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Region committee looks to freeze pooling costs

By **Melanie Hennessey**
 CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

A regional committee is pushing for a freeze on how much Halton pays to help Toronto cover its social service costs.

Better known as GTA pooling, the system was introduced by the Province in 1998 to support the city's social assistance and social housing requirements — something that's expected to cost the average Halton taxpayer about \$180 this year.

During the health and social services committee's budget deliberations Tuesday, Halton Hills Councillor Clark Somerville put forward a motion that calls for the Region to cap its upcoming contribution for GTA pooling at the 2006 level, which staff estimates will total around \$41 million.

"Let's draw a line in the sand," he said. "It (the pooling system) is broke — we've got to get it fixed."

At this point, the 2006 pooling figure hasn't been finalized and it's not known how much Halton will actually be asked to pay for 2007.

Somerville went on to point out that with a provincial election coming this year, it's a good time for council to make an issue of pooling.

Several committee members voiced

support for the resolution, like Milton Councillor Colin Best.

"This is a loud message to the Province," he remarked.

Regional Chairman Gary Carr noted that he wants to press the local provincial election candidates on what they would do regarding the pooling situation. "I think we need to get very aggressive with the Province. It (pooling money) is a huge amount of our budget."

Oakville Councillor Fred Oliver added, "I think it's that time of year that we should put a freeze on it."

But Burlington Councillor Carol D'Amelio expressed some doubts about the motion, noting that she wouldn't want her constituents to say they're not paying taxes above the 2006 level.

"Two wrongs don't make a right," she said. "I believe in following the rules and setting an example."

Acting CAO Jane MacCaskill explained staff has been working with other GTA municipalities on an exit strategy from the pooling system.

But for the time being, she said it is a "requirement and obligation that we pay."

Other local municipalities, like York and Peel, have already frozen their GTA pooling payments.

Halton's pooling costs have steadily risen since 2003, going from about \$34 million then to the current estimated \$41 million — a figure that's also proposed in the 2007 budget. In fact, since pooling started in 1998, the Region has contributed almost \$325 million for Toronto's social services.

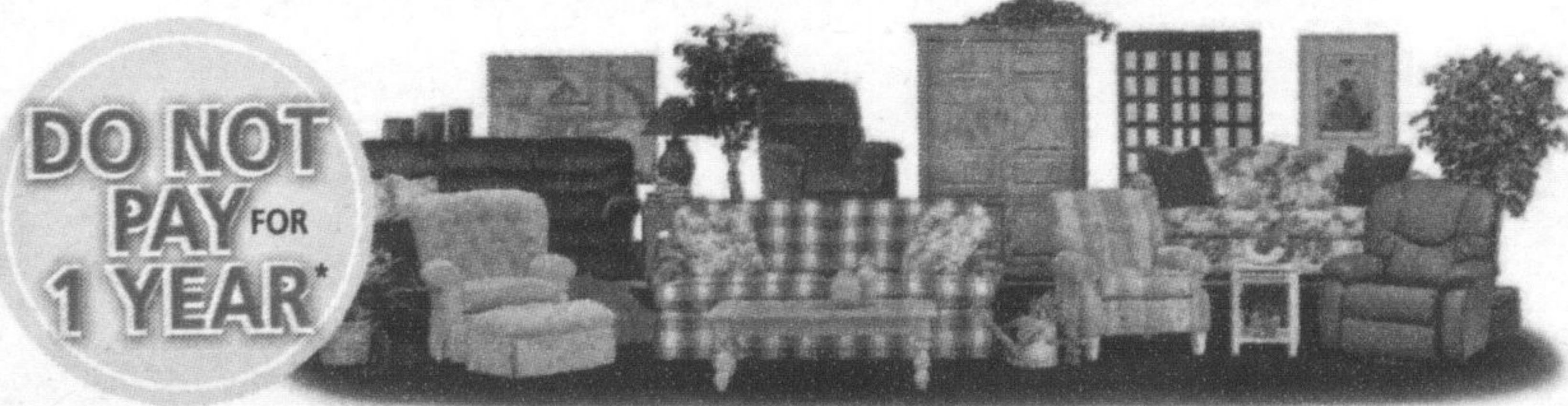
Somerville's motion, along with a report from staff regarding the legality of freezing pooling payments, will go before the budget review committee January 22 and regional council January 24 for consideration.

Melanie Hennessey can be reached at mhennessey@miltoncanadianchampion.com.

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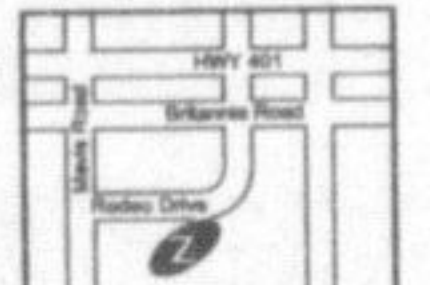
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