

Mayor calls for ambulance quick-fix

BY PATRICK CASEY
Staff Writer

Whitchurch-Stouffville Mayor Wayne Emmerson has slammed a report proposing the region stagger the re-location and upgrades of its 14 ambulance stations over the next five years.

And he called on the region and the province to finance the service properly.

A health and social services committee report presented to regional council last Thursday summarized a 1999 audit by the Ventin Group Architects that recognized the poor condition of the region's ambulance stations.

Rated on a three-point scale, stations in Markham, Richmond Hill, Aurora and Maple can be retained, while the remaining 10 stations either need to be rebuilt or require brand new locations.

However, Emmerson spoke vehemently against a recommendation suggesting priorities be spread over the next five years, with the re-location of the Stouffville station to the area of McCowan and Bethesda roads not occurring until 2004.

"We need to step it up," Emmerson said. "We can't wait four years for some of these places, some of these areas need to be covered now."

"I don't think we need Taj Mahals for these things. They just need to be adequate and we can work with the halls we have. I'm not happy with the architect's report stating some should be shut down and not continued. We need to bring forward a better recommendation so we can have a better service."

"Within two or three years, you know (projects) may not happen as fast as the way it should," he said.

The current report calls for a new station in Unionville this year, with minimal upgrades to facilities in Richmond Hill, Aurora and Maple.

Next year, a new station would be built in Newmarket near Green Lane and Bathurst Street and new structures would be built in King City and Woodbridge, with stations in Nobleton and Sutton re-located in 2002, and Thornhill and Queensville in 2003.

The program would finish in 2004 with the reconstruction of the Keswick and Stouffville sta-

tions. Funding for the five-year plan will be addressed in the 2001 business plan, with the 3,000-square-foot buildings estimated to cost \$3,250,000 apiece.

Although most municipalities will not take control of provincial ambulance services until next year, York Region accepted responsibility last year.

The funding formula is based on a 50-50 split with the provincial government, but Queen's Park has based its financial commitment on the existing standard levels, explained Alan Wells, the region's chief administrative officer during a recent finance committee meeting.

The region's 2000 ambulance budget totals about \$16.1 million and the Tories are only providing \$4.6 million based on the assumption the service can operate for about \$9 million.

"We have no problem with the formula, the issue is whether the government will provide their share," said Wells. "These are items we are currently negotiating with the Ministry of Health."

On top of the proposed funding for additional ambulance stations, the region has already identified the need for four additional ambulances next year, each costing \$1 million to deliver, supply and operate.

According to regional chairperson Bill Fisch, discussions with area MPPs have stressed the region has inherited an ambulance service without a reasonable amount of provincial funding.

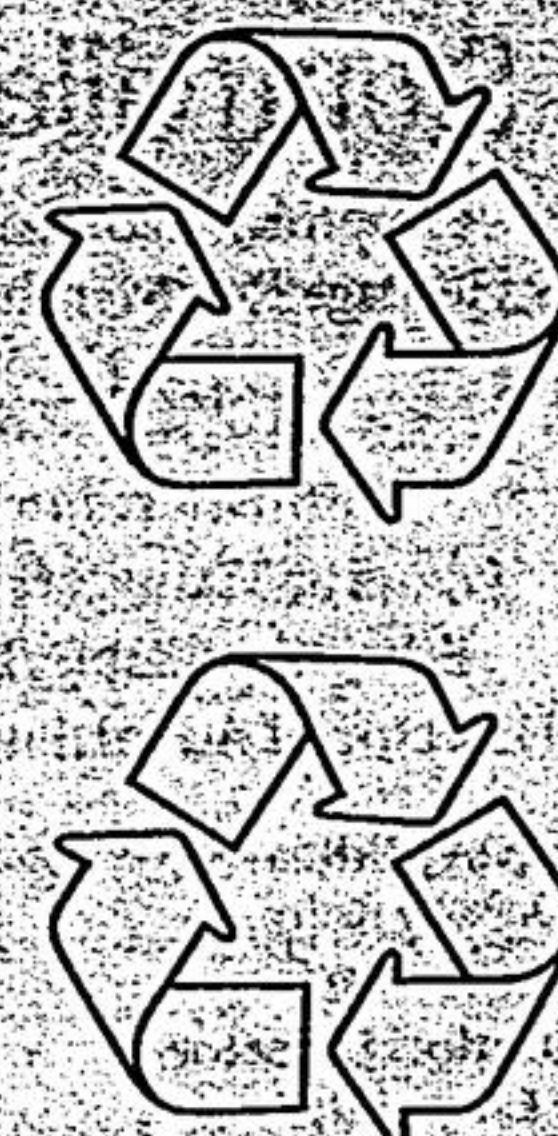


WAYNE EMMERSON: Whitchurch-Stouffville mayor says five years is too long to phase in new ambulance stations.

But Emmerson said that won't help him explain to his constituents in Stouffville and Ballantrae why they are being asked to wait until 2004 for a new local ambulance station.

Meanwhile, Markham Mayor Don Cousens said discussions at the recent Association of Municipalities of Ontario convention suggested regions and local municipalities could be faced with a funding nightmare over ambulance service.

"It is becoming a matter of concern right across the province," warned Cousens. "It's a penalty we are incurring through additional downloading."



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