

Regional chair and Burlington mayor at odds

By IRENE GENTLE

The Champion

Burlington Mayor Rob MacIsaac had been looking to merge east Flamborough with his city, and Halton Chair Joyce Savoline was looking for an apology.

But after back-to-back council meetings Tuesday and Wednesday, neither one had any satisfaction.

After amalgamation failed in a tight 11-9 vote, Ms Savoline raised an objection to statements made by Mr. MacIsaac in the Tuesday edition of the Hamilton Spectator.

In the article, he stated her words on a radio talk show could have influenced staff's recommendation on the contentious and emotion-laden issue.

But Ms Savoline felt his charge challenged the credibility of both herself and Halton employees. "My own personal integrity has been called

into question, the office of the chair has been called into question and the integrity of the staff has been questioned," she said.

Ms Savoline believed her remarks, which noted there wasn't enough information to responsibly initiate a merger with Flamborough, were taken directly from staff after sitting through two public information sessions.

"My comments were made from them, not the other way around," she said.

Ms Savoline expressed her grievance at the end of a grueling five-and-a-half-hour meeting that began Tuesday evening and crawled to a close at close to 2 a.m.

At the time, Mr. MacIsaac seemed at a loss



Joyce Savoline

for words but promised to take another look at the article.

"The comments were not made to impugn anyone's integrity," he said.

"I'm not sure how you could take it that way."

The issue arose again at a regular council meeting later that morning, after all involved had managed to get at least a few hours sleep.

But no apologies were forthcoming.

"I'm sorry you feel that way but I stand by my comments," said Mr. MacIsaac.

"I don't think I did anything wrong."

He charged Ms Savoline with being naive if she felt her word didn't carry weight with regional staff.

"If you think when you make a comment that



Rob MacIsaac

it doesn't influence staff, you majorly underestimate your role," he said.

"Our staff listen to comments made around this table."

He added that he had repeated his opinion in a public forum during the previous evening's debate.

"No one took issue with that statement last night," he said. "I think what I said was accurate."

Mr. MacIsaac said he refused to curtail his speech to please either Ms Savoline or Regional staff.

And he noted Ms Savoline could have contacted him privately about the matter, rather than bring it up at open council.

Oakville Mayor Ann Mulvale also believed no apology was due.

"I think it's highly regrettable that offence is being taken to this," she said.

"I think it's most unfortunate that we'd spend valuable time discussing this."

Votes close to ones at municipal level

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Along the way, Mr. MacIsaac took shots at Halton CAO Brent Marshall for saying the opportunity could arise again.

He also condemned staff for seeming to go out of its way to look for the negatives in the deal.

But in the end, Mr. MacIsaac couldn't convince a majority of councillors, who roughly voted along the same lines they had earlier in their municipal councils.

All Milton representatives voted against the merger.

A potential wild card was Oakville coun-

cillor Stephen Sparling.

In the middle of the meeting, he seemed poised to make the no vote even stronger, saying "I've listened intently to try and find a way to make this work, but every time I look at the numbers, I get concerned."

But in the end, he decided the opportunity was too good to miss.

Saying no meant resisting an emotional appeal by Flamborough Mayor Ted McMeekin.

"I believe this is a once in a lifetime opportunity," he told council at the outset

of a marathon meeting that ended close to 2 a.m. "A failure to move now will in all likelihood lock us into Hamilton forever."

The vote seemed to tear at many councillors, who appeared to be battling between emotion and prudence.

"I'm concerned about debts, concerned about the unknown," said Oakville Councillor Kathy Graham. "We can't just say we'll deal with that later."

And the short deadline disturbed Oakville Councillor Kevin Flynn.

"The shame of this exercise is the absurdity of the timeline," he said.

Too soon for merger, say councillors

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After today's deadline, it will be up to Minister of Municipal Affairs Tony Clement to make the final decision.

Staff's position was based on the belief that it's too soon to seriously consider a merger, Halton CAO Brent Marshall told town council Monday night.

"It's simply too premature," he said.

His presentation showed costs would rise for virtually everyone involved should the merger go through.

"Is it correct to say if this goes through, taxes will go up in Hamilton and Halton and Flamborough," asked an incredulous Councillor Rick Day.

The information also had Councillor Brian Penman searching for an emergency exit.

"How do we get out of this," he asked.

But after noting it would take an actuary to get through all the reports on the issue, Councillor Barry Lee was convinced Milton should just say no.

"I understand one thing. Amalgamation with Flamborough could be quite detrimental to Milton taxpayers," he said.

The decision was also easy for Councillor Rick Malboeuf.

"This is of no benefit, it's basically a no-brainer," he said.

And in the end, a merger won't take place if the minister feels it doesn't meet his objectives of fewer politicians and more efficient government, said Mr. Marshall.

"The minister may indicate that this is not something he's interested in," he said.

"We may be out of this by early April."

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