

# One year later, many see HHS as model marriage

By **KAREN SMITH**  
*The Champion*

The amalgamation of Milton District and Oakville-Trafalgar Memorial hospitals was a model merger, say past and present officials with Halton Healthcare Services (HHS).

On HHS's first anniversary, the people who oversaw the government-ordered marriage say their pro-active attitude and co-operation have made the merger the envy of others.

"Our merger has gone quite well compared to other hospitals that are having great difficulties," said HHS associate chief of staff Dr. Don Robertson.

"We took an attitude that it had to be done. We had no choice in the matter. It wasn't our decision; it was forced. We had to be okay with it and we did it."

The Health Services Restructuring Commission (HSRC), a body of medical professionals appointed by the provincial government, ordered the amalgamation in January, 1998 as part of a major overhaul of Ontario's health care system.

### Merger a relief

After the community feared the commission would close or at least partially shut down Milton hospital, the merger announcement came as a relief.

However, many local citizens still feared an amalgamation with a hospital more than double Milton's size wouldn't work in their favour. The bottom line was Miltonians valued their 40-year-old hometown hospital and felt threatened.

"I couldn't go to the grocery

store without having a half-hour dialogue with somebody about how terrible it was," said Milton Family Practice Program leader Cindy McDonell.

The truth of the matter, according to former HHS co-chair Norm Flemington, is that Milton has actually come out ahead.

"The services to the Milton resident have increased substantially," he said.

Among the benefits has been a noticeable improvement in access to mental health services and diagnostic tests for Milton patients.

### Oakville "mean and lean"

All and all, he said, Milton hospital already operated effectively, but there was much to be gained by partnering with a hospital such as Oakville.

"Oakville was a far meaner, leaner and efficient hospital than we were," he said.

The amalgamation has so far produced a savings of \$780,000 of which \$640,000 was reinvested in clinical services, said HHS senior vice-president Alan Halls.

"There was a conscious decision to make it work — to be proactive," he said of the amalgamation.

But the two hospitals were already sharing resources and working toward further partnerships long before the merger came into being, said former board of directors co-chair Sandra Farley.

"If you take it back to day one that figure would be much larger," she said.



Allan Halls

Even still, the purpose of the amalgamation wasn't based on cost-saving, Ms McDonell said. It focused on efficiency, quality and access to health services.

Halton Medical Society president Dr. Garnet Maley said he sees the amalgamation in a different light.

For Milton, he said the merger has resulted in the loss of an obstetrics unit, downsizing of beds and a lack of administrative presence.

"For the longest time if you raised a problem, there was no one you could talk to about them," he said.

Hospital officials argued the obstetrics unit closure had nothing to do with the amalgamation. It was a long-standing problem — an open obstetrics position hard to fill due to the heavy demands placed on one specialist being on call around the clock without substantial reward.

Mr. Halls said that, if anything, the merger helped attract an obstetrician to Milton. It presented more opportunity for a physician, hence a more attractive job posting.

### Few doctors to deliver

The obstetrics department will re-open with the recent hiring of an obstetrician this fall, but few local family doctors are planning to deliver babies for various personal reasons, Dr. Maley countered.

Ms McDonell said Dr. Maley's complaint that the number of Milton beds has decreased is simply not true. She said the obstetrics department was used for overflow when patient demand was high and that hasn't changed despite the unit closing.

"There's been times when we reopened the obstetrics unit for overflow patients," she said. "We have to take them."

• see OAKVILLE on page 7

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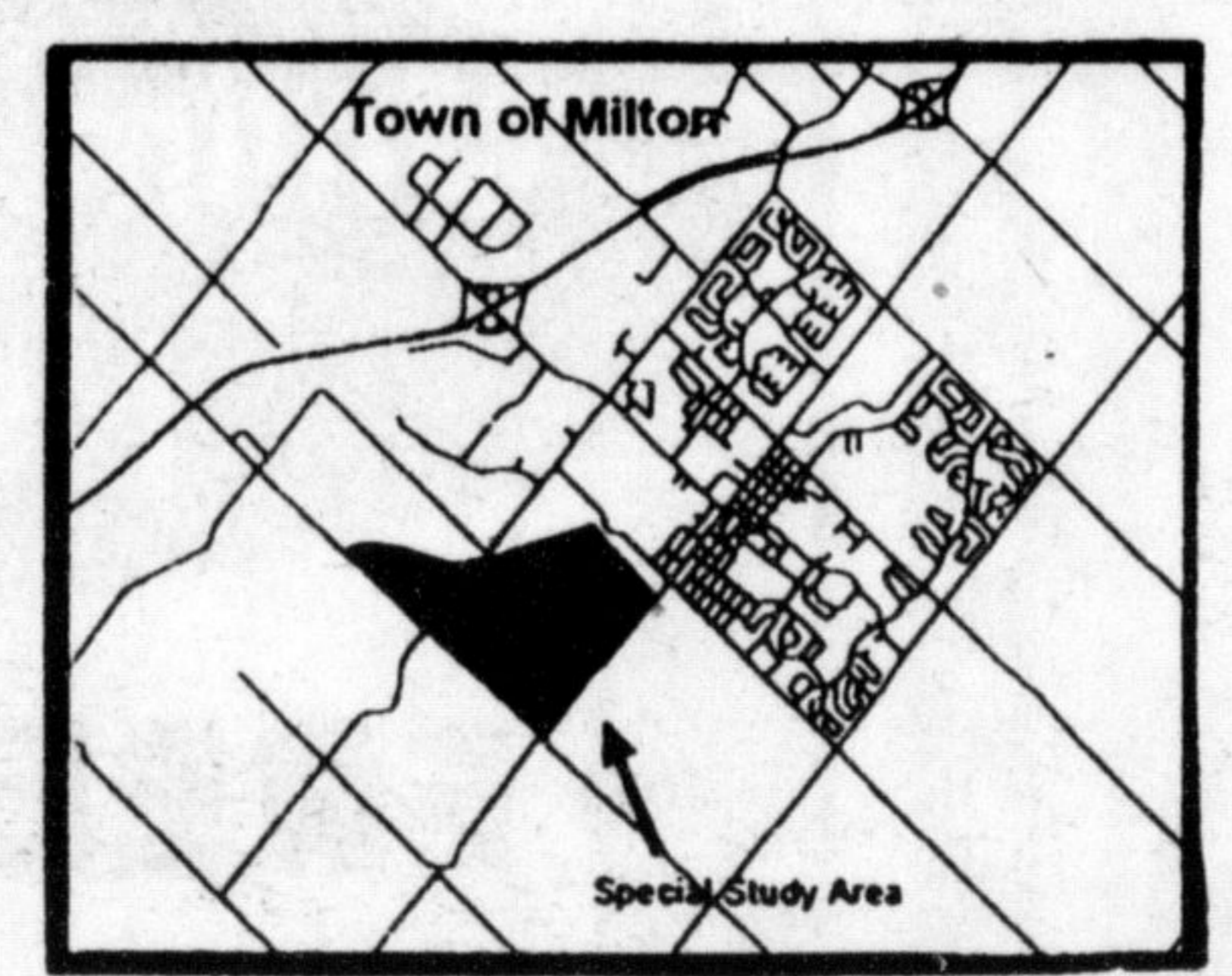
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### REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY OF HALTON MILTON WEST SPECIAL STUDY AREA

The Region of Halton's Planning and Public Works Committee will be considering recommendations on the Niagara Escarpment Plan Amendment Applications and the Regional Official Plan Amendment Applications for the Milton West Special Study Area.

#### This meeting will be held:

**Date:** September 8, 1999  
**Time:** 9:30 a.m.  
**Place:** Halton Region  
1151 Bronte Road,  
Oakville, Ontario  
Halton Room



The applications have been submitted by four proponents: 825927 Ontario Inc., Central Milton Holdings, Jannock Properties and John Grant. The purpose of these applications, is to delete these lands from the Niagara Escarpment Plan Area and add them to the Milton Urban Area. These applications have been appealed to both The Ontario Municipal Board and the Environmental Assessment & Appeal Board. Under the Consolidated Hearings Act, a Joint Board Hearing regarding these appeals will be held on October 26, 1999.



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