

Region is looking to hire associate medical officer

By **JASON MISNER**

The Champion

Halton Region is the largest public health unit in Ontario without an associate medical officer of health and regional officials want to change that.

As part of its proposed 2004 budget, Dr. Bob Nosal, Halton's medical officer of health and commissioner of the health department, is asking politicians to approve the hiring of an associate medical officer of health to deal with increased workload.

The position would pay about \$160,000 a year with benefits.

Dr. Nosal unveiled his department's budgetary requirements to the health and social services committee last Tuesday.

He said there's no guarantee he would be successful in filling the position, but an associate medical officer of health would prove useful in a region that has been deluged by health pressures, like West Nile virus and SARS.

SARS hit in late March and remained a public health issue until May, which meant staff had to intensely monitor for the illness in local residents.

And West Nile kept health staff jumping namely because of the intense virus protection program the Region enacted to combat the

mosquito-borne illness.

These kinds of health issues won't go away, Dr. Nosal said.

"I was fortunate to have an experienced communicable diseases management staff," he said. "If there were no emerging infectious diseases, I probably wouldn't be coming to you right now."

The position primarily would involve overseeing the administrative needs of the health department when the medical officer of health is dealing with a public health issue.

Halton CAO Brent Marshall, who's responsible for all the regional departments, told the committee the recommendation for the position wasn't made lightly.

Mr. Marshall said he loses his right arm when Dr. Nosal is occupied with a health issue.

Addressing emerging infectious diseases, he said, will continue to weigh down staff and the medical officer of health.

When SARS and West Nile emerged, other departments were impacted in addition to health staff, he said.

"We tapped every resource in this corporation," Mr. Marshall said. "The stress was significant. This community is changing."

The associate medical officer of health is one of 13 staff positions the health department is looking to bring on board as councillors wres-

tle with a budget including a potential tax hike of 1.9 per cent. The increase doesn't include the Halton Regional Police budget.

Halton Chair Joyce Savoline said the associate medical officer of health position is "necessary."

"I watched how staff worked (last year) and they were fully stretched," she said in an interview last week.

"We need that kind of back-up when the medical officer of health is having to work 24 hours around the clock."

At yesterday's budget review committee meeting, Burlington Regional Councillor Mike Wallace brought forward a motion to delete a few health staff positions, including the proposed associate medical officer of health position.

He said councillors should have been provided a report detailing the need for the extra staff earlier last year.

"I think these are major changes we are asking for," he told the committee, noting he understands the pressure the health department has come under. "If we didn't ask the questions, there would be no report on these positions."

Mr. Wallace's motion was defeated.

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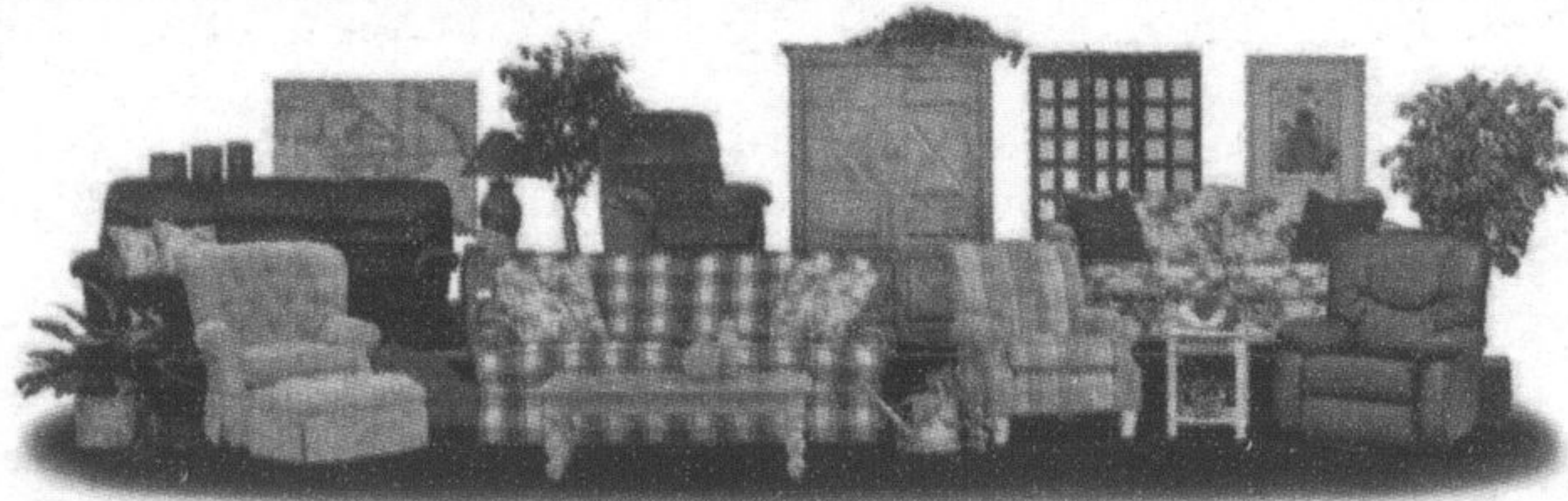
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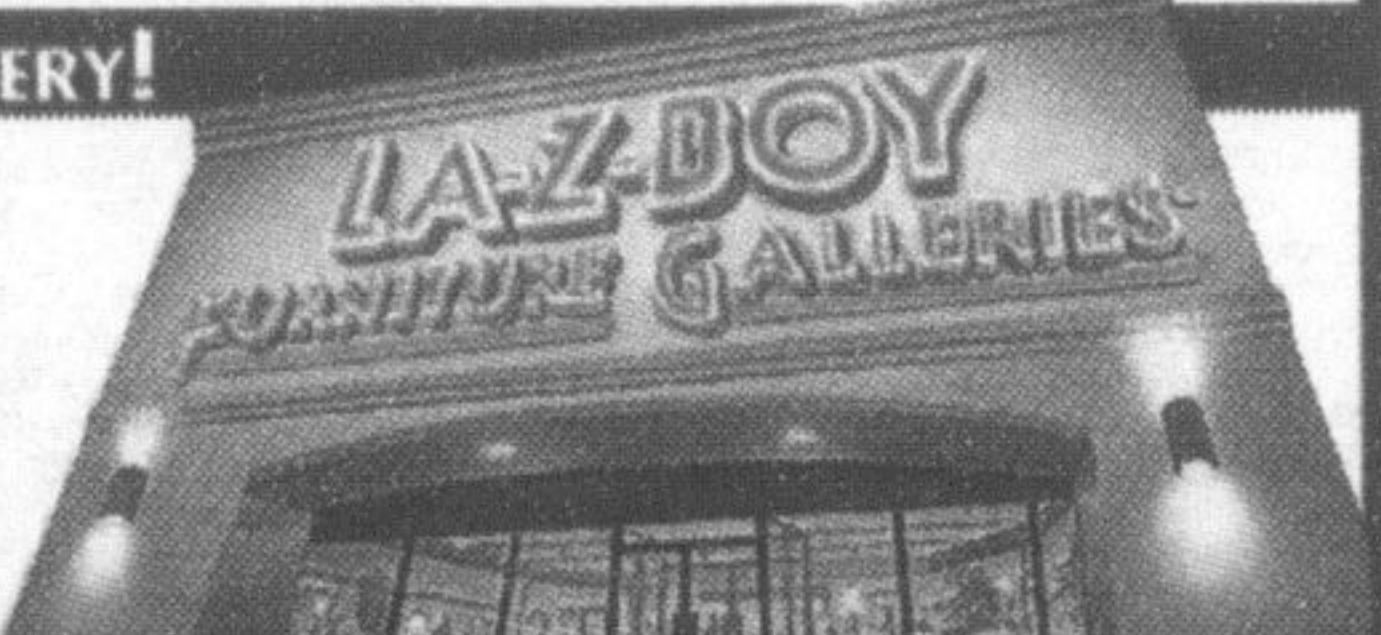
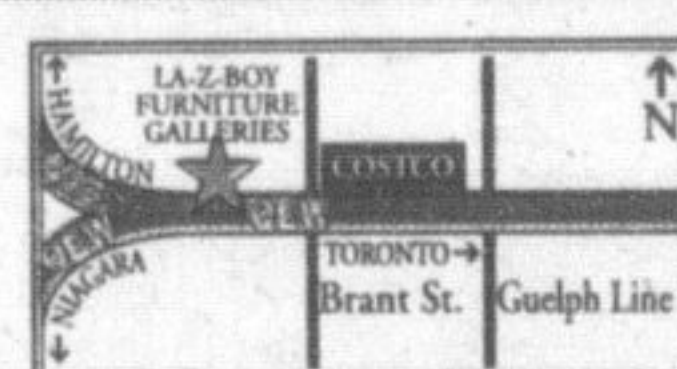
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