

Cancelling bus service for French Immersion could kill program, says parent

By PAUL MITCHISON
Special to The Champion

An Oakville parent warns that cutting bus service for French Immersion will kill the program, as school trustees consider slashing transportation costs to meet a tight budget.

"If they do this, the program will be gone in three years," said Don Vrooman, chair of the school council at Pine Grove School in Oakville, a French Immersion school where most of the school's 650 students arrive by bus.

Trustees are considering cutting bus service for French Immersion students to save \$410,000.

Mr. Vrooman predicted many parents won't be able to drive their kids to school, which will reduce interest in French Immersion.

While most parents are fully committed, he said, new students would be less likely to enroll in grade 1, "and when enrollment drops in any school, then the program is cancelled."

The bus cuts were just part of \$4.2 million in spending reductions under consideration by trustees if they wish to pass a balanced bud-

et for 2002-03. The numbers were discussed during Wednesday night's meeting at the board's head office in Burlington.

According to a staff report from the board's Business Superintendent Carla Kisko, other suggested cuts include:

- Eliminating the purchase of classroom computers and staying with existing machines for another year to save \$565,000.

- Slashing \$1.3 from daily maintenance. It could mean not replacing lights that burn out or fans that don't work, and also trying to repair aging equipment that would ordinarily be replaced.

- Cutting 26 new, full-time educational assistants from the proposed budget, to save \$695,000.

The debate included a discussion of whether the province might suddenly announce additional funding to help cash-strapped boards from making painful cuts.

Trustees have another budget session set for tomorrow and will likely avoid making final cuts until a board meeting set for June 19.

Board Chair Ethel Gardiner said in an interview that the transportation cuts have been discussed as possibilities in the

past, but she still expects a strong public backlash.

She said she hopes more money will come from the Province soon to help avoid making the cuts.

"We still have a ways to go before we make any final determination. This is still preliminary talk."

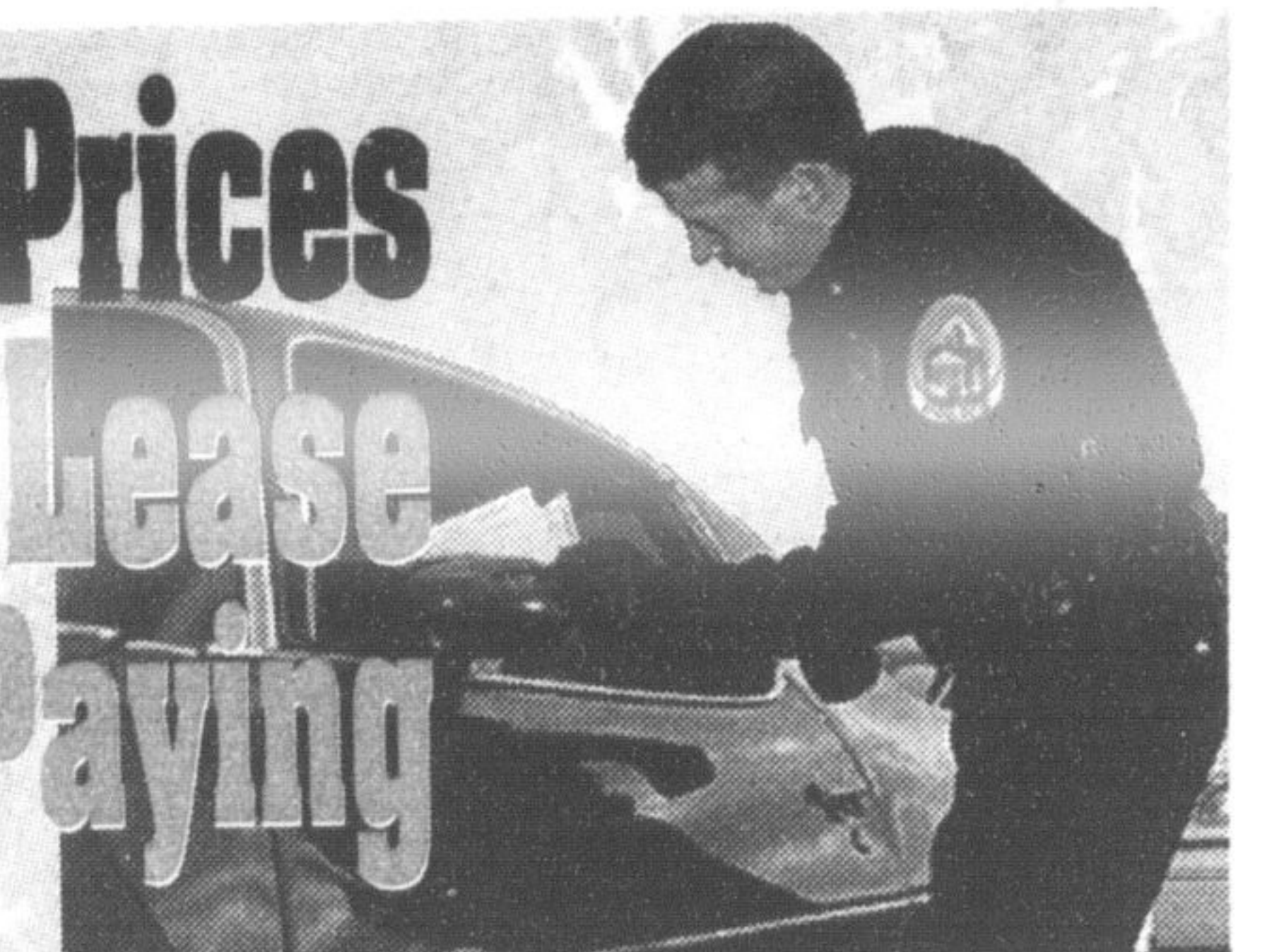
The board's Director of Education Dusty Papke told trustees he believes the provincial government will soon recognize the need for an improved funding formula to replace the existing model from 1997.

"The government has already admitted it needs to be fixed, but I don't know at this point whether there will be additional dollars this year. There are no timelines and that's the problem," he said.

The budget report showed that wages amounted to \$228.3 million, amounting to 79 per cent of the budget.

Ms Kisko told trustees that employee wage increases aren't taken into account in the current budget. Contracts expire in August, so expected wage increases will likely worsen the financial pressure.

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