

REGIONAL AFFAIRS: Tory grant keeps region from raising taxes

Region freezes taxes

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

Although York Region's finance committee ruled out a tax cut this year, at least residents won't be paying any more.

Thanks to a \$7.5 million provincial grant for ambulances and public health programs combined with a 4.2 per cent growth in assessment, the region could cut taxes by 0.53 per cent.

But most councillors said the region should hang on to the \$1.8 million to reduce borrowing costs or put toward unforeseen expenses.

Markham Councillor Ralph Aselin said a half-percent tax cut only works out to about \$8 per household. He argued councillors could do more with the money if they left it in the region's coffers.

Vaughan Mayor Lorna Jackson agreed. "It doesn't mean very much to an individual person. We may be far better to leave it (the tax change) at zero and use that \$1.8 million," she said. "It would be nice to say we're having a decrease but I'm not sure we're being fiscally responsible."

But Newmarket Mayor Tom Taylor, facing an outcry from his residents over a proposed local tax increase of 8 per cent, argued the region should pass any reduction in the budget on to taxpayers.

Pooling costs down
It turns out York Region will contribute less toward Toronto's social programs this year.

Although the province hasn't provided final numbers yet, York officials now estimate the region's bill under the controversial pooling program will be \$88.5 million.

Last week, chief administrator Alan Wells warned the region's costs could jump as much as 2.4 per cent to \$96 million.

Last year, York taxpayers sent \$93.6 million to Toronto under the province's controversial "pooling" program, which forces York, Halton, Durham and Peel regions to share in the costs of the city's

subsidized housing and social programs. But Toronto's social costs have gone down this year.

Social housing contributions have dropped to \$37.6 million, down from \$41.3 million.

York's share of Toronto's social programs has dipped to \$50.9 million from \$52.3 million.

But the reduced costs haven't stopped York councillors from complaining about sending money to Toronto.

York is responsible for about 46 per cent of the pooling costs, which worked out last year to \$139 from each resident.

Peel, with a population of 900,000, contributed about \$66 million to pooling last year — about \$73 per capita.

Contributions are based on each region's assessment.

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"There is no fairness in pooling. We've known that for the past year and a half. We've got screwed for the past year and a half," regional chairperson Bill Fisch said.

Richmond Hill Mayor Bill Bell said the region's disadvantaged children should be treated to special box seats for events at the Air Canada Centre — something selected underprivileged kids from Toronto enjoyed — because regional taxpayers are contributing to the city's social costs.

On the eve of a provincial election, Newmarket Mayor Tom Taylor urged municipal politicians to renew their campaign to get Queen's Park to remove the funding of social services from the property tax bill.

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