

Budget allows for staff hiring in health department

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al \$97.05 compared to last year.

Based on that increase, total regional taxes for this year would ring in at \$1,803.36 compared to last year's total of \$1,706.31, which included a 2 per cent tax hike on regional services.

Taxpayers should include town property taxes to get the total cost of their bills.

The Region accounts for about 42 per cent of a Halton homeowner's property tax bill.

The Region's tentative total operating budget for 2004 is slightly higher than \$447 million.

"The 2004 budget presents a responsible financial plan that addresses service priorities, responds to legislative requirements, reflects increased costs and provides adequate funding to support the Region's expanding capital program," stated an overview report from the Region's financial department.

Part of the legislative requirements includes paying \$36 million this year for pooling, which is a system that involves providing funding for Toronto's social services programs. Pooling has been a sore point with politicians.

Another key emphasis, the report stated, has been drafting a 2004 budget that ensures Halton's healthy credit rating.

It's set for official approval at tomorrow's council meeting, which starts at 9:30 a.m. at Halton's Bronte Road headquarters.

Changes could be made at that meeting.

So far the proposed budget includes a number of initiatives, like:

- Hiring 13 staff people for the health department to meet, among other things, food safety demands and to battle emerging infectious diseases, like West Nile virus.

- Expanding rural roadside garage and blue box collection.

- Taking over responsibility for roads with higher maintenance costs through a deal brokered with the lower-tier municipalities last year.

- The opening of two new long-term care facilities this year, one each in Burlington and Oakville, as well as opening ambulance centres at those facilities.

- Salary and benefit adjustments for staff.
- Ozonation at water treatment plants to better treat drinking water, like in Oakville.

Looking strictly at the regional tax levy, politicians are okay with the hike.

Halton Chair Joyce Savoline said the proposed hike on regional services and rates are achieving a key goal – solidifying the region's quality of life.

"We have a quality of life to maintain in Halton and that is what residents have told us through surveys," said the regional chair.

"The health and safety of our community is our first mandate and we take that responsibility very seriously. (These service enhancements) aren't just wants, they

are needs that keep our quality of life and that is reflected in this budget."

"In terms of the tax base, I'm relatively comfortable with it. I think there are savings to be had in there," said Mr. Wallace,

referring to Monday's budget review.

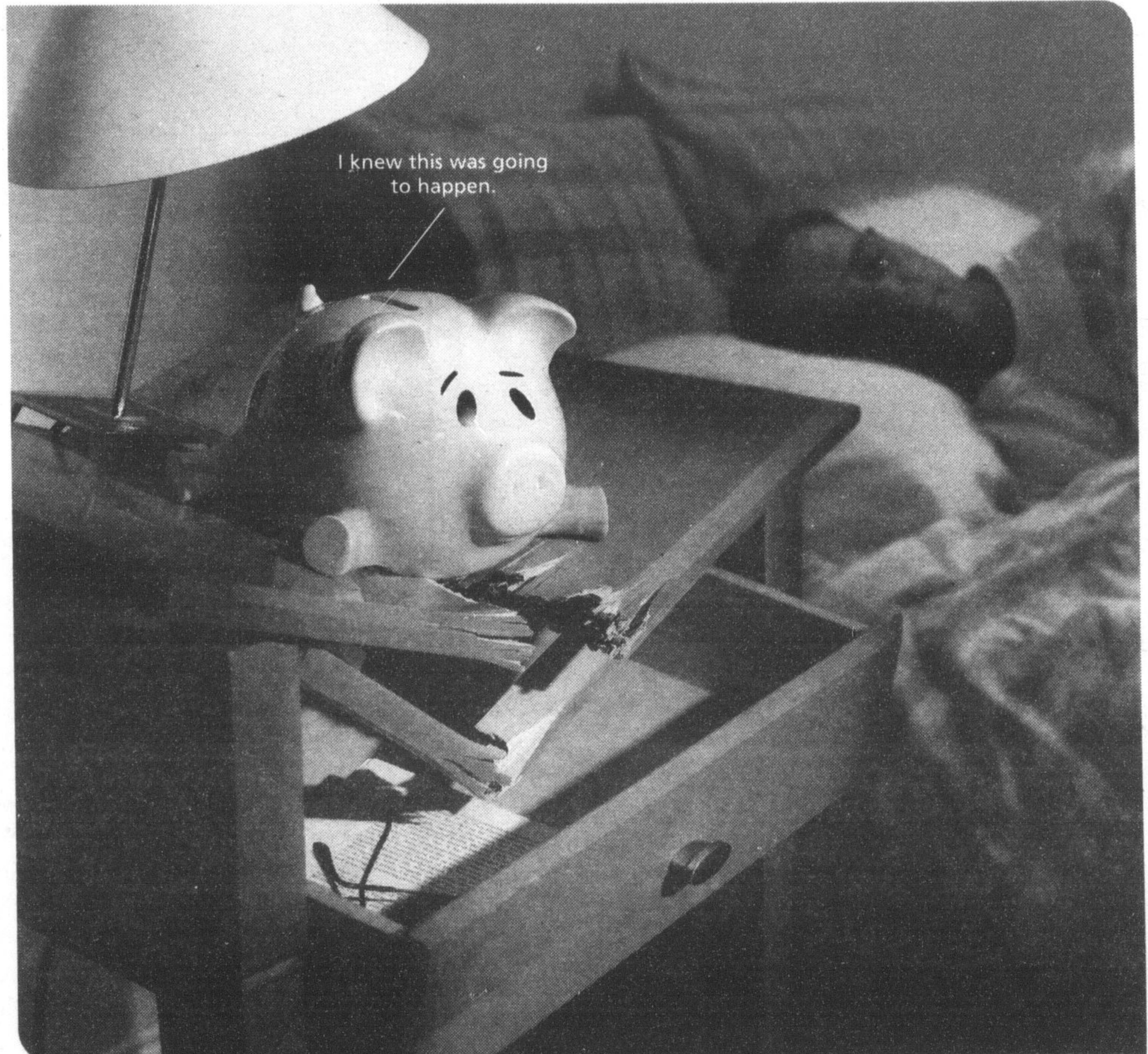
Next year's budget, including police, is proposed to rise 4.3 per cent.

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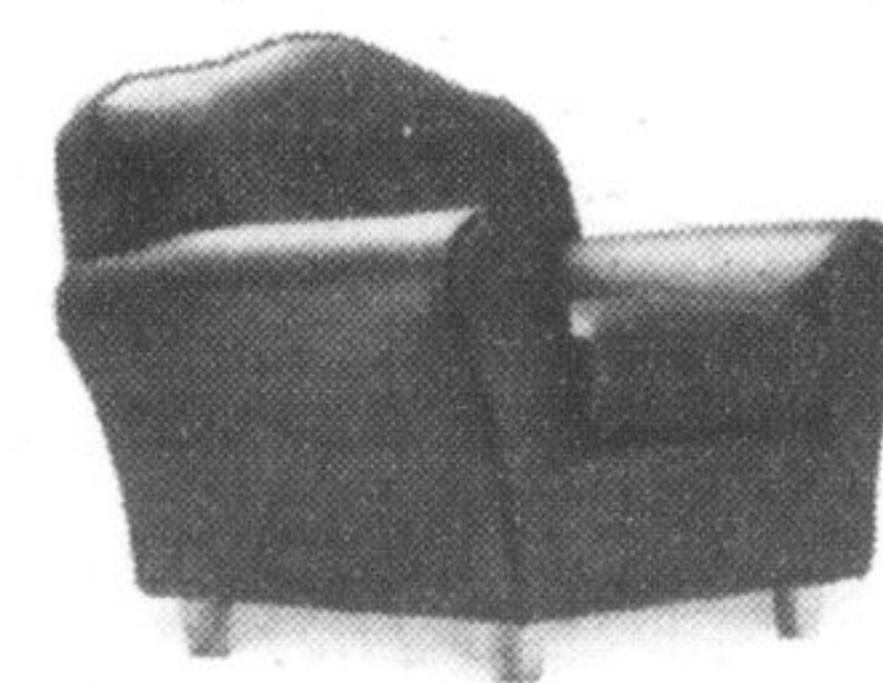
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