



OPINION

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

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Their mettle will be tested

The municipal staff report on increased leisure service user fees was lauded by a number of town councillors Monday. They cited its details on costs and revenues. For some reason, this information had not been previously requested.

While a fan of selected user fees, I do question why, with our obvious money shortage, council's first angle of attack is to raise funds through user fees before addressing reducing costs.

Some councillors said they were going to be spending a lot of time on both these issues before next week's vote on user fee increases. Town staff has met with a number of user groups — they call them stakeholders — to discuss these fees. Frankly I believe every person who pays property taxes is a stakeholder.

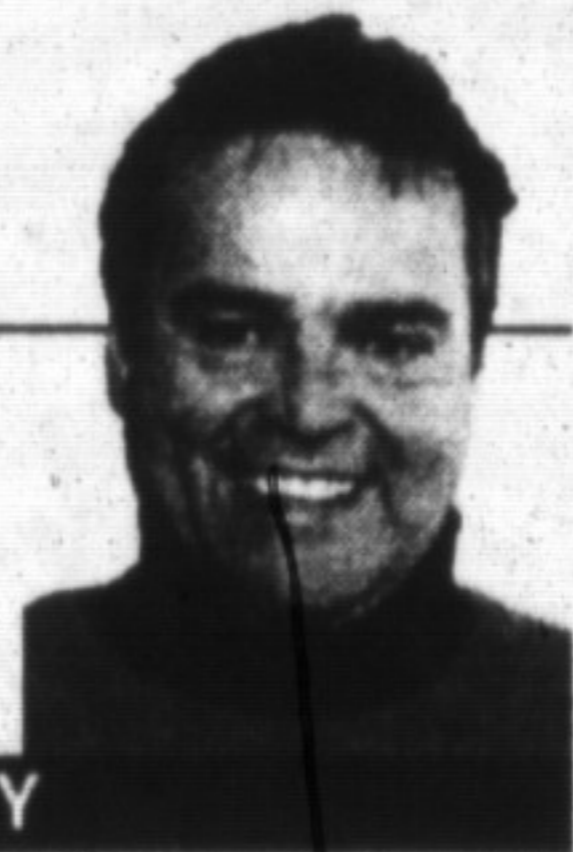
The Town of Oakville just held its first of six public meetings to discuss budget cuts and user fees. Our town staff are preparing their recommendations for council. Will the public here have their choice about providing input, as do the citizens of Oakville?

Cutbacks have forced a re-education program on both town staff and councillors. We, the citizens could do with one as well. Haven't you always wondered where they spend your tax money? A public meeting could be an opportunity for everyone, if council chooses to follow Oakville's example.

How much money is being spent on planning for post-pipeline roadways and subdivisions, versus plowing, sanding and salting our currently snow-covered avenues and icy sidewalks? Just asking.

View Point

with PATRICK KELLY



In one example given at the council meeting 65 per cent of the cost of a children's swimming program was administration. How many kids do the administrators teach to swim? Many believe government is top heavy. Is that the case here?

The recently passed provincial omnibus bill will give our local government considerably enhanced decision-making powers. How will they handle these new responsibilities? Council's decisions about user fees and upcoming budget recommendations will give us a rare glimpse of their leadership abilities.

The leisure services department is expected to cut roughly 10 per cent from their budget, about \$400,000. Are user fees going to make up the \$400,000 or will they actually cut costs? Will non-users get a tax reduction? Yes, councillors have some tough decisions to make.

Next Monday council votes on user fees. If you can get out of your snowy, slippery street, why not join them? When politicians face a crowd, they adopt a simple axiom: The more, the wavier.

Could the last one out turn off the lights?

Like an employee on the chopping block, Halton Region is struggling to maintain momentum with its actions while wrestling with the possible loss of stature and influence.

Regional government representatives have exhibited signs of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' five stages of accepting death: Disbelief, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

Most regional politicians have a part in the storm. They are elected to the region from local constituencies which are in line to be strengthened if regional government slips onto the history pages.

Someone will have to do work the region is currently doing. Eventually the province will finish whistling the tune and everyone will scramble for fewer jobs.

If the province announces that regional governments will be scrapped, it won't take long before politicians begin the wholesale stripping of political points off Halton Region's carcass.

It's already happening. At last week's council meeting Halton Chair Joyce Savoline had to remind councillors that the deed had not yet been done. However, the Golden Report on Greater Toronto Area (GTA) reform has cut the legs out from under the region and has put much municipal business on hold. The tight schedule the province has promised for acting on the report is necessary to stop local governments



Reaume with a View

with BRAD REAUME

from atrophying. Ms Savoline had to remind councillors the Golden text provides recommendations to the provincial government and is not government policy.

Milton Mayor Gord Krantz said the region could not make wide-ranging decisions until its fate is decided. Urban growth in Milton under the Halton Urban Structure Plan (HUSP) is already nine years in the making, but is effectively shelved until the GTA issue is decided.

Ms Savoline told members of the planning and public works committee that the Minister of Municipal Affairs, Al Leach, would not make a commitment to an HUSP-based business plan given "the uncertainty and process of the Golden Report." Ms Savoline refused to say the project is on hold, and insisted it is moving forward due to continued study by provincial staff.



Forcing MPs to toe the line

In 1975 then Finance Minister John Turner said, "I come now to specific measures. None is more important than the control of public expenditures." The deficit that year was \$6.2 billion, with a federal debt of \$33.9 billion.

In 1978, when Jean Chretien was minister of finance, he predicted that, "Significant reductions in the deficit can be expected." That year he added \$13.1 billion to the national debt of \$64.7 billion.

In 1986, the new Progressive Conservative finance boss, Michael Wilson thundered, "When the government came to office, we encountered a debt problem of massive proportions ... The buck was passed to us. Well the buck stops here." Mr. Wilson's 1986-87 deficit was for \$32 billion, making the accumulated debt equal to \$388.3 billion.

In 1994, Paul Martin exclaimed, "For years, governments have been promising more than they can deliver, and delivering more than they can afford. That has to end. We are ending it."

Restructuring regional council, once a political hot potato, has been rendered moot until the GTA issue is decided. Local municipalities have abandoned the esprit de corps of regional government and are plotting to carve up the region's responsibilities. Its become a power grab.

Indications of the trend popped up the day after the report was released as members of council staked out various positions in its wake.

Oakville Mayor Anne Mulvale said Halton's position on Bill 26 was insignificant given the massive changes likely to occur.

Colin Best told Milton council that Burlington council is split between siding with the GTA or Hamilton.

He added Milton should investigate Hamilton's push to restructure in a similar manner to the GTA. Later he disavowed any interest in joining Hamilton-Wentworth.

Oakville Councillor Kevin Flynn confessed to questioning the need to move forward on several issues, but seemed resigned in the end that "instead of folding our tent we have to keep plugging on."

However noble the sentiment, it will become increasingly difficult for local government to function at any kind of effective level in the absence of a mandate from the province. At least a decision to disband the region would give them something meaningful to do.

Let's Talk Taxes

with PAUL PAGNUELO



Deficit — \$37.5 billion, debt — \$545.7 billion.

What's wrong with this picture? For decades, federal finance ministers have been promising to rein in spending, cut the deficit and control Canada's spiraling debt, and for decades they have been failing miserably.

How does this happen? There are lots of reasons: Overly optimistic economic predictions, the demands of special interest groups which politicians seem incapable of turning down, and unpredictable business cycles are just a few. Whatever the causes, however, it surely must be clear by now that these finance ministers could have used a little help.

Enter the Taxpayer Protection Amendment. On Jan. 27 at its "Taxpayer Control of Government" conference in Toronto, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation unveiled what it hopes will put an end to the irresponsible fiscal behaviour of federal governments.

The CTF's Taxpayer Protection Amendment is a constitutional amendment which would accomplish three objectives.

The first section of the amendment would force the federal government to balance the budget every year after 1999-2000. This would give the government an initial three years to eliminate the deficit — more generous than what many economists are demanding.

After that, deficits could only be run in case of war or natural disaster, and then only after a vote of two-thirds of both the House of Commons and the Senate. Financial penalties would be applied to all members of parliament and senators who vote to increase spending or taxes which would cause a violation of the amendment.

It would also restrict spending to the growth rate of the population plus inflation.

Over the past 30 years (1964-94) spending has grown by 2,551 per cent while inflation has only grown by 421 per cent and population by 51 per cent.

"Let's talk taxes" is a feature service of the Ontario Taxpayers Federation.