

Stouffville Tribune

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Dave Teetzel

York's \$15-million windfall could easily disappear

You know what it's like. You find \$20 you forgot about and suddenly it's burning a hole in your pocket.

Now imagine it's \$15 million, and you will know what's happening at regional budget talks today. That's how much York Region has in its capital reserves.

It's more than the region has ever had in the kitty — Aurora Mayor Tim Jones called it "mind-boggling" — and it appears the reserves will keep growing. The region is projecting it will have more than \$77 million in different reserve funds by 2002.

The politicians and staff are to be congratulated for squirreling away this money. But this is an election year and they are ready to spend, spend, spend.

Markham Mayor Don Cousens wants to use part of the reserves to buy land on the Oak Ridges Moraine.

Newmarket Mayor Tom Taylor will go for that, but he also wants to see some spent on social housing.

The hospitals were mentioned as possible beneficiaries.

Oak Ridges MPP Frank Klees weighed in with the opinion that the money came from the taxpayers and, if there's extra, the region should give it back in the form of tax cuts.

But regional chairperson Bill Fisch wants to keep that money right where it is, so when (not if) the economy goes into the dumper, there's still enough to keep all the region's services running.

It's not surprising Fisch is a little more conscious of the need for reserves than his counterparts. Unlike Cousens, he was on Markham council about 10 years ago when his taxpayers were hit with more than a 20-per-cent increase.

But Cousens and the others were on hand for the painstaking cutting at the regional budget table during the '90s.

Perhaps, Fisch might want to replay that great blast from the past in 1995, when the region was saved from slashing the police budget only because somebody in Vaughan discovered an accounting error worth about \$300,000.

If Bill Fisch is trying to avoid going back to that, I'm with him. After all, \$15 million is a mind-boggling amount if you win it in the lottery, but it's not that much compared to the financial crises the region has faced.

Maybe the region can free up some of that money for a good cause. All of the ideas on the table are worthy.

But what I'm afraid might happen is, politicians being politicians, they will try to please everyone. They will spend a token amount on the moraine, a bit on housing, a bit on hospitals and cut taxes a fraction of a percentage point.

None will be enough to make a bit of difference, but those reserves will be gone. Sort of like that \$20 I found.



EDITORIAL

Jean Chretien should apologize to all of us

There was no apology. There was no explanation. There was no promise to resolve the fiasco. Human Resources Development Canada Minister Jane Stewart sat silently in the House of Commons, composed but still, as opposition MPs fired salvo after salvo at Prime Minister Jean Chretien, demanding her resignation over the boondoggle at her ministry.

The PM refused to acknowledge mismanagement in the handling of the \$1 billion in grants for job training, job creation, literacy programs and other projects, instead defending the make-work programs as a moral responsibility to ensure citizens have every opportunity to be successful.

But the accounting errors that have been uncovered are damning, including a grant of \$160,000 to McGill University, even though it had only requested \$60,000; a grant of \$500,000 to a Montreal-based video giant that had already received \$2 million; misallocation of an aboriginal child-care study grant in British Columbia that someone used to buy jewelry and claimed it as office furniture and many other instances where money was granted but programs were not monitored.

Chretien should have apologized immediately to Canadians for squandering their money. His performance, his pathetic defence of an obviously ill-managed program, only further proves he is out of touch with the nation.

Canadians are among the highest-taxed citizens in the western world, Reform leader Preston Manning succinctly states.

"No wonder they are angry, therefore, when they find out that more than a billion of those hard-earned taxpayers' dollars have been grossly mismanaged by the minister of human resources development," he said.

This is simply another example of Chretien's arrogance. When he and his party are under legitimate attack, when their lack of action has created a serious problem, Chretien resorts to claiming a greater sense of moral responsibility than those who oppose him.

Chretien should apologize. Stewart should resign. Her replacement should take her plan to fix the department and make it happen.

And Canadians should dismiss the Liberal government in the next election.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trustee clarifies position on extra religion class for Catholic students

Re: *More religion under study by Catholic board*, Feb. 1

On Feb. 1, I read in this newspaper that I "pitched the idea" for an extra religion course in York Region Catholic high schools because I believe "it is the right thing to do".

Wow. I can't believe that someone could print the exact opposite of what I said.

On Jan. 28, I requested that the York Catholic District School Board not approve a fourth religion credit and that a committee of all stakeholders be established to process pertinent information and make recommendations to the board.

This is not a straightforward issue. Now, as required by the Ministry of Education, compulsory courses must be completed in four years of high school instead of five years.

To add more religion credits than is currently required, in a shorter time frame, gives students fewer electives.

This may negatively impact requirements for university entrance and effectively decimate certain departments in Catholic high schools.

There are many related issues that also need to be studied prior to a final decision being made.

At the Jan. 28 meeting, trustees decided to form a committee in the spring of 2001 to

look at this issue and report back to the board.

MARY ANN KENNEDY SMITH
UNIONVILLE

Driver boycotts Hwy. 407 after being billed for not using it

This is an open letter to the consortium that runs Hwy. 407.

Since it is impossible to get through on your 1-888 number and since a stamp costs less than a long-distance phone call, I am forced to write to you. This does not bode well for your getting any of my business.

I will never ride the 407 again. I will also inform my friends and relatives of my experience with your highway.

Why am I billed \$2.14 every month, even when I do not use your highway?

Why is it impossible to cancel my account with you? I've tried writing "cancel" on my payment already.

I will also write to my MPP regarding your "hiring" of the province to do your bill collecting — my licence is at risk.

How can this be? So send me a final bill and please, cancel my account.

Thank you, from a kind, honest, giving person who does not like injustice. How many easily intimidated people keep paying?

ESTHER COLLIER
RICHMOND HILL

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