

# Region looking to change costly tax pooling system

By JASON MISNER

The Champion

By spring, Halton Region's top finance experts expect to have ready a report with recommendations that could help local taxpayers keep some money they pay into a Toronto pooling system.

But ultimately any change to this system that involves helping Toronto pay for social services will need provincial government approval.

Jane MacCaskill, Halton's treasurer and commissioner of corporate services, said the Region doesn't feel pooling is an "appropriate measure" to assist Toronto in dealing with legitimate social service needs.

The report will attempt to come up with alternatives that could be brought to the Province.

"Halton can't implement a unilateral position," Ms MacCaskill said. "(Pooling is) not the best way to deal with the issue of social assistance programs."

Halton doesn't receive a single penny from the pooling system.

A status report will come before councillors next month. The former Tory government created pooling to help Toronto pay for down-loaded social services when the city was amalgamated in 1998.

Pooling has been a huge financial hit for the Region. Halton has paid \$230 million since pooling

was created five years ago.

The pooling report was asked for by regional council in late 2002, particularly in response to the City of Hamilton's expressed interest of receiving pooling dollars.

There's concern that if another municipally gets money from the pooling system, it will be a further drain on Halton taxpayers.

"There is no question there will be an impact," Ms MacCaskill said. "Mathematically there's no way there can't be."

Ms MacCaskill said it's taken awhile to complete the report because of the financial complexities and the desire to ensure communities like York and Peel regions — who pay into pooling — have time to comment on it.

"There's no question that York and Peel have been asking the Province to review this."

Ms MacCaskill said a change in the funding system by limiting the strain on the property tax bill "could have a major impact. It's a major financial issue we need to deal with."

Halton Chair Joyce Savoline has been outspoken against pooling, and took a shot at it during her inaugural speech last month.

In it she said, "Halton does benefit directly from a healthy Toronto and a healthy Hamilton," but the system is no longer sustainable and has started to undermine Halton's

quality of life.

Oakville Mayor Ann Mulvale was happy to hear Ms Savoline address pooling, and is hoping the impending staff report leads to a more fair funding system.

Ms Mulvale said part of the problem is some Halton residents, contrary to what some may think, are experiencing financial difficulties. "There are people who are barely holding onto their homes," she said, noting she was executive director of the United Way in Oakville in the mid '80s.

Halton politicians, she said, recognize the pressure Toronto is under to accommodate down-loaded social service programs.

That's why changing the pooling system isn't about Halton railing against Toronto but a statement that there's a systemic problem with how the pooling system has been designed, she said.

"They have legitimate revenue needs. What we're saying is that these services should be funded by other revenue streams," she said, like through sales taxes.

The 2004 budget forecast shows that a typical Halton household will pay \$194 for GTA pooling.

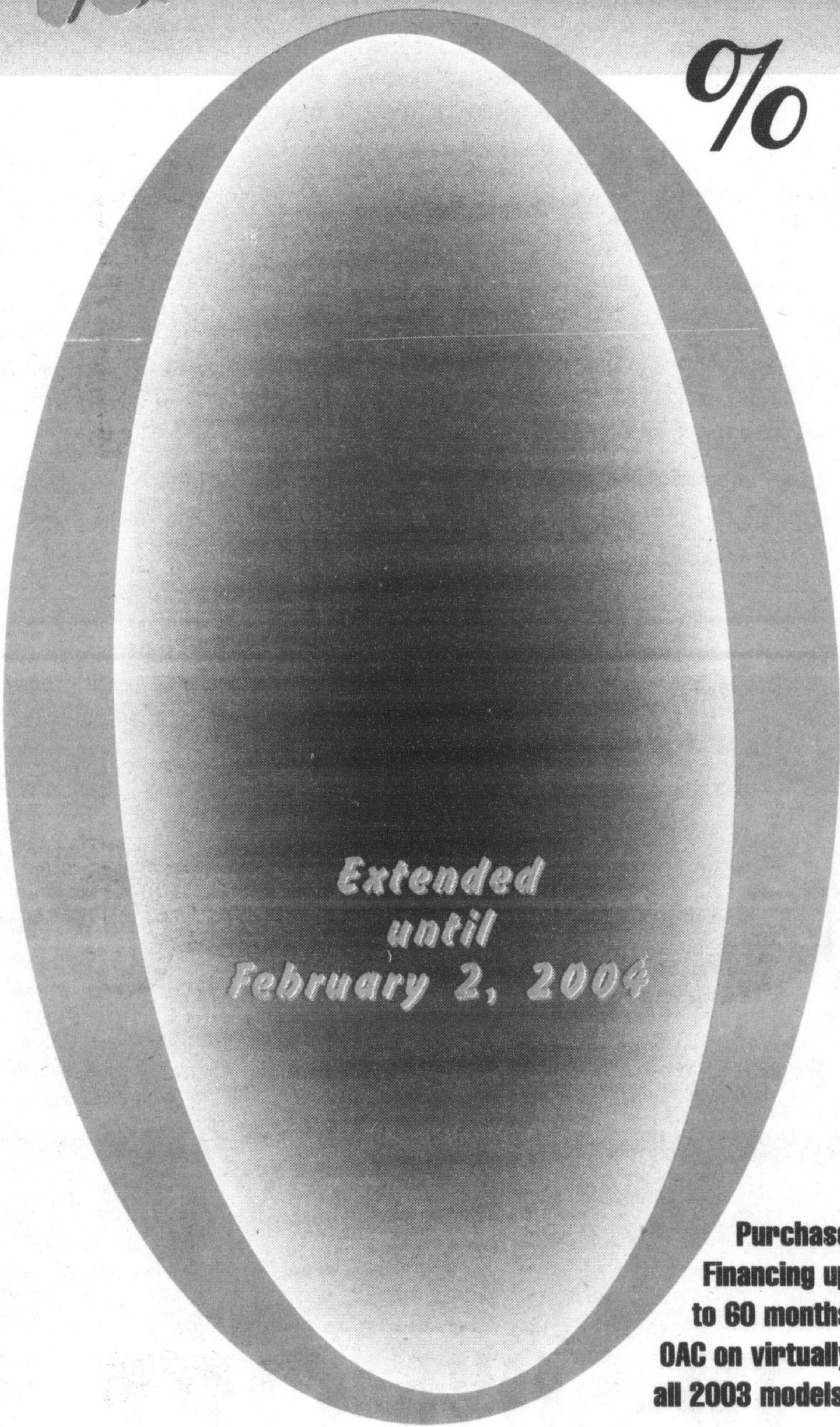
That money takes away from meeting other needs, Ms Mulvale said.

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