

Cutbacks not necessary: school board official

By **TIM WHITNELL**
Special to The Champion

A balanced budget achieved without the need for cutbacks in programming or services is a possibility for 2003-04, says the Halton District School Board's chief number cruncher.

Business superintendent Carla Kisko said details of the general legislative grants recently released by the education ministry appear to be more positive for the board this year, especially for special education, as administrators gear up for their annual budget deliberations.

"We are in much better shape, even with (contract) negotiations to do, than we were a year ago. We dealt with much less money last year," Ms Kisko noted.

"I'm pretty confident we can settle it," without having to resort to slashing services or taking funds from other programs, she said.

"We know we won't have to rob from other areas," she said.

Regardless of whether cutbacks are necessary, Ms Kisko said board officials are always searching out "inefficiencies."

Last year Halton public board trustees debated long and hard and seriously considered passing a deficit budget to protest what they believed was the vast underfunding of education in Ontario.

In the end, a \$285.5 million balanced expenditure package was ratified. At the time, the board's senior administrators said it was about \$4 million short of what was needed to address immediate classroom and non-teaching needs.

Fast-forward almost one year and top senior board officials are singing a much happier tune.

The Halton public board has received an additional \$16.4 million in in-year adjustments for the current school year. The largest portion of that amount is \$6.8 million for special education. The cash infusion, which came in stages, means the revised Halton board budget for the current school year is \$300.4 million.

As well, total government grants to the public board for 2003-04 have been increased by another \$8.6 million to bring next year's ministry allotment to the board to \$308.9 million.

"The pressure is off the big areas like special education," said Ms Kisko. "They (special ed. programs) are in good shape. We will finally be able to put some resources back for the kids."

The bulk of the \$6.8 million for special education is coming to the board late in the current school year so it will be applied to next year's special education budget, she said. Ms Kisko and the board's Education Director Dusty Papke both agree that the wild card in whether the 2003-04 budget can be balanced without much tinkering is the financial impact of ongoing contract negotiations with various employee groups.

"That's an unknown because we have a bunch of contracts to settle," said Ms Kisko.

The board was in mediation talks with its 750 full-time equivalent high school teachers April 24, their first face-to-face meeting in two months. The teachers' previous contract expired August 31, 2002.

Mr. Papke has the same concerns as Ms Kisko when it comes to the budget and contract talks. "The question is how much (money) will get eaten up by the negotiations process."

The Ontario government says it will give boards money to cover a 3 per cent pay increase for its employees over one year. The majority of the \$8.6 million in added grant money for the board for next year, \$5.9 million, is for that purpose.

As far as the prospect of cutbacks to programs or services next year, Mr. Papke said, "We're hoping we can reach agreements that will allow us not to do that."

"We're optimistic that we'll be able to maintain our programs," he said.

Dawn Beckett-Morton, the board's chief contract negotiator, indicated that among employee deals ratified so far across the province, the annualized impact of many

of them, due to phased-in pay raises, is in the 4.2 to 4.3 per cent range.

The provincial deadline for finalizing school board budgets is June 27.

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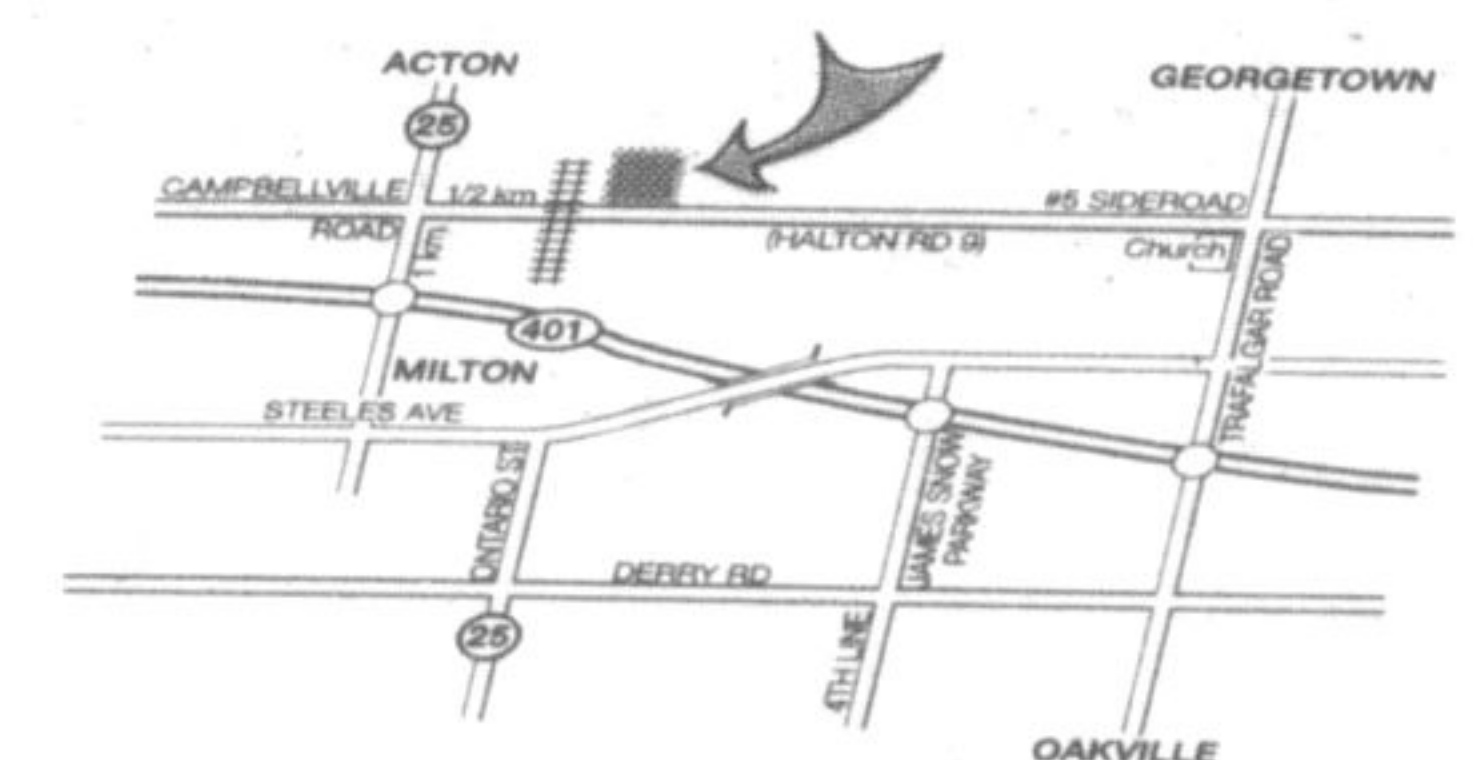
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