Region defends its costly watermain replacement

By IRENE GENTLE
The Champion

A Burlington resident who ran for the position of city and regional councillor in the last municipal election arrived at the Region to oppose Halton's costly cast iron watermain replacement program Wednesday.

But staff fired back with a detailed presentation in defence of the program, which replaces corroded water pipes with longer-lasting counterparts.

Luke McEachern told the Region's planning and public works committee that opposing the expensive program was part of his election platform, as well as that of his wife, Lisa Cooper, who ran for Halton chair in November.

The couple maintain that merely lining old, corroded pipes would be a more cost-effective way to keep Halton's water flowing at acceptable levels while eliminating complaints about rusty water.

He cited other regions, such as Toronto, which opted to reline even older pipes, and wondered why Halton had chosen the more expensive solution.

"The question begs itself," said Mr. McEachern. "Why have so many of these other communities, many of whom draw their water from the same source as Halton, decided to go with remedial upgrade of existing infrastructure, rather than the more expensive open cut replacement that has been adopted here?"

He argued that more expensive doesn't mean better in this case.

"The taxpayers of Halton region want and are entitled to cost effective implementation of policy and programs that are responsible to the taxpayers first," said Mr. McEachern. "Quality programs that are fiscally responsible do not and should not always cost more."

Reaction timely

But Halton Hills Councillor Rick Bonnette wondered if Mr. McEachern would be comfortable with the idea that a house could have burned down due to insufficient water flow if Halton hadn't reacted when it did.

"Certainly I'd want a safe, secure supply of water," said Mr. McEachern. "I'm not arguing that at all."

And Halton Chair Joyce Savoline wondered if Mr. McEachern knew Halton was actually ahead of other areas in terms of shoring up old infrastructure.

"Halton started doing that work far ahead of those other municipalities you've mentioned," she said.

A series of concerns led to the launching of the cast iron replacement program, said Halton's Manager of Records and Information Linda Petelka.

"The cast iron program was in response to overall system deficiencies," she said. "We looked at available water flows for fire, the structural integrity of the pipes as well as water complaints."

After determining which neighbourhoods had the most need, the Region proceeded with bringing all aspects of the service up to standard. Defending Halton's choice as compared to that made by Toronto or Peel, she said the situations are different due to Halton's rural make-up. Though rehabilitating dug up areas can cost big bucks in Toronto, the price tag plummets in Halton, which is less dense and isn't hindered by items such as streetcar wires.

She added that dirty water complaints have dropped by 20 per cent each year since the project began, and main breaks in south Halton have also been reduced from 216 in 1994 to 127 in 2000.

Committee members appeared satisfied with the presentation, and asked that versions of it be presented to different groups, such as the Halton Taxpayers Coalition, of which Mr. McEachern is a member.

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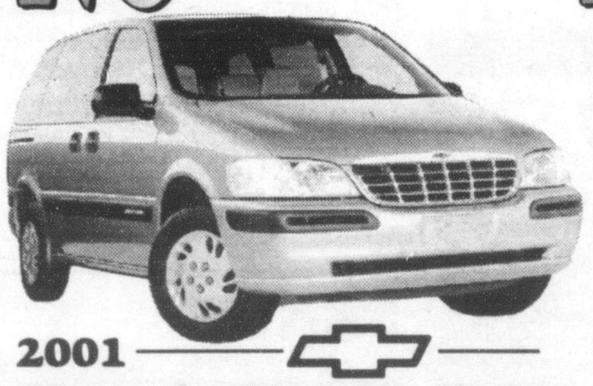

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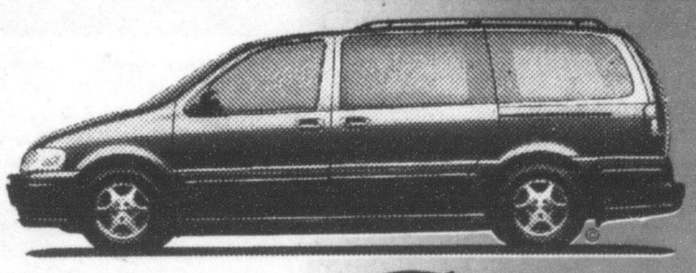

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