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Region in no hurry to implement plan

Tax capping bill will cause more problems than it solves, critics say

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
STAFF WRITER

It's down to the wire. Municipal finance staff is waiting for next week's expected passage of Bill 79, the Fairness for Property Taxpayer's Act, which contains the province's capping scheme for small business tax relief.

But that's not the only thing it will do, they say. Besides creating a whole new group of irate taxpayers, many fear it will not even provide the intended protection for small business.

"Bill 79 creates more problems than it solves," Newmarket director of finance Bob Dixon said. "A number of taxpayers have already paid their bill this year — now we have to come back and ask them to pay more. That will cause a big uproar."

The legislation makes no distinction between commercial properties or between small and large businesses. In York Region, many properties benefiting from the cap are vacant while small and medium-sized business taxes will be clawed back to fund those caps.

That doesn't make any sense, according to a joint report issued by the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, the Association of Municipal Clerks and Treasurers, the Municipal Finance Officer's Association of Ontario and the Association of Municipal Tax Collectors of Ontario.

"Our associations are opposed in principal to Bill 79 in its entirety," the report states. "Bill 79 as proposed will result in taxpayer confusion and anger and the perpetuation of inequities in assessment and taxation. It is an over-reaction to a manageable number of property tax increases."

Complicating everything is the proposed Dec. 31 deadline for local and regional councils to make their final tax policy decisions. It's simply impossible to meet, say staff and politicians alike.

"It's not just a matter of complying," Markham's tax department manager Paul Dillman said. "It means issuing a revised tax bill and programming the new and complicated formula into the computers. We haven't been able to do anything because until the bill is passed we don't know what the specific regulations are or what their impact will be."

Markham Mayor Don Cousens, chair of the region's finance committee, said he will not even attempt to rush Bill 79's implementation, no matter what deadline the province lays down. "We are saying don't put us in the position to read, understand and implement this bill without taking the appropriate amount of time," Cousens said.

"The province is in a hurry to make up for the mistakes they've made in the last few months, but we are saying don't compound the problems by making us rush through this complex legislation."

The tax bills for 1998 must be cleared up before staff can even begin formulating an interim 1999 bill, which they should be doing now, Dillman said. Finance department staff should also be preparing 1999 budgets now as well, he added. "It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the impact on the Region of York as a whole until we see the draft of those regulations," he said.

Bill 79 is expected to pass Thursday.

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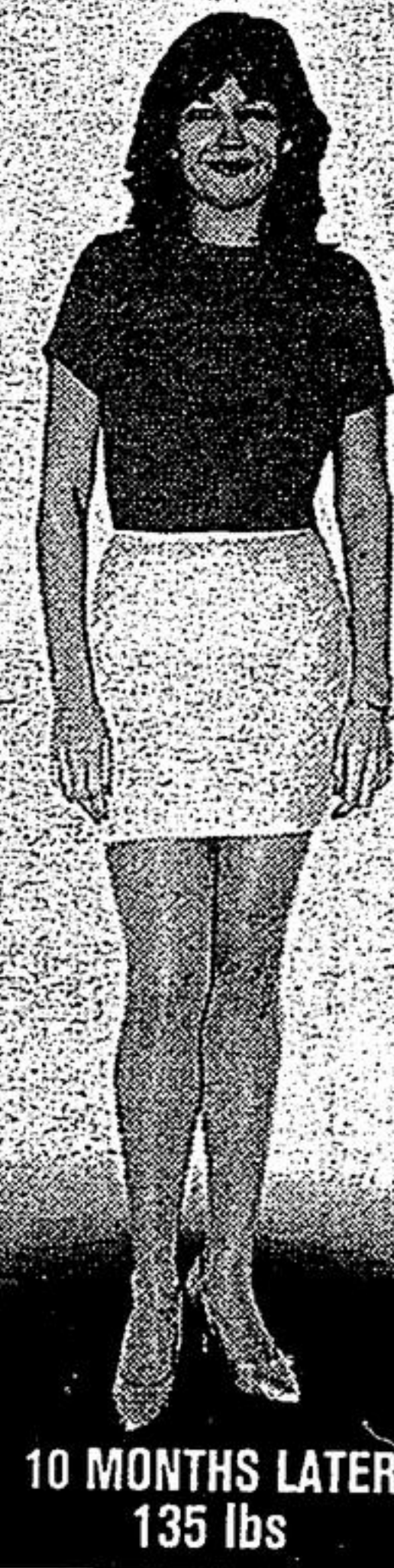
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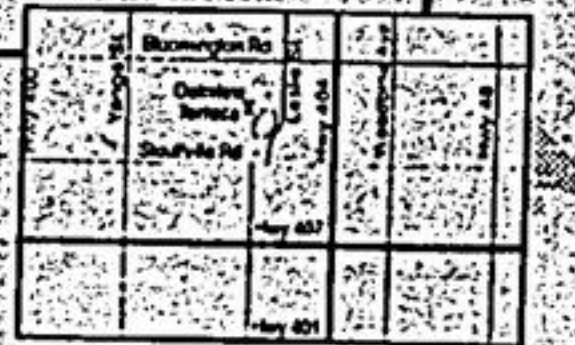
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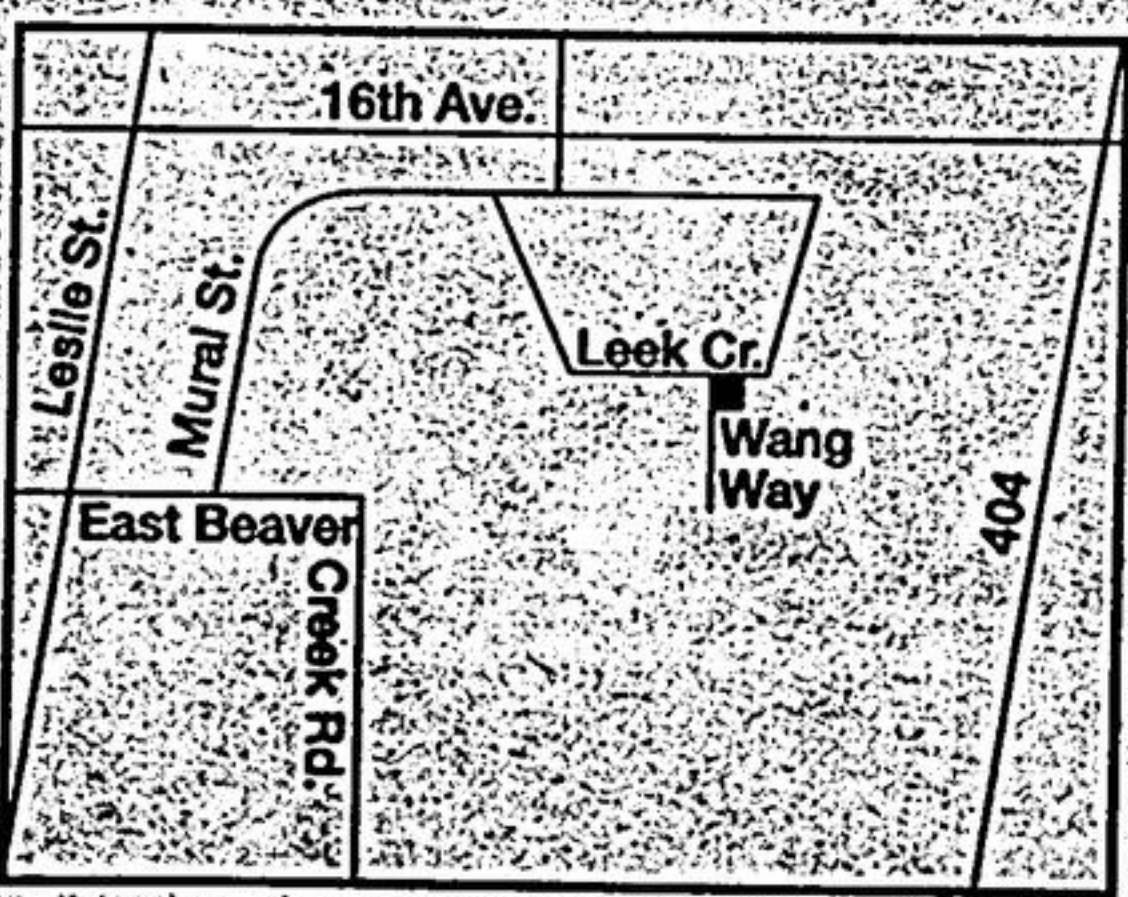
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