

School board narrowly passes 8% bigger budget

Halton Board of Education taxpayers will be paying eight per cent more for education this year than last while teaching one per cent fewer children.

A deeply divided board, Thursday

night, narrowly passed the \$285 million budget by a 10-8 vote.

By the same margin, the board defeated a motion calling for reducing the budget so that the tax increase would be four per cent.

What this means is an increase of \$93 in education taxes on an average assessment of \$6,500.

The board has honed its expenditure increases to a 2 per cent increase. Looking forward to a slight increase or at least on a minor decrease in provincial grants, the board had thought to have a tax increase close to the expenditure increase.

However, provincial grants announced last Monday were nearly 11 per cent lower than last year.

Although the provincial government is increasing grants to education by one per cent this year, poorer boards will be getting more and richer less.

And the Halton Board is seen as a wealthy board with a strong assessment base and capable of raising its own revenues.

Milton trustee Bob Clark, chairman of the board's budget committee had been looking forward to presenting only a three per cent increase in expenditures until this grant information came in.

"How can the province continual-

ly mandate and tell us what to do and cut our funding?" he asked.

Trustee Don Cassidy said that during the election campaign many candidates ran on a budget not higher than the rate of inflation. "This budget is three times the rate of inflation. It is unacceptable."

He didn't accept that the province was to blame. "The same formula that gave us a shortfall was applied equally to all boards."

"An eight per cent increase in millrate is a breach of trust," he added.

Trustee Diana Leblovic said that instead of following the inaugural board meeting's vow of reduce, restraint and reallocate, the three Rs had been converted to the 3 Ds; debenture, delay and deny.

"Debenturing," she said, "merely shifts to the future."

She called for the board to restructure to meet the demands of the economy. "Drastic measures have not been taken."

Trustee John Scheel said that every time there is an opportunity to cut

the budget where staff isn't involved there is a policy in the way.

Trustee Cheryl Reid said "if we keep increasing there will be nobody around who can afford to live here."

Reflecting these sentiments, trustee Anne Barbu said "taxpayers plead that they can't pay anymore." My constituents are struggling through tough economic times, pay freezes, pay reductions and unemployment. We have not done enough to cut costs.

"We are not the heroes for only having a 2.9 per cent increase and others villains for not granting us more money. It is totally unacceptable, taxpayers' pockets are not bottomless pits," she said.

Supporting the budget, trustee Dick Howitt said that each one per cent means \$1.8 million. "Let's get real there is no way we are going to go back and cut \$8 million from the budget."

Trustee Marg Bullock opposing further cuts said that bringing the increase down to four per cent would mean cutting bussing and staff.

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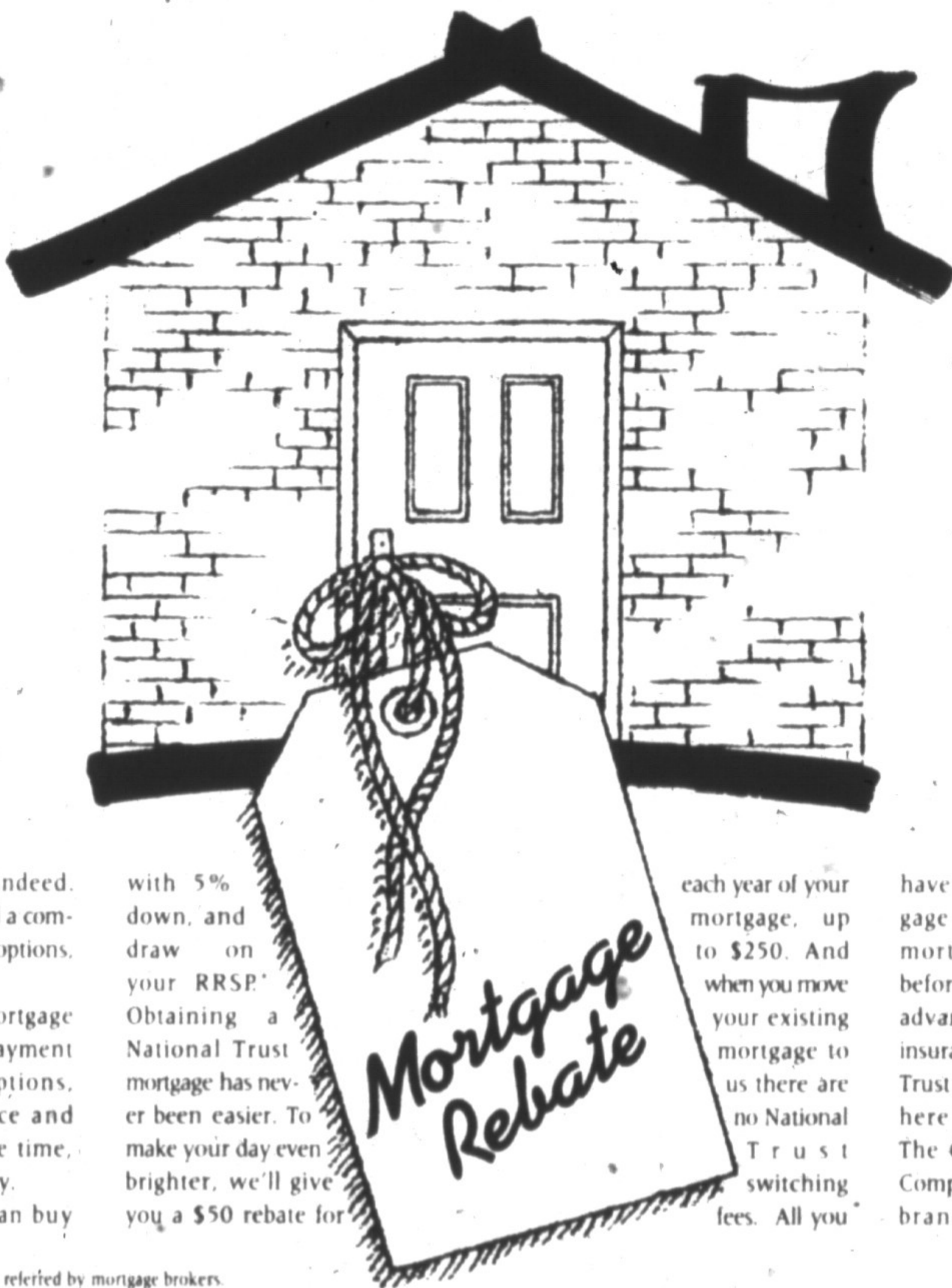
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