

Police budget calls for 9.6% increase

By **HOWARD MOZEL**
Special to The Champion

The Halton Regional Services Board has approved a 9.6 per cent increase for the 2005 police budget – a hike that Chief Ean Algar said could have been a lot higher.

At Thursday's board meeting Chief Algar said staff started the year looking at a 12.6 per cent increase but managed to whittle it down.

Despite the fact the \$76.5-million budget recommends the hiring of eight new front-line officers, as well as other improvements, the chief maintained next year's funding request is frill-free.

"This is a very lean budget," said Chief Algar.

After 2004's police budget represented a 13.1 per cent jump over the previous year – a hike that regional council balked at – Director of Community Policing Administration Jim Watson characterized 2005's budget as "quite responsible." "Ten per cent seems to be the hot-button number for council right now," he said.

Board member and Oakville Councillor Keith Bird agreed and said that he would have a hard time selling anything higher to council.

In defense of his budget, Chief Algar said he has little or no control over many costs, ranging from salaries, benefits, debt associated with capital expenditures and provincially-mandated Adequacy Standards.

Considering the service's ratio of uniformed officers to population, the many financial and societal pressures, the cost of policing per capita in Halton and other factors, Chief Algar maintained that "We're not a fat organization. We are a streamlined organization."

That said, he received the board's blessing to hire a pair of detective constables (plus two detective constables funded by Maplehurst Correctional facility) and four patrol constables. Several other civilian hirings were likewise sanctioned.

Board Chair Donald Robinson said next year's budget was hammered out in an "intelligent and informed way" and represents spending that strikes a balance

between the service's commitment to public safety and the fiscal needs of Halton taxpayers.

Halton Regional Police Association President Dave Atkinson, however, said the budget loses sight of the demands on police.

"We would like to remind the chair that there is also a need to balance the needs of the health and safety of the front-line officers," he said.

Mr. Atkinson said he appreciates the steps that have been taken to date to address staffing and workload issues, but, coming off back-to-back years of \$2-million in overtime, officer burnout and other serious matters will only get worse.

"Front-line problems have not been addressed," said Mr. Atkinson. "We recognize there are financial restraints, but we can't keep doing this at the expense of the front line."

Mr. Atkinson said if the situation continues, perhaps the police should ask the public what it thinks. If it's found that taxpayers aren't willing to pay more, then they should be made aware that cutbacks in service may be the only option.

Mr. Atkinson said the chief's budget presentation explaining what an efficient and low-cost service, he runs is fine and good, but trouble could be around the corner.

"That says a lot about the quality of our officers but something has to give," he said. "You're damn right it's a lean budget, but does that mean next year we'll have \$2-million more in overtime?"

Calls for service up

During his presentation, Chief Algar said 2004 projected statistics show a drop in criminal offences and the crime rate and a decrease in violent crime, motor vehicle collisions and deaths, property crimes and impaired driving. At the same time, he said, calls for service were up and the clearance rate jumped from 38 to 40 per cent.

"All the stats say there are good things happening in our community," said Chief Algar.

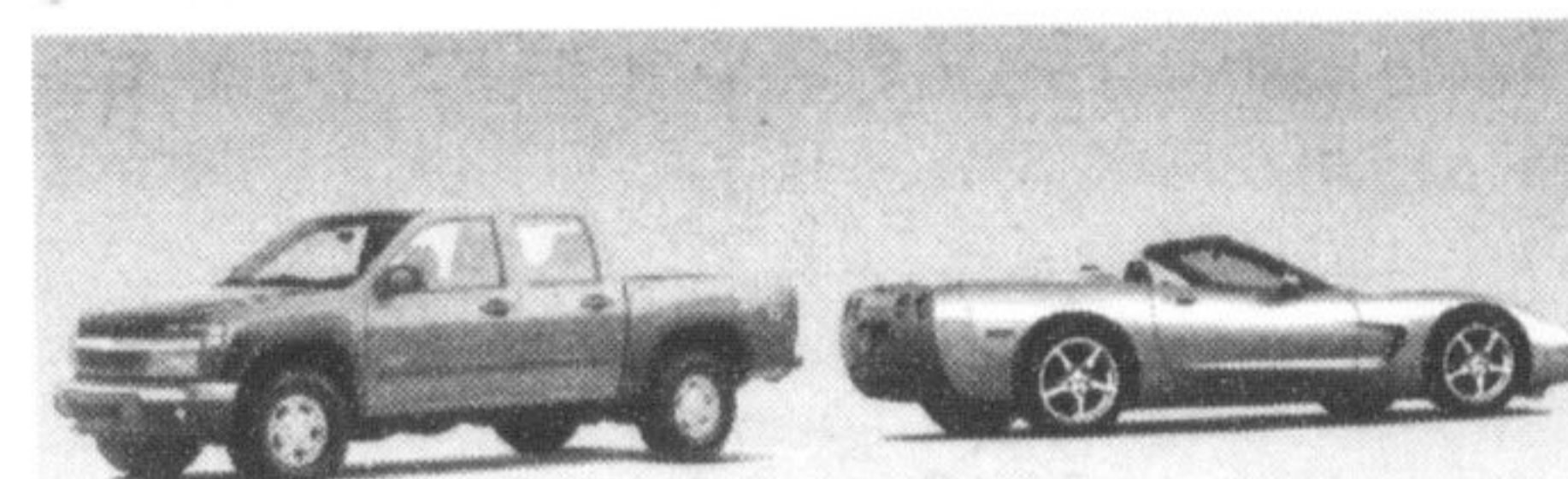
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