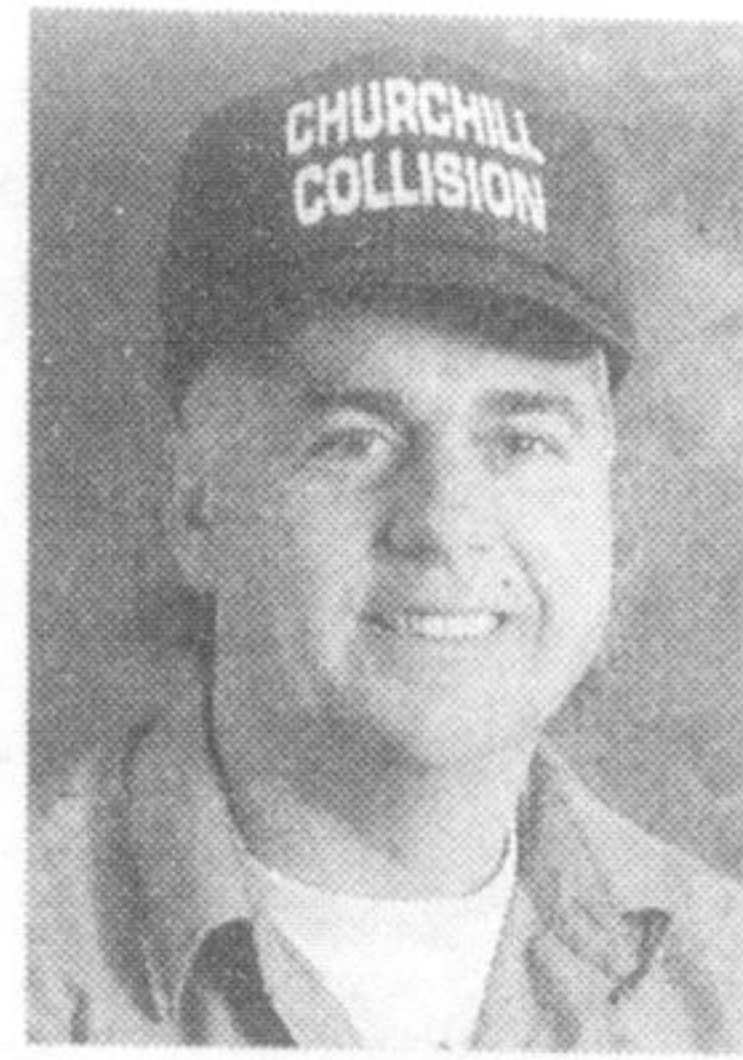


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Farmers up in arms over tax re-assessments; fear hefty hikes

By **ROBIN DOWNTON-POIRIER**

Special to The Champion

Local horse farmers are angry and frustrated with tax re-assessments by the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC), with many looking to sell their properties and close their businesses because of the change.

Jane Castleman, owner of Campbellville's Touch 'n Go Farm, says that although she has not received a tax notice yet, she expects her business to be greatly affected by the MPAC situation, and may soon be forced to shut down.

"Our business is small and we've downsized in the past year to make life a little easier, but this may force us to close all together," she noted. "For now, I have a lot of reading material to go through and more research to do."

Ms Castleman has owned Touch 'n Go Farm for 25 years and says that in hindsight she may not have chosen horse-selling as a career, but now that she is involved it has become her way of life. She added that depending on how much her taxes increase, she

may have to find something else to do within the equine field.

"It's crazy for us to be taxed for a way of life," said Ms Castleman.

Other horse farm operators are choosing to put the tax issue aside until they're directly affected.

Sue Gillespie of Pennylane Farm in nearby Freelon says that she hasn't received a re-assessment notice yet and doesn't know anyone that has. Although she knows her horse boarding business may be re-assessed in the future, she'll be ready to fight the notice and, for now, isn't going to get upset about the situation.

"I don't personally know anyone yet that has been affected by the tax assessments, so I'm not going to worry about it yet," said Ms Gillespie. "If and when I'm affected, I'll have my back up and I'll be ready to fight them. It's ridiculous."

Over the past few years, MPAC has re-assessed some horse businesses like equestrian and riding facilities as commercial properties instead of agricultural, and have adjusted the tax rates accordingly.

Horse businesses such as training and breeding are deemed as agricultural use and are taxed at approximately 0.3 per cent. Those properties that fall in 'grey areas', according to MPAC, are automatically defaulted to commercial use and are taxed at a rate of approximately four per cent.

Ms Gillespie says that the Ontario government doesn't seem to realize that horse businesses are not all highly lucrative ventures, and that many are already struggling to make ends meet.

"It usually takes a second income from outside the farm to keep the farm going and the government doesn't see that," she stressed. "Almost anyone in the horse business, whether it be boarding, riding, training, breeding, or whatever, is in it for the love of the animals, not the small amount of money it brings in."

In August 2004, the Association of Riding Establishment (ARE) Committee was created to fight the tax re-assessments. The committee's co-chairs, Jim Waechter and Leslie Brooks, a husband and wife team, had their property re-assessed and received a tax notice for \$15,000.

• see FARMERS on page 18



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