

VOTE '99: Tax pooling and the amount of dollars York Region taxpayers send to Mel Lastman, is threatening to become a key election issue

York about to get tough

Regional taxpayers will send \$88 million to Toronto for social services this year.

BY DAWN LIERSCH
Staff Writer

• York Region food banks fear many of the 44,000 people they serve each year will go hungry this summer, as donations to their spring food drive have been dismal. Half of their clients are children.

• With a vacancy rate of 0.8 per cent for rental housing, York Region's waiting lists for social housing continue to grow. But no new affordable housing is planned.

• York Region has been forced to cut its grants to social agencies such as Yellow Brick House, a shelter for abused women, and CHATS, a homecare service for seniors.

• As York's population growth continues to soar, officials warn the region's social safety net is collapsing — unable to meet the demand for everything from homeless shelters to addiction services.

Against this backdrop of social woes, York Region is being forced to send millions of dollars to Toronto each year to help pay the city's social costs.

And, with York Region politicians turning up the heat this week, the Mike Harris government's controversial tax pooling program is threatening to become a key election issue in York.

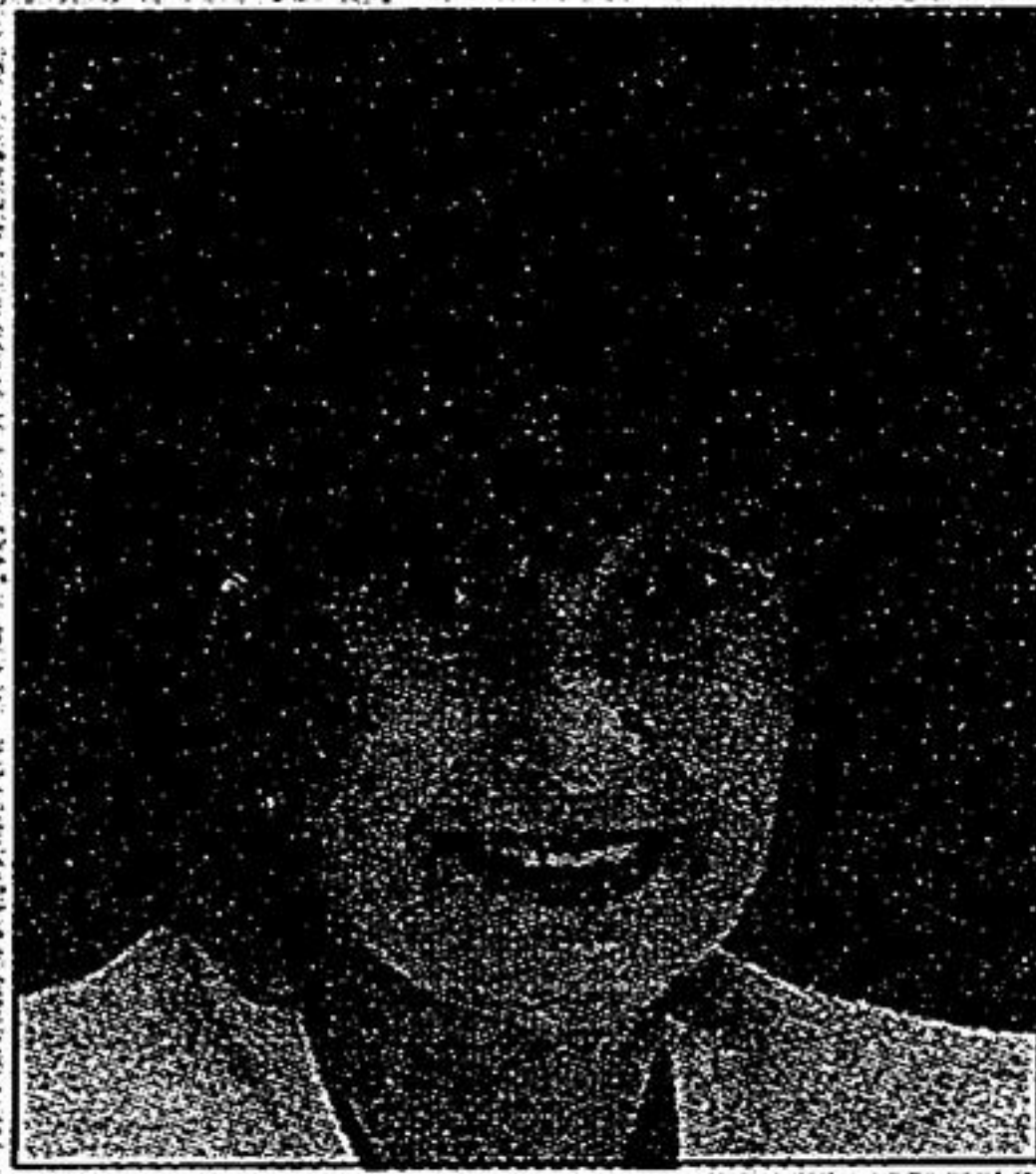
Thanks to pooling, the regions of York, Peel, Halton and Durham are sending a quarter of a billion dollars to Toronto each year. Because of York's rich assessment base, it must pay close to half that annual tab.

'Until we get to the point where everyone is equal, the money should be used to pay for our services.'

This year, York is expected to send \$88 million to Toronto to pay for its social services, including welfare, daycare and social housing.

Tax pooling has had local politicians up in arms ever since it was introduced last year, especially since they have no control over how Toronto spends that money.

And they argue, it's not fair to make York pay for Toronto services when it can't afford to offer its residents the same level of services Toronto residents enjoy, such as free recreation programs for children, twice-weekly garbage pickup in the summer and sidewalk snow-



JOYCE FRUSTAGLIO

York forced to slash programs to subsidize Toronto

plowing in the winter.

The unfairness of pooling has been enough to make even staunch Tory supporter Joyce Frustaglio turn a critical eye on her preferred political party.

'We can't afford to take on Toronto's problems, nor should we have to. We have managed our affairs very well and we shouldn't have to bail out Toronto.'

"We can't afford to take on Toronto's problems, nor should we have to. We have managed our affairs very well and we shouldn't have to bail out Toronto," said Frustaglio, chairperson of the region's health and social services committee.

Although the region was able to balance its 1999 budget, even with the contribution to Toronto, Frustaglio said the region has had to cut grants to local social service agencies.

"Once upon a time, they came to the region and we would give them a grant. Is it fair that York has had to slash programs in order to subsidize Toronto?" she asked.

"Toronto wants to give a Cadillac service while we have to make do with a Volkswagen service, or maybe even a bicycle service."

Because of our rapid growth, Frustaglio says the region should be using that money to expand programs, such as home care and subsidized daycare.

Frustaglio said social housing is a major concern because there aren't enough units in the region to satisfy the demand. But, again,

It's not fair to make York pay for Toronto services when it can't afford to offer its residents the same level of services Toronto residents enjoy, such as free recreation programs for children, twice-weekly garbage pickup in the summer and sidewalk snowplowing in the winter.

pooling is getting in the way.

Martin Silver, general manager of the Region of York Housing Corporation, pointed out the region is spending more money on Toronto's social housing than its own.

York taxpayers spent \$34.8 million on social housing in the region last year, but sent \$41.3 million to Toronto for social housing.

And, as waiting lists for housing in York grow longer, there has been no new construction of rental units in the past four years, Silver said.

York's vacancy rate for both social and private housing is at 0.8 per cent, meaning there are eight vacant units for every 1,000 units of housing. A healthy market place has 3-per-cent vacancy rates, he said.

The vacancy rate for social housing alone is 0.3 per cent.

'The property tax base is not the right place to take the money from because it doesn't have the capacity to address the demand.'

• Martin Silver, general manager, region housing as 5,000

"It's difficult enough for us to fund existing social housing, so how do you address the need for new social housing," he asked, adding he would prefer to see housing funded through federal and provin-



DAVE TSUBOUCHI

Province made fair exchange in pooling scheme

cial income taxes.

"The property tax base is not the right place to take the money from because it doesn't have the capacity to address the demand," he said.

Several York Region election candidates agree.

Nathan Rotman, Thornhill's NDP candidate, said his party plans to move social costs from the property tax bills to provincial income taxes.

And John Volpe, the York North Liberal candidate, said a Liberal government will restore rent controls and reinvest funding for affordable housing and social services to reduce the need for pooling.

"The current government has abandoned social housing construction, the homeless and other serious social concerns and has slashed funding to these areas," he said.

"It has created additional financial burdens for every city in this province, through municipal down-loading of social services."

While Tony Genco, the Liberal candidate for Vaughan-King-Aurora, does support pooling for social services, he doesn't believe the timing is right because York is still struggling to look after its own.

"The people who pay for the services should have the services. I'm all for the redistribution of funds for services, but not at the expense of our services," he said.

"Until we get to the point where everyone is equal, the money should be used to pay for our services."

But Dave Tsubouchi, Markham's Tory candidate, argues the province has made a fair exchange because it agreed to pick up half the education portion of the property tax bill.

"At the end of the day, you're paying less taxes," he said.

He also points out that Toronto has to pay the bulk of funds for some services York residents enjoy.

For instance, Toronto has to pay 50 per cent of the costs for GO Transit, even though there are more York residents using it to commute to Toronto than Toronto residents travelling to York, he said.

Steve Haylestrom, the Green Party candidate for Oak Ridges, believes the pooling policy should be taken further to include all Ontario municipalities.

"The larger the pool of people, the smaller the amount of money people will have to pay," he said.

"The problems of Toronto are the problems of York as well. We're not talking about sewers here, we're talking about people. Some people think if they drive by and keep their eyes closed, it's not their problem."

But Rosanne Rodgers, of the Newmarket Food Pantry, says it's a fallacy to think York Region has few social problems of its own.

She knows, she sees hundreds of local families each year relying on the food bank to survive.

"It's almost invisible in our community because of the different demographics. There are mainly families using it and some come for only a short period of time," she said.

"People always think of Toronto because it's so big and it's always in the news."


'Toronto wants to give a Cadillac service while we have to make do with a Volkswagen service, or maybe even a bicycle service.'

Rodgers is hoping she won't have to close the doors of the food pantry this summer. Short about 20,000 pounds of food and nearing the end of the pantry's spring food drive, she sent out a plea to local churches earlier this week for help.

With about 750 people using the food bank each month, she's worried there won't be enough donations to hold them through to the Thanksgiving food drive in October.

But she said the community isn't always aware how great the need is.

Don Fernandes, food drive coordinator with region's food network, said 10 area food banks serve about 21,000 children a year.



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