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York council defers Hodgson hearing

Judicial review may be called to look into land deal

TRACY KIBBLE
Staff Reporter

York Region officials may ask an Ontario judge to investigate the documents on a land deal acquisition that has left Engineering Commissioner Bob Hodgson under suspension.

Hodgson was suspended April 2 after refusing to resign over allegations he recommended council spend nearly \$800,000 for land in Richmond

Hill in exchange for approval of an affordable housing subdivision. Officials say they could have obtained the land from developer Alfredo DeGasperis for \$2 million.

York wants the land to complete a \$10 million railway overpass.

Although a formal hearing was to take place in Newmarket Thursday at 2 p.m., officials decided after one hour of private session that they would not deal with the matter.

Instead, council voted 16-3 in favor of holding a special council meeting next week in hopes Ontario Attorney General Howard Hampton will assign a judge to the case without delaying the matter.

Hodgson's lawyer, Ronald P. Bohm

of the Richmond Hill firm Stong, Blackburn & Machon was furious his client would not be heard and accused council of treating Hodgson "unlawfully."

"I was told this matter would be dealt with today, now you want to put off what everyone has been waiting to hear. Your suggestion that this should be put to a judicial hearing is not necessary; there are facts before you that clear this man," Bohm told council.

Bohm added Hodgson has dealt fairly with council since the suspension and has avoided revealing his comments until the hearing.

"He has refrained from making piecemeal statements to the press because his loyalty is to you," Bohm

added. "Why spend tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars because we all know judicial hearings drag on. Is it in the interest of council to drag this on and have this in the press for months? Let's put this matter behind us and get on with the business at York Region," Bohm concluded.

Some councillors wanted assurances the matter wouldn't drag on before supporting a resolution to take the matter to the province.

"Perhaps we're reacting hastily on

this. All of us feel extremely uncomfortable that this may drag on," said Vaughan Mayor Lorna Jackson.

King Mayor Margaret Britnell, Whitchurch-Stouffville Mayor Fran Sainsbury and Richmond Hill Councillor Frank Endean were the only councillors to vote against deferring the matter.

Officials will discuss the matter April 18 during a special meeting when council will decide whether a judge should be appointed to the case.

Want to tell story: Hodgson

Anxious to tell his side of the story, York Region's Engineering Commissioner Bob Hodgson is "very disappointed" council deferred a hearing Thursday until next week.

Hodgson has been suspended until April 18 when York Region Council will decide whether they will turn the matter over to an Ontario judge.

But Hodgson and his lawyer, Ronald P. Bohm of Richmond Hill, are angry council has put the matter off.

"I just want to tell my story. That's what I came here for," Hodgson told *The Weekender*.

Hodgson, who has been York's commissioner since 1973, was supported by his mother, wife and three sons at the hearing. His family sat with the rest of the public and press for more than one hour while council deliberated twice in private before announcing they would not hold the hearing.

When *The Weekender* asked if he was nervous, Hodgson admitted it wasn't "the happiest day of (his) life," but said he just wanted the suspension lifted and a chance to tell his side of the story.

Bohm called the suspension "unlawful" and requested an immediate reinstatement of his client.

"I have put information in front of council that says he has done nothing wrong. But they would rather have someone else deal with it," Bohm said.

He added he was denied access to certain information from regional offices because he was told the matter would be dealt with April 2.

These meetings behind closed doors "it's cruel to delay this matter when Bob Hodgson should have the opportunity to have his story told."

Bohm said. Outside council chambers Bohm told reporters Hodgson has had this matter "hanging over him like a sword and had many assurances he would be heard."

He added the judicial hearing is a cop-out of council responsibility.

"It's a shame to spend thousands of taxpayers' dollars but it's always better to have someone else to make the decisions for you."

Richmond Hill Councillor Frank Endean, who voted not to defer the matter, told reporters it was Markham Mayor Tony Roman, who initiated the last minute idea to call for a judicial hearing.

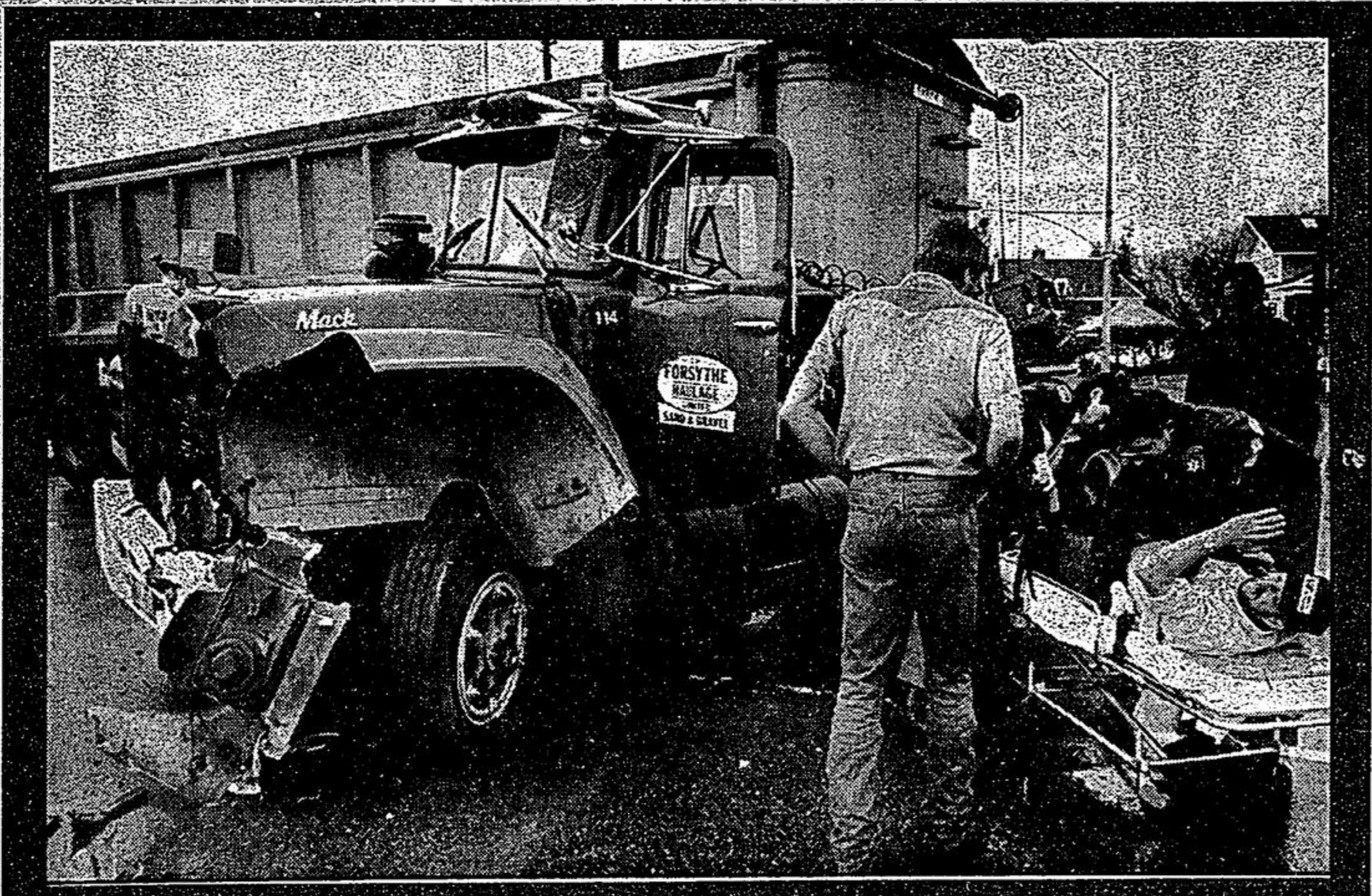
"We should have gone ahead today to allow the man to speak. He's been under a cloud and has every right to have his day," Endean said.

When asked if the land council paid \$783,000 for was worth \$2 million, as alleged by officials, Bohm said:

"Do you know anybody that would give you \$1 million for free. If so, introduce me."

Before leaving the building, Hodgson told reporters that after this extension of his suspension he would not "second-guess anything" council did.

Tracy Kibble



McNeil helps local hungry

Looking to help the community, McNeil Pharmaceutical has donated \$1,000 to the Whitchurch-Stouffville Foodbank (WSF).

Along with the donation, McNeil is setting up an internal food drive, so employees may contribute goods to the foodbank.

"It's a sensational idea," said Cricket Forfar, public relations director for WSF.

"I'd love to see any large corporation doing internal food drives," said Forfar.

The donated money will be used for restocking the WSF shelves with staple foods, including powdered milk and baby formula.

The money will also help to stock the shelves with items that cannot be donated such as meats and fresh vegetables.

Stouffville residents face 4.9% tax hike

TRACY KIBBLE
Staff Reporter

Whitchurch-Stouffville Council unanimously approved a 4.9 per cent tax hike this week, a three per cent decrease from last year.

Council, in 1990, settled for a 7.5 per cent mill rate and officials expressed satisfaction in this year's "modest" budget increase.

A 4.9 per cent hike would mean a \$21.61 increase on an average \$21,000 assessment, or an annual tax, excluding sewers, of \$462.40.

"Town staff deserves credit for bringing this budget down to 4.9 per cent; this is excellent considering we're in a recession," said Ward 4 Councillor Wayne Emmerson, who chaired the Monday night budget meeting with department heads.

"We won't be able to do all things, but we'll definitely be able to do some. Now we can get on with summer projects," Emmerson said.

And Mayor Fran Sainsbury said Whitchurch-Stouffville's budget is "realistic," and noted the 4.9 per cent figure was lower than Markham's 5.5 per cent and York Region's 6.4 per cent increases.

Ward 6 Councillor Jim Sanders added the budget was "well put together" and noted the GST added \$265,000 to the budget, "a significant amount."

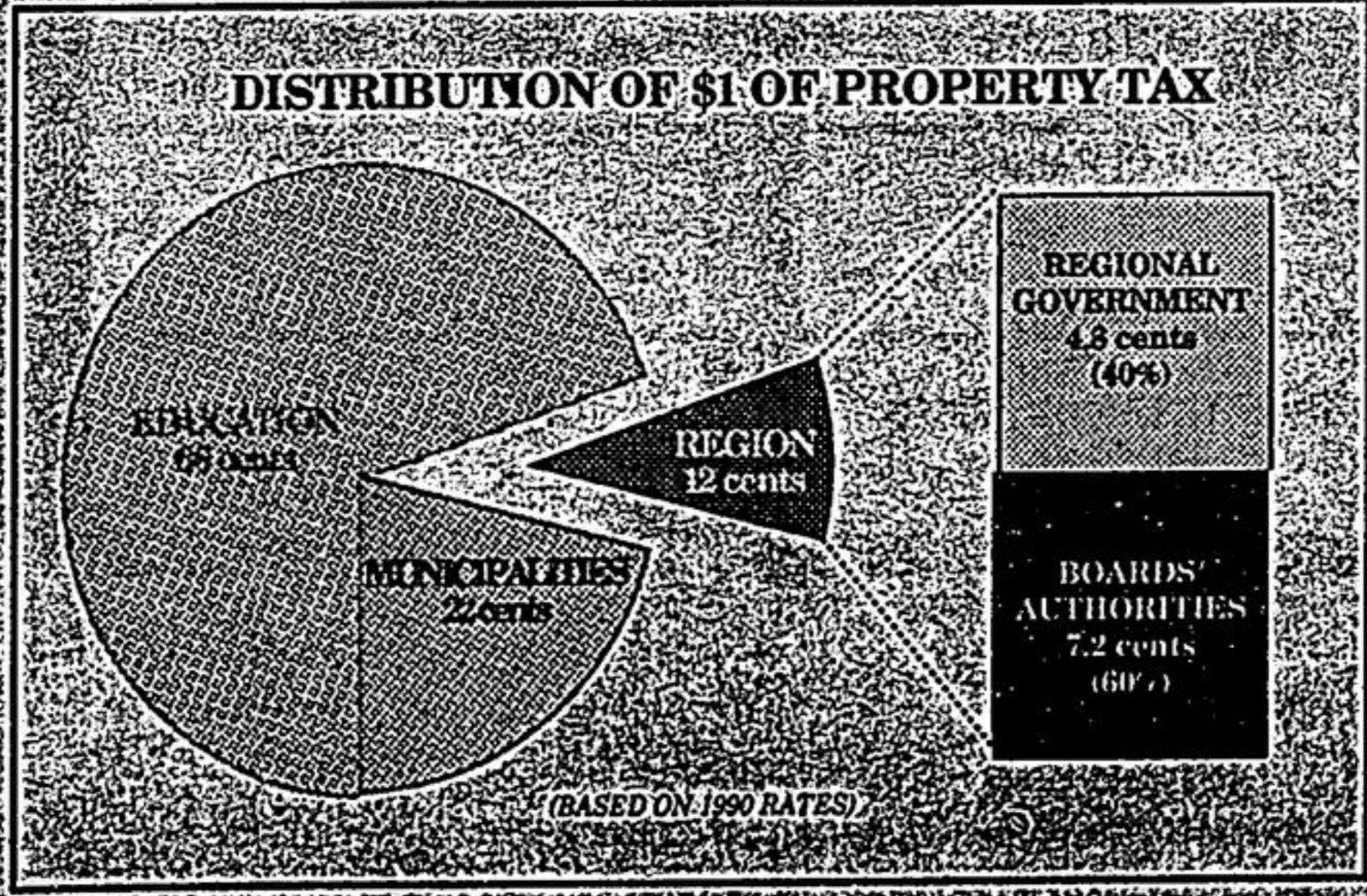
"Staff whittled away so much; even cut into reserve (accounts). This budget is cutting close to the line," noted Ward 5 Councillor Doug Alles.

"This budget is lower than inflation, which is at about five per cent," Alles added.

"It takes into consideration the troubles our citizens are experiencing and I sincerely hope we don't have to pay for it in future budgets," Alles said.

For each tax dollar, 66 cents pays for education; 22 cents for municipal services and 12 cents for regional costs, including fire and police. (See chart.)

Whitchurch-Stouffville taxpayers are faced with the 4.9 per cent hike for local services (\$21.61) and a 6.4 per cent hike for regional services (\$24)



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