

'Workfare' here by September

Halton selected as one of 20 sites in Ontario

By BRAD REAUME
The Champion

Workfare programs should be up and running in Halton by September.

Wednesday provincial officials announced Halton would be one of 20 sites selected for the first phase of the Ontario Works program, of which workfare is only a part.

According to Bonnie Ewart, Halton's commissioner of social services, workfare is really a fall-back position for those receiving social assistance who are not in school or taking specific retraining.

"Any kind of a job or training takes preference but workfare is the other option," said Ms Ewart. "The intention is for workfare to provide more experience and more contacts to help in the job search."

Sid Ryan, president of the Ontario wing of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, called workfare "punishment for the poor" and added "the evidence shows that these programs do not improve the economy, provide useful training or create secure jobs."

A spokesperson for the Halton Anti-Poverty Coalition was not available for comment at press time. The coalition made a presentation against workfare at a recent meeting of Halton regional council.

The program will target public sector jobs, according to Ms Ewart, rather than private sector employment, which was the focus of JobsOntario — the employment plan of the previous government.

"At a time when municipalities, senior's homes, hospitals and school boards are facing massive funding cuts and long-term employees are contending with layoffs, this program will only cause chaos at the workplace as workers jostle each other for scarce resources," said Mr. Ryan.

The program will cover the entire province by 1998, likely in three waves. Ms Ewart said there is so much work involved setting it up in Halton there will be little time to compare notes with Peel Region or Hamilton-Wentworth, which were also selected for the initial phase of workfare.

"We've done some thinking about the program but no real planning because we didn't want to commit our resources to something until we were sure it was

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— Bonnie Ewart
Halton's commissioner
of Social Services



going to happen," said Ms Ewart.

Halton will begin by developing a business plan for Ontario Works which will be presented to the provincial government. Funding guidelines for the program will be determined through that process. According to the social services commissioner, Halton will work within its 1996 budget for social services.

According to David Tsubouchi, minister of community and social services, the program is dedicated to breaking the "cycle of dependency on welfare created by previous administrations."

"Work for welfare will benefit people on welfare by helping them acquire some skills, self-confidence, and contacts that will assist them in finding a job," said Mr. Tsubouchi. "Ontario Works will also give them an opportunity to give something back to their communities."

Seniors, people with disabilities and single parents of young children are exempt. The program will begin with those on general welfare assistance and be phased-in to those on family benefits by 1998.

Other sites where the program will be instituted in its initial phase include Durham Region, Niagara Region, Oxford County and Waterloo Region.

Participants, who could number as many as 1,300 in Halton, are expected to work 17 hours per week, or roughly the number of hours for which they would earn their benefits at minimum wage.

Some of the suggested community service jobs include local clean-ups and tree planting, helping out at charity events, or assisting at local seniors centres and schools.

Local hydro in favour of report backing break-up of big brother

By BRAD REAUME
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Ultimately it comes down to cheaper rates.

Donald Macdonald's report on electric power in Ontario recommends the break-up of Ontario Hydro, the largest utility in North America. If the recommendations are implemented, eventually customers will be able to choose their own electric company, much the same way they choose long distance phone providers today.

That should produce significantly cheaper rates, especially for large scale users of power, according to the report, which stopped short of guaranteeing lower rates because of the unpredictability of the market. Local hydro officials are pleased with the recommendations.

"It's very much in line with my way of thinking. In my view competition has to be put into place," said Milton Hydro general manager Don Thorne. "Electrical generation is no longer a natural monopoly type of business. We shouldn't sustain a monopoly when there is no need. Competition generally leads to lower prices."

According to the Macdonald report, transmission of power would remain a monopoly within various distribution areas, much like cable television. However, technological advances have led to competitive generation of power on a smaller scale than was previously possible, and the ability to track transmission more accurately. When technology provides a more accurate method to track usage, then consumers will be able to have the choice of companies. According to Mr. Thorne this will take five or 10 years.

The Macdonald report suggests Ontario Hydro retain its nuclear generating facilities and its Niagara Falls station, which contain 65 per cent of the province's generating capacity. The nuclear facilities would be difficult to sell off because of potential liability, while the Niagara Falls facility is closely tied to the public perception of electrical power in Ontario and should be kept for purely political reasons, the report says.

Competition will likely be phased in at the wholesale level, according to Mr. Thorne.

He said the Macdonald report largely mirrors the Milton Hydro position, save Milton Hydro called for a power pool among utilities rather than wholesale purchasing.

Currently there are 308 electrical utilities in Ontario with Ontario Hydro acting as the distributor for about one million people in low density areas. According to the Macdonald report, Ontario Hydro should get out of the distribution business and utilities should amalgamate and take up the low density areas, so all customers fall under a locally accountable structure.

Mr. Thorne conceded there would be forces at work which would guide that choice. Political boundaries are likely to guide any amalgamations, he said.

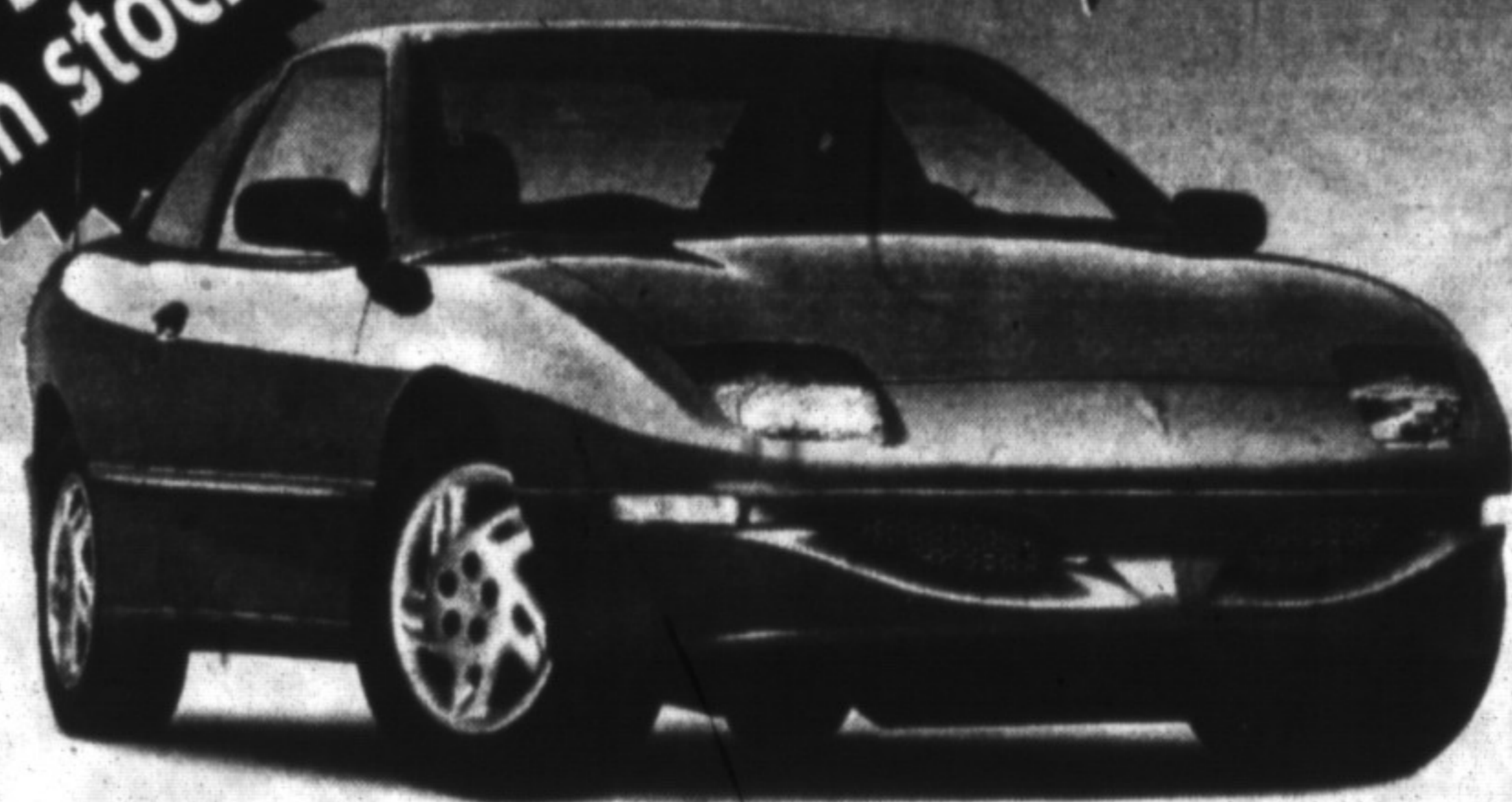
"It will take several years to get the distribution side of the business organized but generation of power will proceed that with competition beginning as soon as the report is implemented by the (provincial) government," said Mr. Thorne.

"In the past big government, big business and big labour were in the driver's seat in the electricity business. This report puts the customer in the driver's seat."

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