

School board agonizes over wholesale computer changes

By **TIM WHITNELL**
Special to The Champion

It's a Catch-22 situation that involves a much bigger number.

The Halton Board of Education is being told it needs to spend several million dollars to upgrade, and in many cases replace, its outdated computer network. But can the funding be justified in these fiscally tight times, with the board facing \$16 million in spending cuts?

However, if nothing is done, the board must also deal with the inevitable decay of a redundant technology base and shell out significant dollars just to prop up a limited system.

The Information Long Range Technology Plan of 1996-2000 was unanimously approved in principle by trustees at last week's board meeting. A motion to allocate the money needed to implement the plan also carried, subject to board budget approval.

Most trustees were in favor of implementing the plan sooner rather than later, but there was a persistent dissenting voice.

Burlington's Lynda Schreiber is skeptical that money ploughed into such a large project could be recouped in a relatively short time, as trustees have been told would likely happen.

"The mainframe in the basement of this building is best described as an anchor."

— Tim Kingsbury



"The program is good, but there really isn't the money. I have not got a costing that shows me savings," said Ms Schreiber.

The Halton board's long-range technology plan carries a \$15.5-million price tag for network infrastructure, instruction, administration, support and training.

The cost, though, after transferring existing financing for technology over to the new plan, would be \$10.9 million, which would be paid off over three years. About \$1.3 million of that would be needed by the fall of this year for initial expenses related to upgrades at all public schools in the region.

The goal is to have an integrated computer system to handle the board's business processes as well as classroom needs. The plan is considered crucial to the

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Rea a match for hidden drugs

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on and Lt. Walker and Rea are now called out about a dozen times a month at 11 southern Ontario jails.

After several years of faithful service, Belle retired at the age of 10 and became a family pet in the Walker home. Sadly, she died two years ago.

While Belle was gearing up for retirement, Lt. Walker was training Rea to take over. He adopted her at the age of a year from an Oakville man who had her as a family pet, but could no longer keep her upon moving to a smaller home.

Rea was trained and ready for action by the age of two. She took over for Belle in 1991.

Lt. Walker is now preparing five-year-old Dixie, another German Shepherd, to relieve Rea from her duties soon.

The inmates respect the clever canine, says Lt. Walker, even though she represents trouble for prisoners hiding contraband. They've even given her a nickname — Miss Conduct.

Responding to encouragement and praise from Lt. Walker, Rea sniffs out more than drugs. She finds drug paraphernalia and homemade weapons hidden in

the most uncanny fashion, detectable because they have come into contact with drug residue.

The eager-to-please dog has discovered inventive inmates' works — drugs hidden in the soles of shoes and shampoo bottles made into pipes for hashish smoking. One prisoner created a knife-like object by wrapping plastic from a garbage bag around the edge of a sharp piece of metal. To make a handle for the weapon, the inmate then melted the plastic under the flame of a lighter and dipped it in cold water until it hardened.

"They're (inmates) human beings and they've got 24 hours a day to think," Lt. Walker says.

Rea and Belle have found more than 200 weapons in the 300 dog-assisted searches conducted at southern Ontario jails since 1985.

Lt. Walker, 36, and Rea are on call 24 hours a day to search for contraband, as well as escaped inmates.

In the summer of 1993, Rea tracked three prisoners who escaped from Maplehurst to a Steeles Avenue vehicle rental business, linking them to the theft of a truck. Two years later in Mimico, she found an escapee hiding in a bush in a residential backyard.

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