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SORTING IT ALL OUT: Local Brownies and Rotarians recently helped sort donated toys and clothing at the Salvation Army's Toy Shop. Here, Rotary exchange student Raquel Arias, who's visiting from Ecuador, is almost buried in the piles of donated stuffed animals. The Salvation Army of Milton will help more than 250 children this Christmas. People can donate toys, clothing and gift cards until Tuesday. Gifts for teens are especially needed.

GRAHAM PAINE / CANADIAN CHAMPION

Zero tax hike budget passed

By Tim Foran

METROLAND WEST MEDIA GROUP

The elimination of any salary hike for regional councillors was a last-minute change to Halton's \$1.1 billion 2010 budget approved Wednesday.

The changes, proposed by council's budget review committee Monday, won't change the overall requested tax levy, meaning there will be no increase next year in property taxes for regional services, which include items such as police, ambulance and regional roads maintenance. There will also be no increases in water rates, which are paid by Halton residents on their electricity bills.

Staff achieved the zero tax and rate increases in part by instituting a freeze on tax-supported new hires, except for police personnel, and keeping the number of municipal staff at 2008 levels.

Property taxes cover approximately \$318 million of the Region's budget, with other major sources of revenue including provincial and federal funding, as well as money collected from developers for capital projects.

Council opted against a tax cut by ratifying a budget review committee recommendation put forth by Burlington Councillor Jack Dennison to forward approximately \$800,000 in unexpected extra revenue into the municipality's recession reserve fund, created last year. Halton's treasury only recently learned it was getting the extra cash due to an increase in assessment — the number of new properties being added to the tax rolls — from 2.42 per cent to 2.74 per cent.

Dennison told the budget review committee Monday he didn't suggest the money go toward a tax cut for two reasons. He felt the chances of getting that through council in a year when there was already a zero tax hike budget were "slim and none" and he felt the money could be used to mitigate any potential tax increase in 2011.

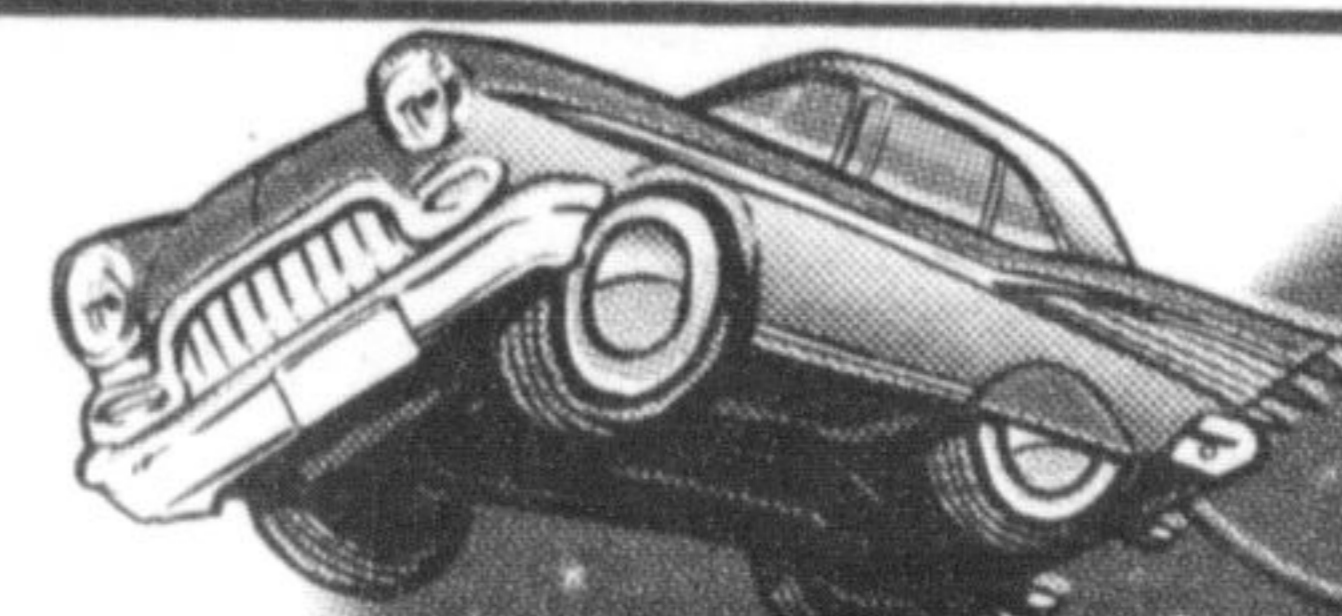
The budget forecasts a 2.6 per cent tax hike in 2011, though staff have overestimated such requirements in recent years.

At the same committee meeting, Halton Hills

• see COUNCILLORS on page A2

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