

Bureaucrats take first stab at Halton's '93 budget

Proposed tax increases run from 1.5 to 4.8 per cent

By **ROB KELLY**
The Champion

Halton Region's senior bureaucrats are recommending a proposed property tax hike ranging from a high of 4.8 per cent to a low of 1.5 per cent for the 1993 budget.

The preliminary report, to be discussed tomorrow (Thursday), is the first of what promises to be many documents related to the tough looming budget decisions regional council will face during the run-up to final approval of the 1993 budget next March.

The spread between the proposed high and low percentage increases is the difference between an inflation-level hike at 1.5 per cent, and the anticipated cost of carrying on business as usual next year — an additional 4.8 per cent, or about \$15 for the average Halton household.

If regional councillors tell their

financial experts to come in at 1.5 per cent, or perhaps even less, the number crunchers will have to begin trimming regional operations to hit that target, Monday Bonnie Ewart, Halton's acting chief administrative officer, said that "is going to be very difficult."

4.8 per cent "realistic"

Ms Ewart called the 4.8 per cent increase "realistic" and what is needed to run "a very tight ship" but added "we're anticipating that's not good enough" for some councillors, who may demand tax increases held to 20-year low inflation levels.

Last year's regional tax increase was 7.6 per cent.

To date Halton has avoided laying off any of its approximately 1,000 workers. Instead programs and discretionary spending have been axed, and people who leave often either haven't been replaced or only

replaced several months later. It's expected to save roughly \$570,000 — about one per cent of the regional tax budget — through the end of 1992.

Ms Ewart skirted the question of possible layoffs Monday, saying "I'm not going to comment on that." But she did add that she would "like to think" Halton could maintain its no-layoff policy. She called the current method of letting attrition cut costs "very successful" and "more humane."

Regional ratepayers can expect to be charged on average an extra \$13.47 a year on their water bills too, up to about \$370 a year from the current \$357. That's an estimated increase of about 3.8 per cent.

Better in 1993

In the proposed budget directions unveiled by regional finance director Joe Rinaldo that councillors must now begin to mull over, the Canadian economy is shown as poised for a rebound in 1993, with

gross domestic product growth of anywhere between 4.5 and 5.6 per cent.

But real interest rates — the after inflation yield needed to woo investors to municipal bond issues — are expected to remain high, which means Halton will have to offer substantial premiums to obtain the financing needed for the major capital projects that go with a rapidly expanding population.

Real interest rates hovered around 7 per cent in March, well above the 5.74 per cent average from 1984 through 1992, Mr. Rinaldo noted in his report.

Halton is currently contemplating an 11 per cent increase for improvements to regional roads, seen as a high but necessary expense from Mr. Rinaldo's perspective given the need for repairs. Road and sign improvements are pegged at \$1.8 million.

Other major capital projects figuring in the budget outline include: The \$18 million facelift underway for Halton Centennial Manor in Mil-

ton; a proposed \$6.4 million infilling for the Bronte Harbour area in Oakville, to be followed by a \$12 million longer-term revitalization program; a \$6.5 million upgrade for the Halton Regional Police radio network.

\$136 million

In addition, over the next 12 years Halton is expected to spend \$173 million on utility system improvements, although it's believed that developers will figure prominently in the financing for that.

Halton Region is expected to have gross tax-related expenditures of almost \$136 million in 1993, with an anticipated \$59,541,000 to be collected in taxes if the increase is to be held to about 4.8 per cent. The other regional funding comes largely from the provincial government. Halton plans to spend a further \$52.5 million on utility operations in 1993, almost all of which is recovered in residential and commercial utility bills.

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