

Earth to chief Harding — there seems to be some static . . .

Last week Halton Regional Police chief James Harding and a band of hangers-on dropped in on a committee meeting for regional councillors. This is a rare event, and that's probably for the best given what happened.

Chief Harding was there to run an idea up the regional flagpole and see if he could get councillors to salute. He got a half-hearted nod from some and a Bronx cheer, a regular raspberry out of the cheap seats, for the way in which he put his case from Halton Hills councillor Pam Johnston.

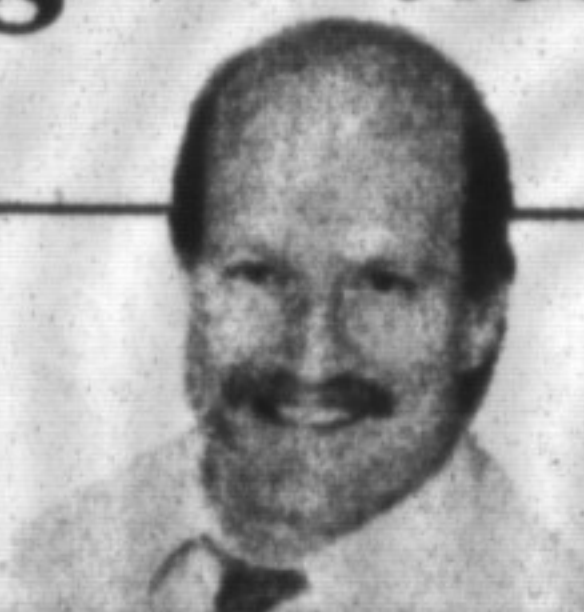
In short, chief Harding wanted to steer councillors toward spending around \$6.5 million on a new radio network that would combine all Halton's emergency services in what is called a trunk system. The premise is sound, if you'll pardon the weak pun, but at the aforementioned cost, we're talking Rodeo Drive radio.

Some politicians, keenly aware that many of their constituents have crashed from the quiche-eating '80s into the Kraft dinner '90s, were uneasy about the \$6.5 million figure. They said so. This prompted a short but stern lecture from chief Harding about "the potential danger to officers and citizens" if something isn't done and the "grave sense of urgency" in beefing up police radio communications.

Appearing equally put out, Ms Johnston offered the following reply: "One thing that really upsets me is that whenever we're dealing with the police, it's not a logical or rational approach." Instead, councillors "al-

VIEW POINT

with ROB KELLY



ways find the chief or some other members of the force have to use threats or intimidation" to get what they want.

Of course, it's no laughing matter if the police radio system doesn't work well, and if chief Harding said it's less than reliable, I don't doubt that's the case. Chief Harding is a man of integrity, I submit. He's done good things in Halton and across Ontario, especially his work on race relations.

But he's also pompous and used to throwing his weight around. He's a bureaucrat, a civil servant, who acts like he won an election. So it's appropriate that he get his Goodyear blimp sized ego pricked, especially in front of some of his groupies.

I suppose it's easy for someone like chief Harding to fall into the trap of acting like Louis XVI. After all, he runs what amounts to a \$38 million a year corporation organized on para-military lines. When he says jump, most cops start looking for a soft place to land. His nominal board of directors, the area police commission, is usually there to offer benediction to this benign dictatorship. It's a situation many a corporate CEO dreams about.

Chief Harding was regally aloof almost as soon as he walked into the room last week. It was a relatively small committee chamber. Some of his officer-groupies were already there. When His Highness hit the doorway, they stood up in a reasonable imitation of attention.

There was an electronic engineering consultant at the end of the line, the guy who was getting paid for the radio network report. Not wanting any static, undoubtedly, he pulled his civilian frame up into the appropriate attitude too.

His Magnificence ignored this display. That is the only reasonable explanation. It was taking-place less than five feet from him as he hobnobbed with politicians. (If he didn't see it, I just hope he never goes to the pistol range when other people are there.)

He didn't say "thank you," or "please sit down." He let the help hang out to dry for a few minutes, standing awkwardly, until the gesture fizzled and they sat, uneasily.

That surprised me because normally chief Harding is a by-the-book type of guy. In fact, he even writes his own book. Once, about a year ago, he gave a spiel to regional councillors about why he needed money for something else, with an accompanying brief. I asked a groupie for a copy of the text, which was public information because it had been presented at a public meeting.

The groupie turned to chief Harding, in true flunky fashion, and asked if it would be okay to give me the report. A regal negative nod formed the silent answer.

"That's alright," I said, in an unfortunate break with palace protocol. "I'll get one from a councillor in five minutes anyway." This elicited a royal shrug of indifference. One of the area mayors was happy to share the report, which was not controversial except for the fact that it showed the cop brass, as usual, wanted more cash.

So I was kind of pleased when Pam Johnston, of all people, said the emperor has no clothes last week. She was right in this instance. Chief Harding over-reacted. The councillors were edgy about the high cost of the new radio net, but the cops already had a fallback position, which was simply upgrading the old radio system at less cost.

Councillors never gave any indication they wouldn't do that. It was unfair of His Majesty to start railing about police safety. It was knee-jerk stuff.

I never considered councillor Johnston much of a public servant until lately. She's the one, you may recall, who recently enjoyed a \$1,500 junket to British Columbia at taxpayers' expense. This at a time when Halton Region was cutting child daycare programs to save money.

But she brought back a handful of reports from the various meetings she attended out there, and she went out of her way to present them to regional committees, working overtime, as it were. And she's becoming more vocal on a number of issues.

There are, at present, no real bright lights on regional council from Halton Hills, but Ms Johnston's star seems to be rising.

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Mill pond pathway

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flow through the pond. They also want to upgrade the earthen foot path around it.

But MNR and HRCA officials view those projects as potential interferences with the fish.

Negotiations are ongoing as to the scope of a study Milton should undertake on the issue.

If the groups demand a full-blown environmental assessment, acting town planning director John Fior said, it could cost between \$50,000 and \$100,000.

"I get a little concerned when we start dealing with radical bureaucrats," said Mayor Gord Krantz in obvious frustration with the situation after a briefing at municipal council Monday night.

As far as potential impacts on the waterway, "I don't see any great big changes (planned)."

In the short term at least, municipal plans for path reconstruction and waterflow improvements to the pond are on hold.

But there are various other proposed improvements to the downtown area poised to go ahead, as soon as the provincial government releases its \$300,000 share of the funding.

The money came to Milton as a grant for downtown improvements. Milton must spend \$100,000 over each of the next three years.

Mr. Fior has purposefully prepared a long list of potential projects, so ones of varying scope can be slotted into the municipal budget package when it comes time to decide how Milton will allot the \$100,000 a year in municipal tax money it must spend for the improvements.

Broadly speaking, Mr. Fior is looking at downtown streetscape improvements, some parking lot improvements, the possible acquisition of land for downtown parking and sprucing up the various downtown parks with shrubs, lights and other decorative features.