

Utility bill hike could be up to six per cent in 2000

By IRENE GENTLE
The Champion

Expensive capital projects could jack up the Region's 2000 utility bill by almost six per cent, Halton's budget review committee heard recently.

But committee voted to whittle that down to a tax freeze instead.

Last year, the average homeowner shelled out about \$407 for water and wastewater services.

But financial staff estimate that capital projects could swell that by a margin of half a per cent to almost six per cent.

That would balloon the bills to somewhere between \$409 and \$430.

The rate budget is expected to be approved by late November.

Different options

Staff arrived at the meeting armed with a proposal to draw up a budget showing a three per cent increase, with options to shave that down to a tax freeze.

The committee quickly turned that around to recommend a tax freeze with an option to increase at the rate of inflation (around two per cent).

Expenses related to work on the Skyway sewage treatment plant, plant and equipment maintenance and systems operation would be responsible for the added budget pressures in the coming year, said a staff report.

But councillors should understand what projects are being left out of a tax-trimming budget, said Joe Rinaldo, Halton's finance commissioner.

He asked for permission to prepare a list of the necessary projects and bring it back with a budget following council's directions.

"It is important that we identify needs and if you elect to go to zero, that is a policy decision," he said. "The requirements are as much as six per cent."

Councillors should know the consequences of the budget they endorse, agreed Halton Chair Joyce Savoline.

"I think it is a staff decision to put it before us and a political decision what to do with it," she said. "We don't want staff making the political decisions."

Bringing in a low or no tax increase may be politically savvy, but not at the cost of leaving out important projects, said Oakville Councillor Kathy Graham.

"I don't have any problem with the rate of inflation. I think that is an admirable way to go," she said. "But



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— JOYCE SAVOLINE

I think we have a responsibility."

Asking for a budget to come in at a certain rate is just playing with numbers, said Oakville Councillor Keith Bird.

"So what we'll end up saying is here is the rate of inflation that we picked out of the air because it gives us a warm, fuzzy feeling," he said. "We're playing a political game here."

Bird stresses quality

It is crucial that the Region maintains a top quality water system, said an irritated-sounding Mr. Bird.

"We're playing a little bit of a mug's game. At the end of the day, it has to be done," he said. "I'll be supporting a budget that reflects the needs of supporting a first-rate water system."

But "sustaining a system isn't the same as adding to it," observed Burlington Councillor John Taylor.

"The added monies would be for growth factors, not maintenance," he said.

Residents should understand the value of Halton's water system, said Ms Savoline.

"One thing we may have done in the past is underplayed to the residents and set a false expectation of what it really costs," she said. "Maybe it is time for a reality check. I think people have to understand the business that we are in."

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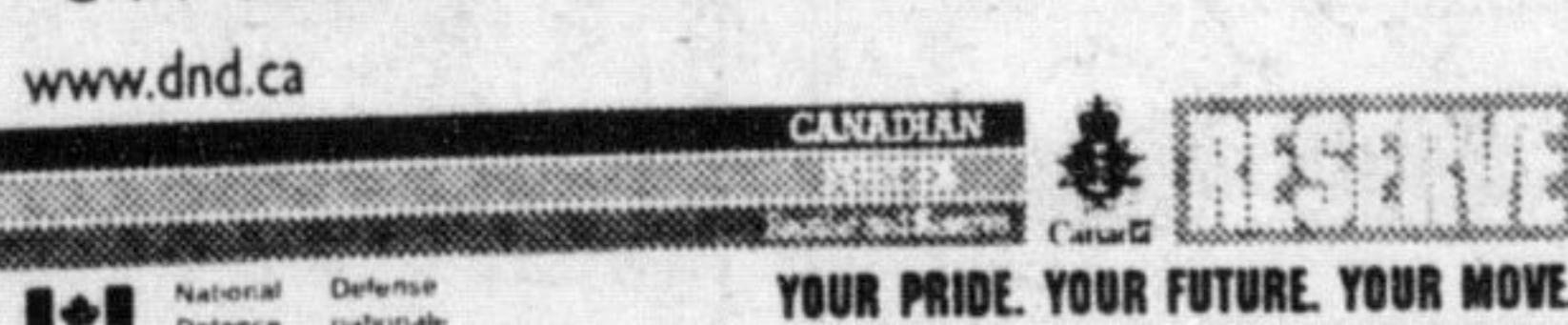
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