

# Halton could be on hook for ambulance costs

By IRENE GENTLE  
The Champion

With little more than a month to go before Halton Region takes over the recently-downloaded ambulance service, a 50/50 funding commitment from the Province is still in question.

And that could leave the Region on the hook for approximately \$712,000 worth of additional annualized staffing costs, Halton's health and social services committee heard Tuesday.

That's the price tag of about 27 additional full-time paramedics, which would help beef up the inherited service when it goes in-house August 16.

The aim is to rev up response times, which have generally lagged since 1996.

In Oakville, average response times have increased from 9:51 minutes in 1996 to 10:26 in 1999. Burlington has seen an increase from 9:18 minutes to 10:13 in 1999.

And Milton all but limps to the scene with Halton's slowest

response time, at 13:42 minutes in 1996 and 15:07 in 1999.

Only Halton Hills has improved, going from 13:07 minutes in 1996 to 12:03 in 1999.

Regional municipalities taking over ambulance service are required to meet 1996 response times. But Halton is trying to go one better by aiming for the North American benchmark of 8:59 minutes or the standard for paramedics trained in advanced life support (ALS), which is just 7:59.

Provincial dollars, not staff numbers, is the real issue, observed Halton CAO Brent Marshall.

"The only reason we're back here today is we still haven't got a green light from the Province," he said. "We want to be sure committee knows that going ahead may not be with provincial funding."

The committee endorsed moving forward, and the issue will go before council for final approval next week.

But Oakville Mayor Ann Mulvale chastised the Province for downloading the service with a 50/50 funding commitment it hasn't yet come through on, while legislating response times it

couldn't recently achieve.

"Having tasked us with that, they're making the task more difficult," she said. "But if another level of government won't be responsible, we will."

That's the message Halton Chair Joyce Savoline could get behind.

"It's still our mandated responsibility," she said. "We ought to send a message to the community that you come first in our book."

Improving service is the bottom line, said Halton's Manager of Operations John Pereira in a separate telephone interview by The Champion.

"We're hoping to reduce response times on a regional basis, as well as a municipal basis," he said. "And we've got to start with a good foundation."

That's what the Region is attempting to build with the hiring of up to 108 paramedics, including double the current complement of ALS paramedics.

Residents also win by having a consistent and equalized service throughout the region, he added.

# Paramedic angry he lost local job

By IRENE GENTLE  
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A Halton hiring spree to fill positions for the recently downloaded ambulance service has at least one long-time paramedic feeling injured.

Harvey Matts is a 30-year veteran of paramedic work, with 20 years below his belt in Milton.

But when the Region decided to take the service in-house, Mr. Matts was one of several in Milton who didn't make the cut.

"I find it very upsetting that we were

overlooked," he said. "The people who are there don't necessarily have better qualifications than I do but I certainly have seniority over them."

The reason is seniority isn't transferable to a new employer, said Halton's Human Resources Director, Tom Clark.

And severance pay, also a contentious issue with Mr. Matts, isn't applicable because he still has a job with his current employer, but in Peel instead of Milton.

A level one paramedic, Mr. Matts has received basic life support training.

But in the recent hiring spurt, an effort was made to increase the number of paramedics with advanced life support (ALS)

training instead.

Advertising for Halton's 108 positions drew 185 applicants.

"We had a lot of well-qualified people for the positions," said Mr. Clark. "We feel we did a pretty fair and equitable and rigorous interview process."


Milton Councillor Rick Malboeuf had heard rumblings about the hiring practice and took his concern to Halton's Health and Social Services Committee Tuesday.

But when the meeting dissolved, he left reassured that the Region had done the right thing.

"I'm happy with the process and I have no more concerns," said Mr. Malboeuf.

"The business that considers itself immune to the necessity for advertising sooner or later finds itself immune to business."

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