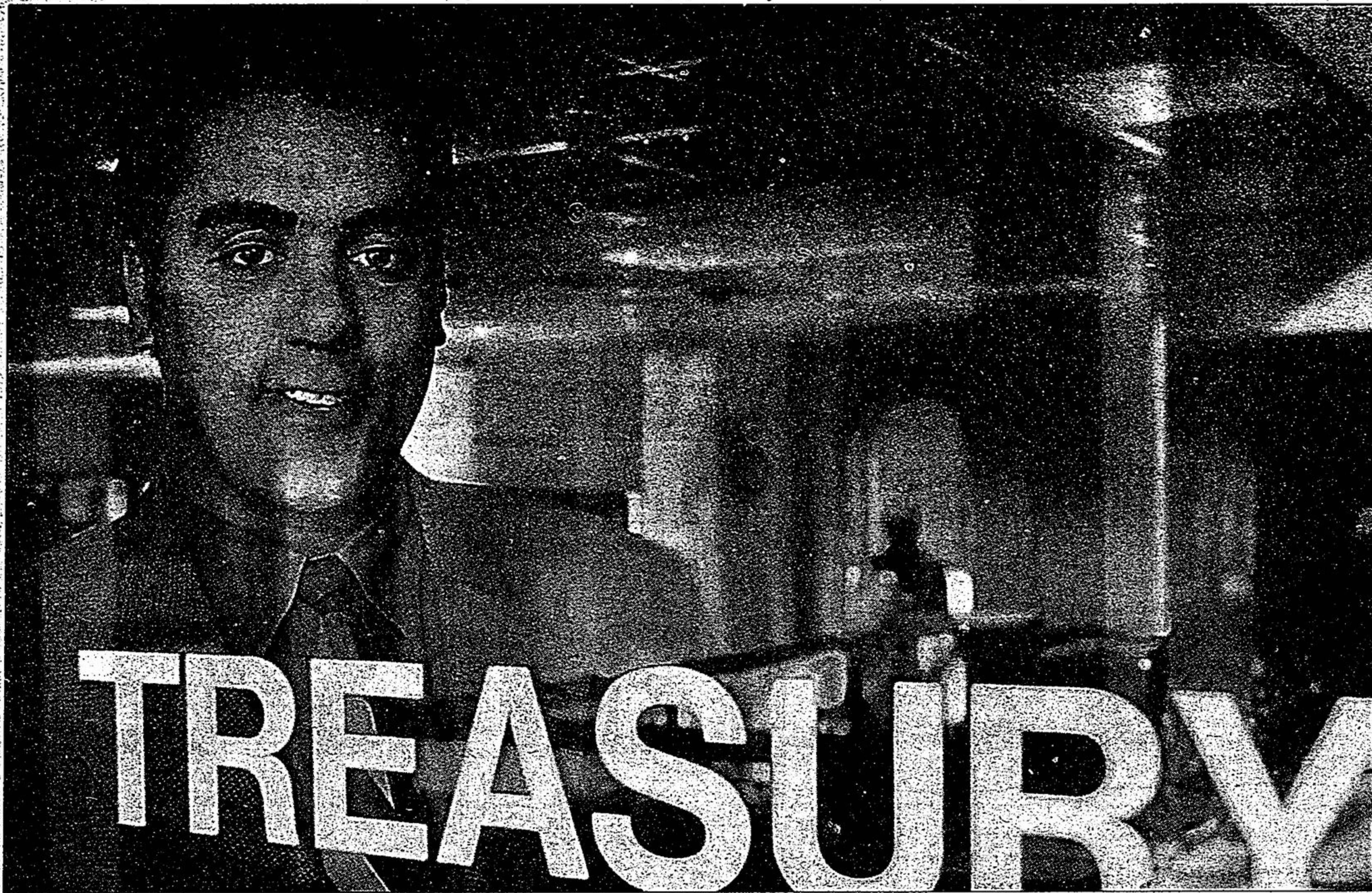


WHAT KINDS OF SERVICES DO YOU GET FOR YOUR TAX DOLLARS?



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

East Gwillimbury chief administrative officer and treasurer Al Evelyn says every municipality has its own figure to base municipal taxes on.

No comparing municipal tax rates

BY ROY GREEN
Staff Writer

With the municipal election four days away, we're all hearing a lot more about 'zero tax increases' and 'holding the line on taxes' from candidates across York Region.

But comparing services delivered for municipal tax dollars in each of the nine regional municipalities can be a tricky proposition.

For a start, there is no 'gold standard' — no single, easily translatable figure to provide an instant comparison of services delivered-per-dollar of taxes from Markham to Vaughan, to King and Georgina.

"Every municipality has its own figure on what is the average home price to help illustrate what taxes the homeowner will pay each year," said Al Evelyn, CAO and treasurer in East Gwillimbury.

"We use \$200,000 as an average, because it's a good cross-section for homes here and people can relate to that. If their home is assessed at \$300,000, they know they'll be pay-

ing 50 per cent more."

The person who lives in that average \$200,000 home in East Gwillimbury will pay \$2,803 in taxes this year, which includes the municipal levy, as well as taxes passed on to the school board and York Region.

\$200,000 AVERAGE

Aurora and Whitchurch-Stouffville also use \$200,000 as an average, so comparisons are somewhat easier. Aurora's tax on a \$200,000 home is \$2,684.80 and Whitchurch-Stouffville levies \$2,600.

But Georgina, with fewer larger homes, uses \$135,000 for its average. The Georgina resident living in that home pays \$2,054.60 in taxes. In Newmarket, the average is \$175,000, which creates \$2,363 in tax dollars, while in Vaughan, they use \$250,000 and collect \$3,190. Richmond Hill also uses \$250,000, which generates \$3,300 in taxes, while in horse farm country — King Township — the figure is

\$300,000, which generates \$3,990.

Markham, said assessment review officer Gayelyn Henderson, used an average of \$253,000 for the 2000 budget year, which generated taxes of \$3,300. We were unable to reach officials in Richmond Hill for the purposes of this comparison.

It's also tough to make comparisons between small rural communities like East Gwillimbury and heavily populated municipalities like Vaughan and Markham.

"You can't compare rural to urban requirements," said Vaughan's director of finance Barry Jackson. "The needs are completely different. Public transit is a big factor in Vaughan and is probably non-existent in East Gwillimbury."

Nick Kristoffy, treasurer in Whitchurch-Stouffville, agrees. "In Markham, for instance, you expect urban services — a full-time fire department versus a largely volunteer force in Georgina. And of course, market values are much higher for that reason."

So, shouldn't taxes be much,

much lower in those small rural municipalities that don't deliver much in the way of amenities?

"There's a lot of rural roads to maintain without a lot of assessment to support them," said Evelyn.

"There may be only a few homes on your road, but the roads have to be maintained just the same. On the recreation side, we don't have the population base to support a lot of recreation facilities, but we do provide a good level of service."

SAME SIZE, STILL DIFFERENCES

Even within municipalities of similar size there are some differences. "It depends on the services that are offered," said Barb Cribbet, Aurora treasurer.

"Is garbage pick-up once or twice per week? Is there a limit on the number of bags?"

In Georgina, for instance, residents pay \$1 for tags to put on their garbage bags.

Another method of comparison might be the tax rate for each municipality, which ranges from

1.30 to 1.39 across York Region. Except in Georgina, where it is 1.52.

But Georgina CAO and treasurer Stan Armstrong said Georgina is getting a bum rap because market value assessment makes it appear that Georgina's tax rate is the highest in York.

"Everyone focuses on the tax rate, but you have to apply that rate to a different assessment figure — \$135,000 in our case. It's better to compare with other municipalities on the same level as we are. The rate in Uxbridge, for instance, is 1.50."

Nick Kristoffy agrees. "In fairness to Georgina, the market value of homes there are lower. You still have to raise the same amount of money."

And Kristoffy adds York Region municipalities fare very well when compared tax-wise to other areas in the GTA. "Mississauga is at 1.40, Pickering at 1.55," said Kristoffy. "Toronto appears very low at 1.21, but market values there are much higher. Our tax rates in York are generally lower."

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