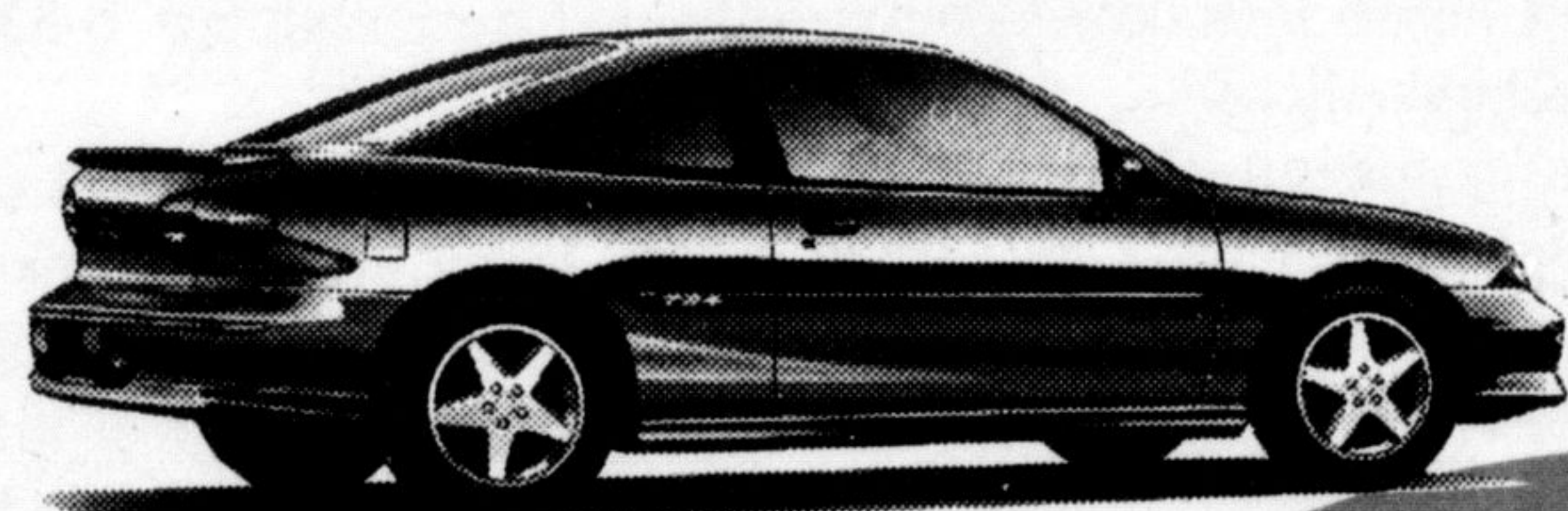
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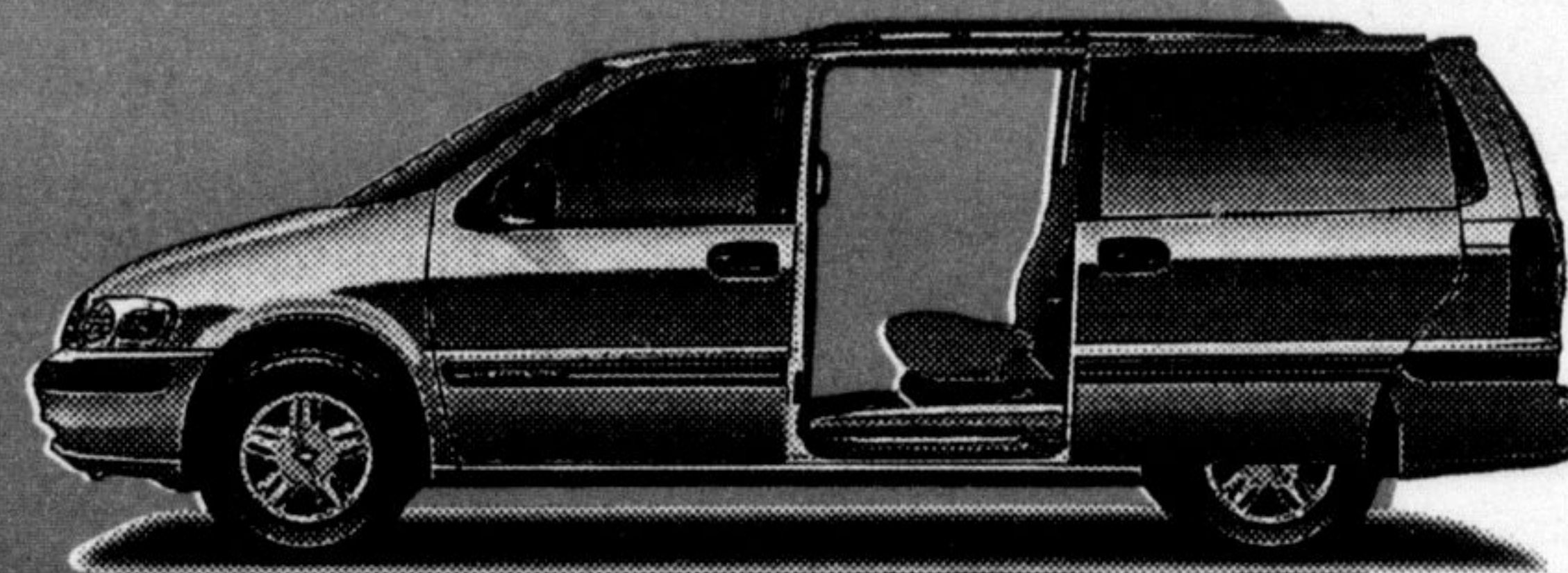
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