

Region wins Silver Award for 'Big Pipe' project

Award for project financing given to Region by the Canadian Council for Private/Public Partnerships

By IRENE GENTLE
The Champion

Halton's massive pipe project aimed at pumping lake water to service north Halton's impending population boom has caught the eye of the country.

The Region was recently presented with the Silver Award for project financing by the Canadian Council for Private/Public Partnerships.

The pipe plan was a joint venture between

D'Orazio/Walter and Halton.

Calling the award "prestigious," Halton Chair Joyce Savoline said it was a recognition of the innovation required to get things done.

"It's a confirmation that we're a dynamic corporation for whom innovation is not just a buzz word," she said at Wednesday's regional council meeting.

"This award belongs to all of us."

Ironically, the national award was crafted in Halton as well — at Sheridan College in Oakville.

Jim D'Orazio, chief operating officer of the D'Orazio/Walter Joint Venture, was on hand to share in the limelight, but he handed much of the praise for the award back to the Region.

"We can't take any credit for it. You in the Region have to take credit for that," he said.

"But to even be considered for this award, you have to take a number of steps."

For a small company formed more than 30 years ago — the same year Mr. D'Orazio was born — the greatest honour was being chosen for the pipe project at all, he added.

"We were given an unqualified recognition as a team by (Halton Planning Commissioner) Pat Murphy about two years ago," said Mr. D'Orazio.

"We were up against some great competition, to be chosen among that group was a great feat and a great honour. This is just the icing on the cake. I can't say thank you enough."

The \$27 million construction contract was handled as a design-build project with D'Orazio-Walter, and funded by developers. Construction began in January.

The concrete pipe will pump treated lake water to Milton to allow for the development of 6,200 new homes and 500 to 700 acres of employment land.

A second wastewater pipe was built simultaneously.

The town is expected to grow to a population of 85,000 by 2016.

Residents' water bills going up

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That would provide the Region with the cash needed to tackle a number of projects without excessive borrowing, said Halton's Director of Budgets and Fiscal Policy Dave Birkett.

But Mr. Dennison wondered why the initial steep hikes couldn't be smoothed out over the 10-year forecast period, amounting to an increase of about 4.25 per cent per year.

"There has to be a way we can come up with a scenario that averages out those increases," he said. "I think our constituents would prefer that we did the extra homework on this."

But no amount of number crunching could prevent the base budget from growing if rate hikes were leveled, said Mr. Birkett.

That would lead to a situation where costs skyrocket due to debt charges while less revenue is pulled in.

"If we went to the smoothing option we have here, you're collecting less revenue in the early years. Then, obviously, you have to debenture more," said Mr. Birkett. "By bringing those revenues in at the beginning, it lessens the needs for debenturing."

The idea is similar to paying off a credit card bill at the outset, before interest charges are levied, rather than paying it down slowly.

In the latter scenario, the customer ends up paying out more than if they had laid down the cash up front.

"We're not raising the same amount of money if we smooth it out over 10 years. The only way you can make that is if the debentures go up, which raises the base budget," said Mr. Birkett. "You're carrying forward all those financing charges."

But that didn't satisfy Mr. Dennison, who said, "I totally disagree with the response I'm getting."

He said borrowing done in the first four years could be paid back in the last six, if rates were smoothed out. "You don't need any more debentures."

He asked that the item be referred to the next council meeting to give staff a chance to work out a better system, but the motion was defeated by his colleagues.

Burlington Councillor John Taylor then took the opportunity to hail back to a consistent theme of his — the need for a detailed plan to cope with growth.

"I think this council has a lot of work to do to deal with growth," he said. "We must look at the cost of growth, not just financially but also quality of life."

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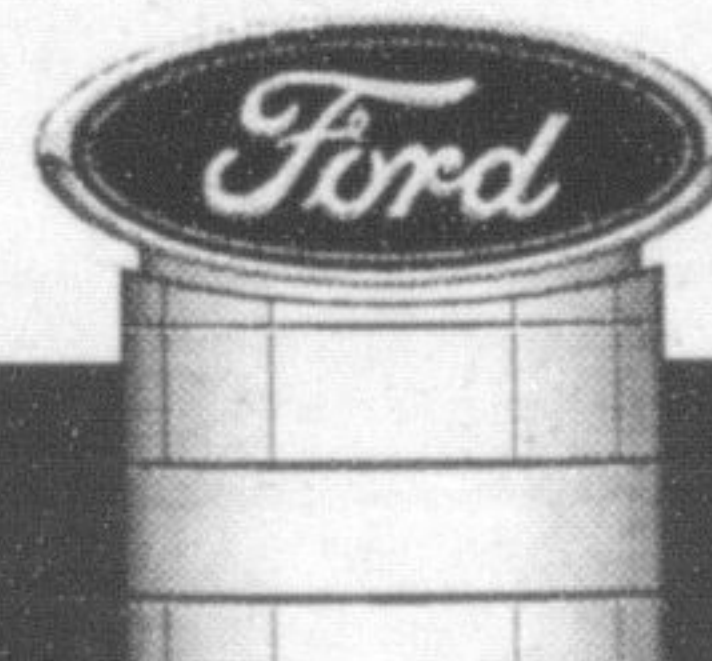
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