

Transportation cuts for specialized classes off chopping block: budget

By **TIM WHITNELL**

Special to The Champion

Parents of many public school children taking specialized classes around Halton will be relieved to know cuts to their transportation funding have been removed from the ongoing school board budget deliberations.

Proposed budget cuts of \$410,000 for the busing of French immersion students, \$168,500 for the transportation of English as a Second Language pupils and \$162,900 for gifted students had been on the chopping block up until just before Wednesday's school board meeting, when a revised list of budget cuts was unveiled.

While parents of students in the specialized classes are likely happy for now, final budget decisions will be made by the 11 trustees in late June. There are still \$233,900 in cuts proposed related to transportation.

Board Chair Ethel Gardiner said she will suggest busing remain in place for students in her hometown

of Georgetown, citing longer, more dangerous and more arduous walks for pupils there, particularly in winter. Halton's Catholic board has granted a similar busing exception to its students in the same area, she said.

Beyond the busing issue, the Halton public board still has many difficult decisions to make before it can achieve a balanced budget.

The new list of items under consideration for reduction amounts to \$4.05 million, down from the \$4.2 million proposed at the last meeting.

Board staff say they're working on the assumption of receiving \$285.44 million from the Ontario Ministry of Education for the 2002-03 school year, based on the latest student enrolment projections.

Another \$200,000 was added from the Halton board's reserve fund leaving it seeking \$4.05 million in reductions.

There were several other major changes made to the proposed budget including decreasing the number of new education assistants (EAs) to be placed in elementary schools next year, particularly for special education students.

The initial plan for 63 new full-

time equivalent EAs was downgraded to 37 recently and has been further reduced to 27 additions, resulting in a saving of \$970,000 in proposed spending.

The drastic dilution of the incoming EA complement doesn't sit well with many trustees.

"You are doing a great job," Ms Gardiner told board staff, "but it is evident the kids will suffer greatly. I am going to have huge, huge difficulty passing a balanced budget.

"We can talk about fiduciary duty until the cows come home but we have a greater duty to serve the children of Halton."

Two areas where \$1 million in savings were found were computers and retirement gratuities.

A proposed chop of \$565,000 to the computer budget is now just \$65,000.

A half-million dollars has been chopped as well from the retirement gratuities fund for 2002-03. A \$6.2 million cost two years ago will be about \$4.5 million for the current year but is being estimated at just \$3 million for next year.

The savings next year couldn't be estimated or announced until those employees confirmed their intention to retire this year, which doesn't usually happen until June.

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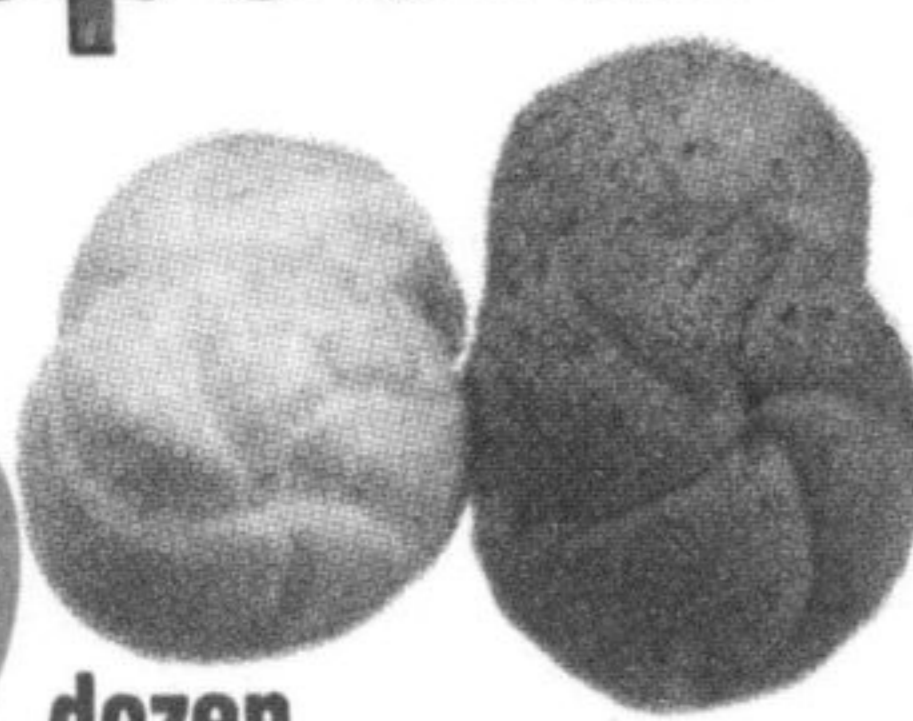
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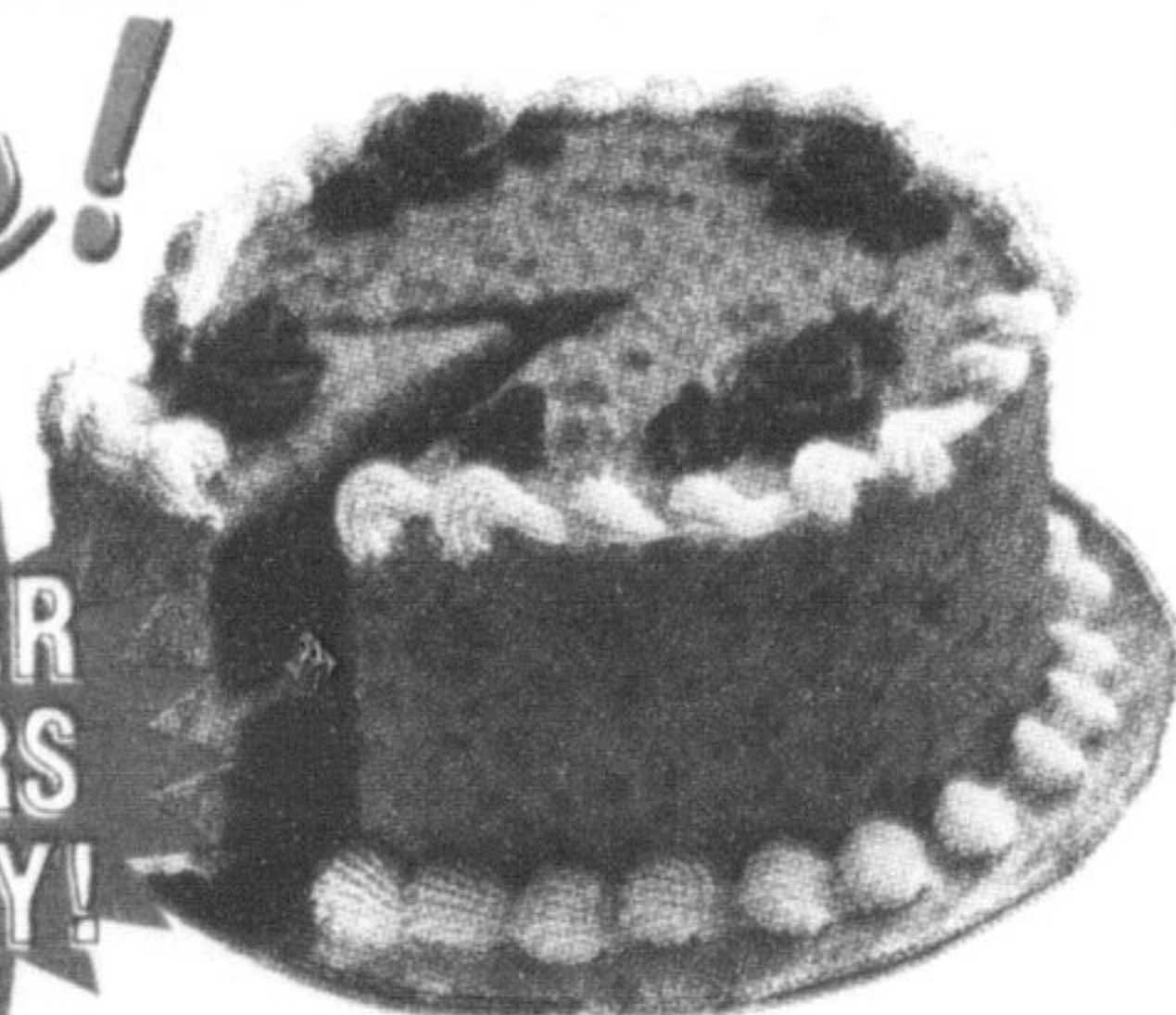


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