

Taxpayers' group, developers square off over levies

By ROB KELLY
The Champion

When it comes to taxes, Halton's commercial land developers are giving more than they get, industry representatives told regional councillors recently. But those who dispute that say the developers are getting to give less than they should.

The development industry squared off against a taxpayers' group and some regional councillors on the administration and finance committee February 26 in the latest round of lobbying about how much more money the builders should pay Halton to do business, and when they should begin paying it.

The opposing forces on this issue have been circling one another warily since the matter first came to the fore in 1989.

Under the provincial Development Charges Act that was unveiled then, municipal governments and quasi-government agencies, such as the boards of education were told to

streamline their tax procedures.

In its tinkering, Halton has proposed charging developers substantially more for capital levies, the one-shot taxes builders pay as a kind of fee for industrial and commercial construction. The idea behind boosting the levies is to achieve what's called full cost recovery — simply put, to recoup all money municipal governments pay to provide roads and utilities used by businesses.

Halton originally backed off a full cost recovery scheme after developers, already battered by the recession, organized an indignant and forceful protest in 1991. Full recovery amounted to a levy of \$2.80 per square foot for new buildings.

Instead the Region charged only \$1.10 per square foot, more or less a continuation of the status quo, but imposed a two-year limit on that levy. Regional councillors also created a subcommittee made up of the various opposing interests on the issue in the hope that they could hammer out a compromise.

The somewhat uneasy arrangement the subcommittee came up with was to propose full cost recovery, but to phase it in over either two or three years.

Dr. Duncan McEwan, a spokesperson for Taxpayers' Coalition Halton, a watchdog organization favouring full cost recovery in the belief that average taxpayers are presently subsidizing developers, pressed for a one-year phase in period. Anything more will "maintain far too heavy a burden... for far too long."

But Mike Bryan, a development spokesperson, took the opposite tack. "We ask council to go slow. We encourage the Region to take a leadership role, to see if there is some room for compromise."

Industrial-commercial business dollar values were off 50 per cent in 1991 from 1990, Mr. Bryan told councillors, and "early indications are 1992 will be similar to 1991."

While Halton's levy is not particularly onerous per se, when it is rolled in with similar fees from agencies such as the school boards, various area municipalities like Burlington, Oakville and Milton, and the hydro levy, "it makes the economics of development very difficult," Mr. Bryan said.

Pat Caine, a spokesperson for the Burlington Chamber of Commerce, agreed. Mr. Caine felt it was "safe to say" the cumulative levies would add 10 per cent to the costs of doing business for developers.

Mr. Caine also argued that no one had factored in important benefits development brings to a given community in the form of increased taxes. He cited a City of Burlington survey which illustrated that in every case commercial-industrial business "contributed more than it consumed" in taxes. As well, there are positive spinoffs in areas such as employment, he noted.

Burlington Mayor Walter Mulkeiwich said that is "not an issue. Clearly development is going to bring jobs and investment. Economic development is good. We buy that." However, if the levies aren't collected from commercial-industrial interests, "where do we get the money?" Mr. Mulkeiwich asked.

"I've been consistent for 15 years saying we should have full cost recovery and I'm not going to stop now," Mr. Mulkeiwich added.

Mr. Rinaldo plans on reviewing the subcommittee's proposals in detail. He expects to formally propose new commercial-industrial levies in October.

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