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TAXES: Province will extend deadline for York Region to use 'tools'

Tax relief plans considered

BY LISA QUEEN
STAFF WRITER

While York Region and provincial politicians continue to spar over who's to blame for hefty property tax increases, frustrated business owners are waiting to see if they will receive tax rebates.

York Mackenzie MPP Frank Klees said the province is considering letting the region withhold \$250 million in education taxes for several months. That would allow the region to save as much as \$6 million in interest, which it could use to refund businesses facing tax increases up to 1,000 per cent.

Council has agreed to study tax rebates for businesses and homeowners, including who would qualify for the refunds and how they would be financed. On Thursday, Peel Region council approved a \$25-

million rebate plan for merchants.

But the provincial concession on education taxes would come with strings attached, Klees said following Thursday's council meeting, where business owners again pleaded for relief from high taxes caused by Ontario's new property tax system.

Klees said the province would only agree if council promised to use other "tools" meant to ease the impact of high taxes. The province is extending the deadline to implement the tools until Oct. 31.

The region could phase in tax increases and decreases. Council could also create new property classes that would prevent the tax burden from being shifted from office towers and large factories to mom-and-pop stores and small industries.

Klees insists the tools would minimize immediate tax increases, arguing inequities will be sorted out in time. However, regional financial staff insist the tools are useless in

■ More on taxes, page 20.

York. Rejecting the region's claims that the province withheld information that would have helped councillors decide if the tools were worthwhile, Klees said Toronto made sure it had the necessary details.

"There isn't a Toronto public and a rest-of-Ontario public," he said. "This (York Region) is a high level of government here. These people should be making it their job, it is their job, to find out what the impact is. The more I hear that kind of discussion, the more it smells to me of covering (their) backside."

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