

York Region residents will pay more for Toronto's social housing

BY PATRICK CASEY
Staff Writer

York Region must pay an additional \$4 million toward Toronto's social housing costs this year, leaving regional politicians fuming over the unexpected expenditure.

When the region approved its \$817-million operating budget in February, \$80.1 million was identified as York Region's contribution to Greater Toronto's pooling costs, \$8.5 million less than a year earlier.

However, after the region's finance department completed a mid-year progress report of its 2000 budget, another \$3.9 million must now be directed to Toronto before the end of the year.

'I cringe every time I see those budget lines'

— Don Cousens
Markham mayor

Markham Mayor Don Cousens was irate after viewing the report at Thursday's finance committee meeting, calling it a volatile situation that will deteriorate once Ontario's red-hot economy begins to stall.

"I cringe every time I see those budget lines. The province has just gone away and left us with this one, but we should never relax," seethed Cousens, committee chairperson.

"It doesn't mean a bloody thing when you think the economy can change and it will all fall on York Region taxpayers to carry the load for Toronto. The economy is strong, but the day it isn't, social assistance and housing costs will increase. The threat of what the costs can be in the future are frightening.

"The day will come when we are faced with bills and we won't have a deep enough budget to handle it," he warned.

In 1993, the region experienced a severe economic dip as local social assistance caseloads reached 9,485 a month, almost double the figures from last year.

The provincial government established the GTA pooling initiative in 1998 where money from the regions of York, Halton, Durham and Peel is added to Toronto's financial contribution to pay for social assistance.

In the past three years, the region has committed \$267 million through the program, including \$84 million this year alone.

Although the region has set aside about \$34 million in

social assistance and housing reserves, Whitchurch-Stouffville Mayor Wayne Emmerson said taxpayers will be left responsible to handle future shortfalls once reserve accounts are exhausted.

"If we don't have the reserves, we have to go to the public and tell them what the increase in taxes would be to pay for Toronto's social assistance," said Emmerson after finance commissioner Sandra Cartwright explained a 1-per-cent tax increase would raise \$3.6 million.

"If we didn't have a good economy, look at what this would do for the residents."

Cousens originally suggested committee members should schedule a meeting with Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman to discuss the financial increase.

In the end, the committee decided to meet with officials in Durham, Peel and Halton, a move that mirrors a similar scenario in April, when the four regions asked the provincial government to cap the pooling expenditures.

Meanwhile, the added pooling costs offset news that regional growth has helped create a \$15.9-million surplus this year, with the money earmarked for the capital reserve fund at the end of the year.

With nearly \$502 million in reserves and a AAA credit rating, the funds will be added to the \$19 million the region had previously set aside for future capital costs.

Although residents can anticipate a tax freeze in 2001 for the third consecutive year, they will be asked to pay a minimum 1- to 2-per-cent tax increase in each of the next five years to pay the region's \$62.5-million commitment for hospital expansion plans.

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