

Councillor loses bid to establish zero Halton budget

Region to ask Halton police to scale down their 12.6% increase request

By ROB KELLY

Halton regional councillors turned back a bid to examine the impacts of freezing their budget at 1991 levels Wednesday, but regional council did vote to ask Halton police to have a second look at their budget, with its proposed 12.6 per cent increase.

Oakville councillor Steve Sparling was behind the push to see what steps would be needed for a regional freeze. But Halton chief administrative officer John Fleming, the head of regional staff, said he had already outlined the available choices last December. "I don't think there are any additional options. The raw material for going below the rate of inflation is already before you."

Mr. Fleming's preliminary budget document, released in December, outlined a range of financial scenarios and settled on a 7.37 per cent tax increase.

Included, however, were provisions for cuts that would take that down below four per cent, largely by slashing regional services. But when the Halton Regional Police increase of 12.6 per cent (which the Region must bill for) was factored in, the overall proposed jump came to 10.5 per cent.

Mr. Sparling's move to get detailed plans from regional staff for holding the tax line at 1991 levels led to a long, sometimes emotional discussion as councillors faced a series of bleak alternatives.

"The idea is to look at what it would take to get to zero," councillor Sparling said. "I'd really like to see what options are available." He also wanted to know "how much pain" those options would involve.

Burlington councillor Ralph Scholtens said he wouldn't support Mr. Sparling. Mr. Scholtens pointed out that most of the money Halton spends is on programs controlled by higher-level government, such as welfare payments. The only place Halton can cut costs is on things like road improvements and other utility-oriented work, and doing that would mean "massive" spending to catch up later, he warned.

Besides, regional staff has already taken its best shot at outlining a budget and "to go back and do it again is an exercise in futility," the councillor said.

Mr. Scholtens added that newly elected councillors (such as Mr. Sparling) often pledge to hold a hard fiscal line during election campaigns but soon find out how difficult that can be. "It comes down to a question of having to eat crow and I would suggest to them they accept that now and get on with it."

Although Halton only pays 20 per cent of soaring welfare costs (the provincial and federal governments split the rest), Oakville Mayor Ann Mulvale questioned whether anyone is really prepared, for example, to cap the amount spent locally to feed and clothe those most victimized by the recession.

"If we say 'Go away, there's no

money left,' let me tell you how quickly the public reaction will turn," Ms. Mulvale said. She added that agonizing over Halton's social services budget has already made it difficult for her to sleep.

Milton councillor Brad Clements angrily pointed out that Halton con-

trols perhaps "25 or 27 per cent" of the taxes it collects, with the remainder going to the police, the Halton Region Conservation Authority, the Children's Aid Society and for welfare payments.

"What are we doing here?" Mr. Clements demanded. "Sending our

staff to cut the hell out of our budget so the police can have a 10 per cent increase? I fail to see what we are trying to accomplish here."

Only Mr. Sparling, Oakville councillor Bill Logan and Milton Mayor Gord Krantz voted in favour of examining the zero-increase option. A

measure to hold wages for elected officials to a two per cent increase in 1992 was also voted down, although something similar will probably be re-introduced at the committee level. The move to ask police to look for cuts in their budget was overwhelmingly approved.

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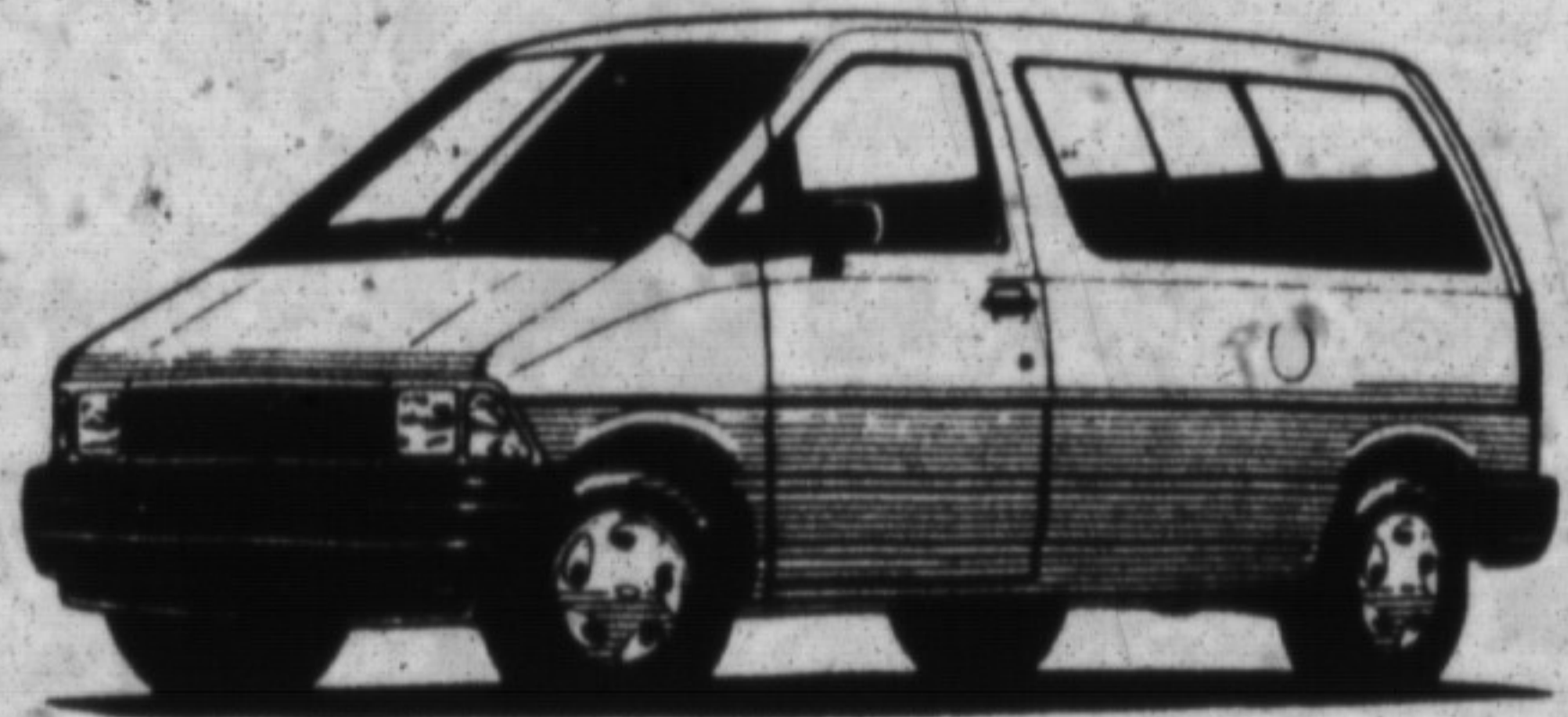
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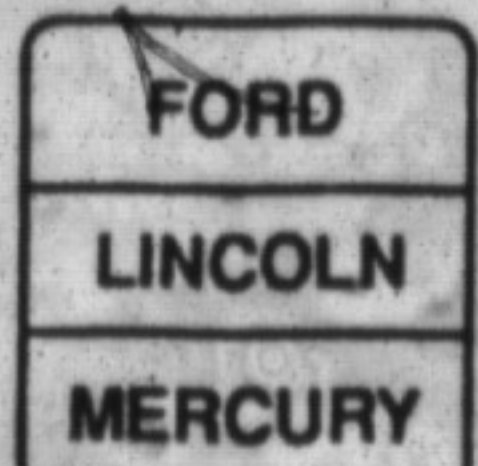
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Charges laid in \$60,000 McDonald's internal theft

A former manager of McDonald's in Milton has been charged in connection with the theft of more than \$60,000 from the restaurant over a nine-month period.

The money was stolen from the Martin Street fast food outlet, owned by Richmond Chandler Investments Ltd., between November, 1990 and August, 1991, Halton Regional Police say.

A 24-year-old Cambridge woman has been charged with theft, fraud, and uttering forged documents. She is scheduled to appear in Milton court February 10.