

'Agonizing for us'...

... he tells committee

Chief says high-speed chases are necessary

BY LISA TALLYN
Champion Reporter



CHIEF JIM HARDING

High-speed chases are frightening endeavours for everyone on the road, but police officers in particular dislike them.

"Police chases are agonizing events for us," said Halton Regional Police Chief Jim Harding. But he says they may be a necessary evil.

He was speaking in response to a report from the Solicitor General's Special Committee on Police Pursuits that was released late last month. It recommended strict limitations on the occasions when police may engage in vehicle pursuit. They should only chase a vehicle when they suspect an offence under the criminal code has been committed.

Chief Harding said this restriction could hinder an officer's effectiveness. By taking away an officer's right to give chase, more motorists will flee, even those who have committed only minor traffic offences.

"People will drive recklessly and dangerously and could cause a blood bath in the streets," he said. "I don't want to abandon the safety of the people for the lawbreakers."

Six persons — five civilians and one officer — were injured in chases with Halton Regional Police last year. In 1984, two people died and five people were injured in pursuits. In the province from 1983 to 1984, police undertook 6,757 chases resulting in 1,578 accidents, 872 injured persons and 32 dead.

Some alternatives the study raised were the installation of vehicle-mounted cameras on cruisers to photograph fleeing vehicles and their licence numbers, and the establishment of a helicopter police patrol force. It also recommended that police have the right to strictly enforce the law of vehicle owners having the onus of responsibility, and that courts should have the right to impound a vehicle that has been used by a motorist to willfully flee from the law.

The Chief questioned the feasibility of the alternatives. A helicopter patrol would be costly and impractical especially in a region that is largely rural and spread out.

He said he can foresee the possibility of an increase in the number of suspended and impaired drivers on the roads.

"The government goes to great pains to clamp down on impaired drivers but is attempting to take away the opportunity for us to see the law through to its conclusion."

Three police officers on the committee dissented on the chase ban recommendation claiming that owner liability will not be an effective alternative to vehicle pursuit. By not being able to chase all offenders the officers' hands will be tied to determine just why a motorist is fleeing. Someone who speeds away but has only committed a traffic offence may be fleeing because they are impaired, driving while suspended, or in possession of stolen property or narcotics. The officers won't have the opportunity to "determine the element of the unknown."

Government should not be intervening in police business, says the Chief.

"They are interfering with the right of the police officer to exercise his authority, using good judgement, under the law without political intervention," he said. "How soon will it be before we are under the total direction of the government, and we become a police state."

What police commission needs is a woman

Oakville regional councillor John Graham wants to know the reason there are no women on the Halton Police Commission.

The councillor asked the question after he discovered former Milton councillor Jim Watson had been appointed to the vacancy on the police commission when Rick Morrow's term ended in December.

"This appointment certainly follows the letters I've written to the province recognizing the desirability of a woman serving on the commission," he said.

"I know Mr. Watson and I'm sure he'll do a good job. But women are capable of serving on the commission and I'm disappointed the province hasn't seen fit to appoint a woman."

The commission consists of two councillors, appointed by regional councillor and three citizens posted

by the Ontario Police Commission. Recently, Virginia Cott, a Hamilton housewife, was appointed by the province to the Hamilton-Wentworth Police Commission.

Police commission chairman Jim Grieve said he agreed women should serve on the commission but he knew of no women councillors interested in the job.

"I share the lament," he said. "Women should be a qualified voice on the commission. But we didn't have anything to do with the appointments."

Ontario Police Commission development officer Gordon Hampson was unavailable for comment at press time.

Mr. Grieve said women councillors could apply for the two regional council seats on the commission, but so far none had.

"I know of no woman who sought the position," he said.

Three of Halton's five female regional councillors said they had not applied for the job nor had they been asked.

Oakville councillor Liz Behrens called the issue of women serving on the commission a "red herring."

"I don't see any difference between a woman and a man serving on the police commission," she said.

"That's a red herring. I've never known a woman to sit on the Halton Police Commission nor have I known one who wanted to sit on the police commission."

Burlington councillor Joyce Savoline said she has never considered serving on the commission.

Halton Hills councillor Pam Sheldon said she would like to serve on the commission but did not consider it this year because of her lack of political experience at the regional level.

"I'm a firm believer in experience for the job," she said.

"That way you get the best people for the job, whether man or woman. Policing is important to me and it's a commission I'm very interested in."

"I would like to serve on it in the future."

Milton's Jim Watson joins police commission

Former town councillor Jim Watson has been appointed a citizen member of the Halton Police Commission.

Mr. Watson fills the spot vacated by Rick Morrow, of Halton Hills, whose term expired in December.

"I feel we've got a pretty good force and I'm looking forward to serving on the commission," Mr. Watson said.

Another new face on the commission is Fred Oliver, a former police

chief, and a regional and town councillor for Oakville.

For the second year in a row, Burlington councillor Jim Grieve, was appointed chairman of the commission. He said he was pleased with the re-appointment made official at the last police commission meeting.

"I really believe in letting the managers manage," he said of his plans for running the commission during the next year.

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