

Budget halfway there as outgoing council votes yes

By ANGELA BLACKBURN
The Champion

In an election year where both old and new regional councils get a crack at Halton Region's 1995 budget, outgoing councillors didn't give it much play before okaying it at regional council Wednesday.

After November 14's municipal election, newly elected regional councillors will get their chance to dig in before final budget approval, set for Dec. 21. It will then include Halton's Regional Police Service budget, which won't be ready until early December.

So far, it's a budget with no property tax increases but one that jacks up water bills by 3.1 per cent — adding \$10.50 to the average household's tax bill.

The 3.1 per cent increase will pay \$9.46 million toward upgrading aging infrastructure (still \$1.43 million short of identified 1995 needs), and will pay most of a five-year, \$4.6 million watermain upgrade plan to ensure adequate firefighting capabilities, predominantly in Burlington. Earlier this year, that city's firefighters couldn't get enough water from hydrants to effectively fight a house fire.

It all means 1995 regional taxes, combined property taxes and user rates, will tally \$741.46 for the average residence in Halton. It breaks down to \$387.85 in property taxes and \$353.61 in water rates.

The Region's preliminary budget was unveiled two weeks ago. Several committee meetings followed where councillors tinkered with items, but did relatively little before the budget appeared Wednesday for council's preliminary approval.

The tinkering saw \$800 chopped out of a councillors' services budget, likely to come out of a miscellaneous fund, said regional treasurer Joe Rinaldo. "It's so small, you lose it in the rounding of the pennies," he said.

Council did endorse a three-year plan to grant \$100,000 each year to a Burlington Bay fish and wildlife restoration project. The funds will come from a capital reserve and don't impact final budget figures.

Council was wary about funding the project based on concerns the restoration could improve the area to the point of perhaps hindering eventual plans to upgrade the Region's Burlington Bay sewage treatment plant.

The budget assumed conservative tax base growth in Halton, but Wednesday Mr. Rinaldo said, "We have an update on the assessment figures. Assessment growth will be greater than expected so the regional tax levy will actually go down for the second year in a row. There are no final numbers yet but I'm confident

we'll see a reduction in the regional millrate." It could come in at one quarter of one per cent.

Regional property taxes have actually dropped by \$1.98 since 1993. So far they've dropped by only four cents for 1995 over last year.

The budget meets a council target of no property tax increases, instead

of the staff-recommended 1.5 per cent increase that would have accommodated inflation but tacked an extra \$2.34 on the property tax bill.

The water rate hikes mean taxpayers will cough up about \$5 extra a year to pay for water system infrastructure upgrades and another \$5/year for fire protection security.

Mr. Rinaldo cautioned that the budget could change based on the incoming council's wishes.

The treasurer said the region's \$199 million 1995 expenditure budget holds no decreases in services but will see staffing cutbacks at Allendale, primarily because of reduced provincial funding.

Earlier this year, regional social services commissioner Bonnie Ewart flagged Allendale as a potential concern because it's unknown if additional provincial subsidies will continue past March 1995.

If they don't, the Region will see a \$1.7 million shortfall and face decisions.

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