

Man pleads not guilty to tree-cutting charges

By **STEPHANIE THIESSEN**
The Champion

A Burlington man pleaded not guilty Thursday to destroying thousands of trees last year on a property straddling the Milton/Oakville border.

George Vastis and his company, 1255723 Ontario Inc., were charged in June of last year with a total of 40 counts of destroying trees in an Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) and destroying trees in a woodlot, contrary to the Region's tree-conservation bylaw.

Two more tree-cutting charges were added last July.

Mr. Vastis' Fourth Line property lies south of Britannia Road and north of Hwy. 407 between Regional Road 25 and Trafalgar Road. It's alleged that Mr. Vastis was responsible for destroying

trees from April 4 to 11, 2003 and again July 14 and 15.

The fines could cost Mr. Vastis up to \$840,000.

Mr. Vastis pleaded not guilty before J. Woloschuk, justice of the peace, at Milton Provincial Court to the charges he personally faces as well as the charges against his company, of which he's president.

In his opening statement Crown Attorney John Olah, representing Halton Region, said Mr. Vastis wasn't oblivious to tree-cutting regulations and is an experienced landowner with several parcels of land in his name.

"This is not about a man and his backyard," Mr. Olah said. "This is a sophisticated businessman who has knowledge he has to deal with certain rules."

Mr. Olah referred to a map produced by Halton Region that out-

lined the ESA in which he said Mr. Vastis' property is located. ESAs are designated in the Region's Official Plan.

Mr. Vastis, court heard, was informed after the first incident he wasn't allowed to destroy trees haphazardly.

"It's the Region's position that Mr. Vastis was warned about the need for a permit," Mr. Olah said.

Cory Harris, a water resources engineer with Conservation Halton and a provincial offences officer, told the court he took a walk around the property April 11 after being notified something might be amiss.

"We received information that activities were occurring on the property that could potentially have an impact on the water-course," Mr. Harris said, explain-
• see **TREE-CUTTING** on page 9

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