

ETCETERA

THE GUARDIANS OF EDUCATION

As the challenges for school board trustees grow, the number of people willing to make the commitment to serve is declining

BY GIANNI COLAVECCHIA
Staff Writer

Reid Cawston has had enough. After less than one term, the Pefferlaw resident has decided he won't be able to work as a trustee with the public school board in York Region.

He commutes to Toronto nearly every day and with a new job will not be able to commit the 20-plus hours a week his trustee duties demand.

Trying to reach a collective agreement for teachers and helping to draft a \$583-million budget that covers nearly 100,000 students, are two of the tasks Cawston helped tackle this year.

For those and other duties associated with the job of trustee — attending after-hours meetings, taking phone calls from irate parents — Cawston received \$5,000.

The level of compensation for all that work, he says, prevents many people from becoming trustees.

'Nobody's in it for the money.'

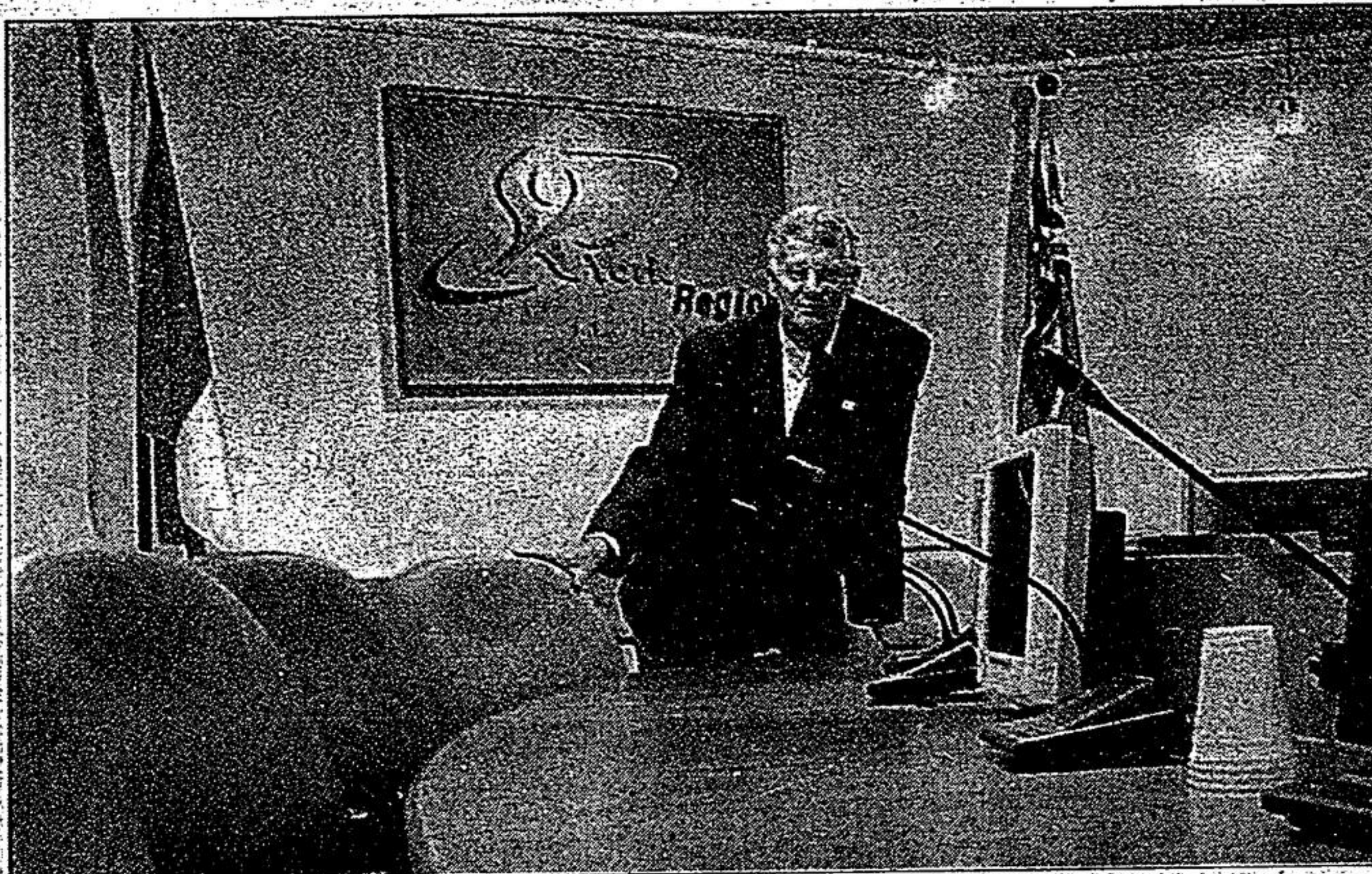
"For those people who are employed part time or retired, money is in their consideration," he said. "You have to be of a certain mind to do it. Nobody's in it for the money."

Cawston is one of several trustees who will not run for a school board seat Nov. 13.

Dealing with commitments that make it impossible to focus on school issues or discouraged by less decision-making power and poor pay, the number of people wanting to serve as a trustee is sharply down from the last municipal election in 1997.

Only 14 people filed their nomination papers to become trustees with the Catholic board — down from 21 three years ago. In the public board, 22 people are vying for the position of trustee — down from 33.

Most of the region's seats have gone uncontested, with incumbents being acclaimed because no one has bothered to



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Markham Trustee Bill Crothers, who serves as chairperson of the public school board, is one of the acclamations in this year's campaign. He says, despite more provincial control, there are still many responsibilities for trustees.

run against them.

One of those acclamations is for Bill Crothers.

Despite his stances on several contentious issues and a high-profile position that leaves him open to all sorts of potential challengers, Crothers is the lone candidate for public board trustee in Markham's Area 3.

The board's chairperson said the same motivation that prompted him to run for a trustee position 12 years ago is behind his run this year.

"I've been involved in a number of community activities," he said. "I've treated it as public service."

Crothers admitted a chunk of trustees' decision-making power is gone but said a large amount of old responsibilities remain.

Trustees must still draft budgets, determine where funds go and hire or fire employees, he noted.

But Crothers also said the salary of a trustee makes it "very, very difficult" for the average person to consider the position.

Trustees in Ontario earn \$5,000 and school board chairpersons are paid \$10,000 a year.

Before Ontario passed legislation cutting trustee pay, trustees with the York Region Catholic board could make more than

\$12,500 and their chairperson could pull in nearly \$19,000 a year.

Trustees with the region's public board used to earn nearly \$20,000 and their chair could rake in more than \$29,000 a year.

One-third of the compensation was tax-free.

Many commentators believe the province has also taken away most of the tools that gave trustees a sense they could affect major changes.

Education reforms under Bill 160, they say, rendered trustees as little more than underpaid officials who look largely after housekeeping issues.

The power to set the education portion of property taxes no longer belongs to trustees. They also find themselves having much less control over instructional time and related issues when negotiating collective agreements with teachers.

The power to control the purse strings and set out various conditions of employment are now the exclusive domain of provincial politicians.

The changes have come during one of the most difficult times in the history of education in Ontario.

Trustees find themselves stuck between a

government determined to make several changes — no matter how controversial — and teachers' unions bent on resisting forced extra-curricular activities, hiked instructional time and other reforms.

Those trustees who are still around find themselves with larger geographical areas and heavier workloads after the province cut their ranks three years ago to 600 from 1,900.

Catholic board chairperson Elizabeth Crowe said she's felt the stress of representing an extra area (Whitchurch-Stouffville), helping to deal with a near-crippling deficit of \$32 million and handling two teacher strikes.

Despite the difficulties, Crowe said she's running for trustee in the Aurora-King area simply out of an interest for children.

'I've treated it as a public service.'

"I see it as a vocation," she said. "I never ran because I wanted to set tax rates."

Declining to name a person who left a trustee position over education reform, Crowe also said increased demands and lower pay are likely hurting the number of applications her board gets for trustee positions.

"I think we are losing some other people who might see it as another form of employment," she said, referring to potential trustees who hold jobs.

Crowe said she still believes trustees hold many important responsibilities, such as setting budgets.

That sentiment was echoed by Rob Savage, a Ministry of Education spokesperson.

"The fact still remains that our school board trustees are responsible for ensuring kids are in school and receiving a good education," he noted.

No matter how tough the job of trustee gets, some observers say, there will always be a contingent of people wanting to respond to issues that affect children.

Philip Craig, chairperson of a Georgina public school council, said he's running as a candidate to help improve what observers describe as very poor standardized test results for students in his area.

"I have four kids in the school system and over the last year, I've noted the Educational Quality and Accountability Office results in Georgina and they have been decidedly low," he said. "That's a concern."

\$2
Plus tax
TUESDAYS

6 CHICKEN
6 McNUGGETS
AND SMALL FRIES!

