

Draft plan addresses school accommodation

By JASON MISNER

Special to The Champion

Halton District School Board's new five-year draft capital plan could save the board roughly \$25 to \$30 million.

However, a major uncertainty remains: School boards have been waiting for a year to hear from the Province as to how new school construction will be funded.

The Halton board — which needs to address a growing student population but faces a financial crunch at the same time — approved, in principle, the capital plan at its January 25 meeting. It would see \$104 million worth of construction over the next five years. The board will hold public meetings to get feedback on the plan before it's finalized.

The Ontario Ministry of Education has asked boards to submit their capital plans — based on the best information available to them like enrolment projections and renewal plans for existing buildings — that will outline how students will be accommodated. Halton is one of the few boards in the province that's growing,

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ELAINE WESTERHOF

even though the rate of growth, between 1 to 1.5 per cent a year, has slowed from previous estimates.

The fact a funding formula hasn't been rolled out concerns staff. "The development of the proposed capital plan has been without the benefit of ministry guidance on school consolidation/closures and the development of a new student accommodation fund-

ing formula," a 21-page report stated, noting the board doesn't have money in capital reserves.

"When this information is made available it will influence the proposed capital plan.

"In general, boards have expressed concern regarding the level of detail that has and has not yet been provided by the ministry."

The lack of a clear funding formula forced the board late last year to find money within its budget to clear the way to build two elementary schools — one each in Milton and Burlington — to open this September.

The board wants to build two additional elementary schools to open September 2007 in Halton Hills and Oakville.

The next Milton high school, to have opened in 2008, has been delayed a year since there's no available site at this time, said Elaine Westerhof, the board's planning manager.

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The board is looking at property in the Bristol survey — or close to it — since that is where the student population will be coming from. Land values are increasing, Ms Westerhof noted.

When or if the new high school gets built, she said it would become the permanent place for the Gary Allan campus in Milton. A Gary Allan campus exists in each of the region's four municipalities.

The board has been in a wait-and-see mode since the ministry made major changes to the funding formula a year ago. The Province uses the formula to divvy up money for new school construction.

Changes announced in February 2005 no longer require boards to close schools to free up pupil spaces to qualify for new-school funding.

School construction has become an urgent need for the Halton public board as it copes with a student population that's among the fastest growing in Ontario.

So far the Ministry of Education has said the funding parameters will come soon but there's no exact timeline as to when those changes will be announced.

Education Director Wayne Joudrie told The Champion the Education Ministry is well aware of Halton's growing student population. While it's not clear when a funding formula will be unveiled, he said the board hopes that Education Minister Gerard Kennedy can provide a short-term solution so Halton can address its accommodation pressures.

One of the concerns Mr. Joudrie has is that more of the new students coming into the Halton public system are being housed in portables rather than in permanent bricks-and-mortar buildings.

"We're in the process of having discussions with ministry staff and, hopefully, the minister himself, to convince them that Halton is in a unique situation," he said, noting the ministry took over providing money for new schools in 1998 when the responsibility was taken off the tax rolls. "What I'm hopeful for in the short-term is that we'll have a solution... for Halton, because of its unique scenario, as a stop-gap (measure) until the full funding formula gets out there."

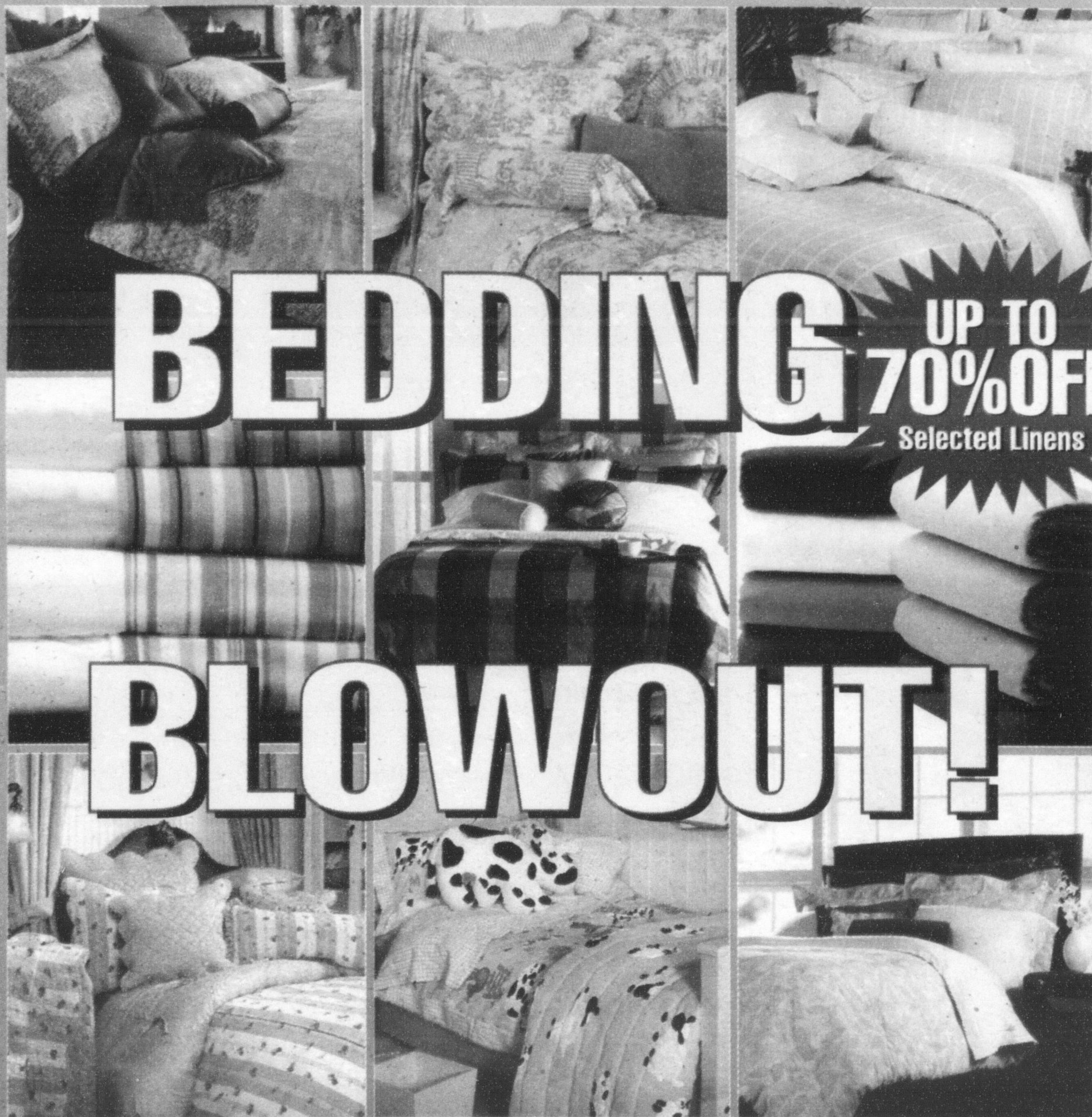
Mr. Joudrie stressed that in the meantime one of the initial key considerations of the draft capital plan is to hear what the public thinks of it. "We won't say we've got it perfect yet."

Board Chair Paul Tate said he's confident that, despite the lack of a clear funding formula, Halton's unique situation of a growing student population should warrant a favourable response from the ministry. "I'm sure once we show the capital plan to the minister, we show him how we consulted with public and we have a plan in place, that is not going to be a problem selling it to him."

A public meeting on the draft capital plan will be held in Milton tonight at Hawthorne Village Public School from 7 to 9 p.m.

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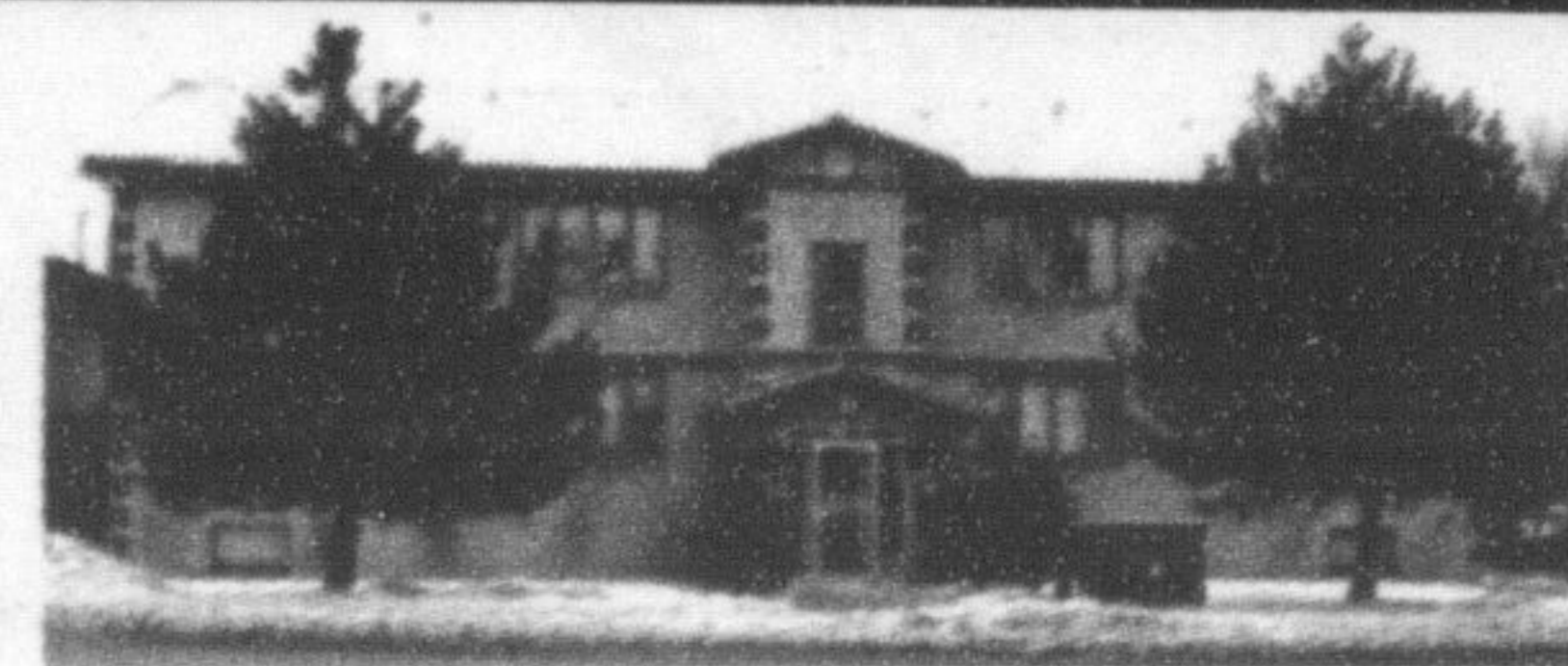


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