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Tax change barely passes

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owners and residents who will see the largest hikes. Mr. Pomeroy noted. The majority of those people are in Oakville. The MVA plan calls for a tax shift of \$4 million from Burlington to Oakville.

While Oakville's overall tax increase amounts to 2.7 per cent — about \$4.1 million — some are hit worse than others. Oakville's commercial sector will pay more than a third of the tax increase, about \$1.5 million. That's an average 8.3 per cent increase, in some cases much more, and Oakville councillors fear it profoundly threatens their downtown shopping area.

Wednesday Burlington's nine regional councillors allied with Milton's three in support of MVA, while Oakville's seven enlisted the aid of the five Halton Hills representatives against it. The two 12-member factions thus assembled remained intact throughout the debate and four hours of presentations from Oakville ratepayers attempting to discredit MVA.

Besides concerns over the new downtown business levy, those opposing MVA questioned the timing, given the prolonged recession, the bureaucracy involved in administering MVA, and the appropriateness of introducing it while the provincial government is re-examining the whole tax structure.

As well, although there are provisions in the MVA proposals to supply grants to those most affected by tax jumps, some councillors asked whether the boards of education — which depend heavily on property taxes collected by regional government — would play ball.

Across Halton Region, 55 per cent of ratepayers will get a break under MVA, while 45 per cent will pay more. On average, those benefitting from MVA will see a \$212 drop in

yearly property taxes, while those who will see their assessments go up will average a \$291 annual increase.

Burlington Mayor Walter Mulkevic said he has "yet to hear from what I assume is the silent majority in Oakville whose taxes will go down with this. Most of Oakville north of the QEW, most of Burlington north of the QEW, are winners in this."

Oakville mayor Ann Mulvale asked how "in all good conscience" Mr. Mulkevic could support regional MVA when he vehemently opposed it at the local level in Burlington.

For years "we have invested taxpayers' money to reinforce the vibrancy" of downtown cores, Ms Mulvale continued, "yet we see what we're going to do to those individual merchants. People are taxed at a far higher level now. They're saying, 'enough.' We don't know what we're going to do to the small business base and we should be concerned about what we're going to do to our downtowns."

"Today is the worst time to make this decision and in the long term it is not a win for anybody," she warned. Until there are major changes in the way taxation works in Ontario, such tinkering amounts to "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic."

Burlington councillor Ralph Scholtens said MVA represents newer, fairer taxation, and to stop it would be "a grave mistake, a tremendous risk. Let's take this unruly monster of unfairness by the horns and slay it."

The MVA plan could be the killer stroke for beleaguered downtown merchants, warned Oakville councillor Keith Bird.

In the 1960s, many downtowns never recovered from the competition of "the killer malls," Mr. Bird pointed out.



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