

Mixed reaction in region to throne speech

BY JEFF MITCHELL
Staff Writer

Forget about a new era in provincial politics.

Thursday's throne speech indicates the new regime at Queen's Park is merely "Harris with cufflinks and slicked back hair," said Vaughan-King-Aurora MPP Greg Sorbara.

The Grit MPP said the speech, which is intended to signal the direction of the government, was long on platitudes, yet tragically short on new initiatives.

"I think people will be disappointed," Mr. Sorbara said. "This is not much of a shift from the Harris approach to government, other than to say, 'We'll do a lot of consulting.'"

Others are hailing what they see as breakthroughs in their relationships with the provincial government, now under the leadership of Premier Ernie Eves. The speech listed promises of funding reviews and revisions for health care and education, in addition to a clearly stated willingness to take a consultative approach with stakeholders.

"It does appear to be a new approach," said Bill Hogarth, director of education with the York Region District School Board. "We have guarded optimism."

Indeed, the text of the speech pledged a new way of doing business after seven years of confrontation and controversy in Ontario.

"The challenge now is to guide our province through a new era," the speech read. "Ontarians have said they do not want classrooms and hospitals to be battlegrounds. Your government has heard that message."

There was little in the way of specific

funding in the speech. But highlights included:

- A promise to review the per-pupil funding system that has been imposed on Ontario schools since 1997 and has been criticized as too restrictive. In addition, the Tories will provide school boards with stable three-year funding models, replacing the year-to-year funding now in place.

The announcements, in general, are good news, Mr. Hogarth said.

"Having a three-year formula makes a lot of sense because it gives you an opportunity to plan," he said.

The funding model will also allow boards more latitude in negotiating contracts with teachers, he said.

- Stable, three-year funding for hospitals.

Dr. Jim MacLean, president of

Markham Stouffville Hospital, said that's a welcome move, but he's hoping for more flexibility in the funding system in the future.

"We're all supportive of multi-year funding so you can develop your plans on a long-term basis," he said.

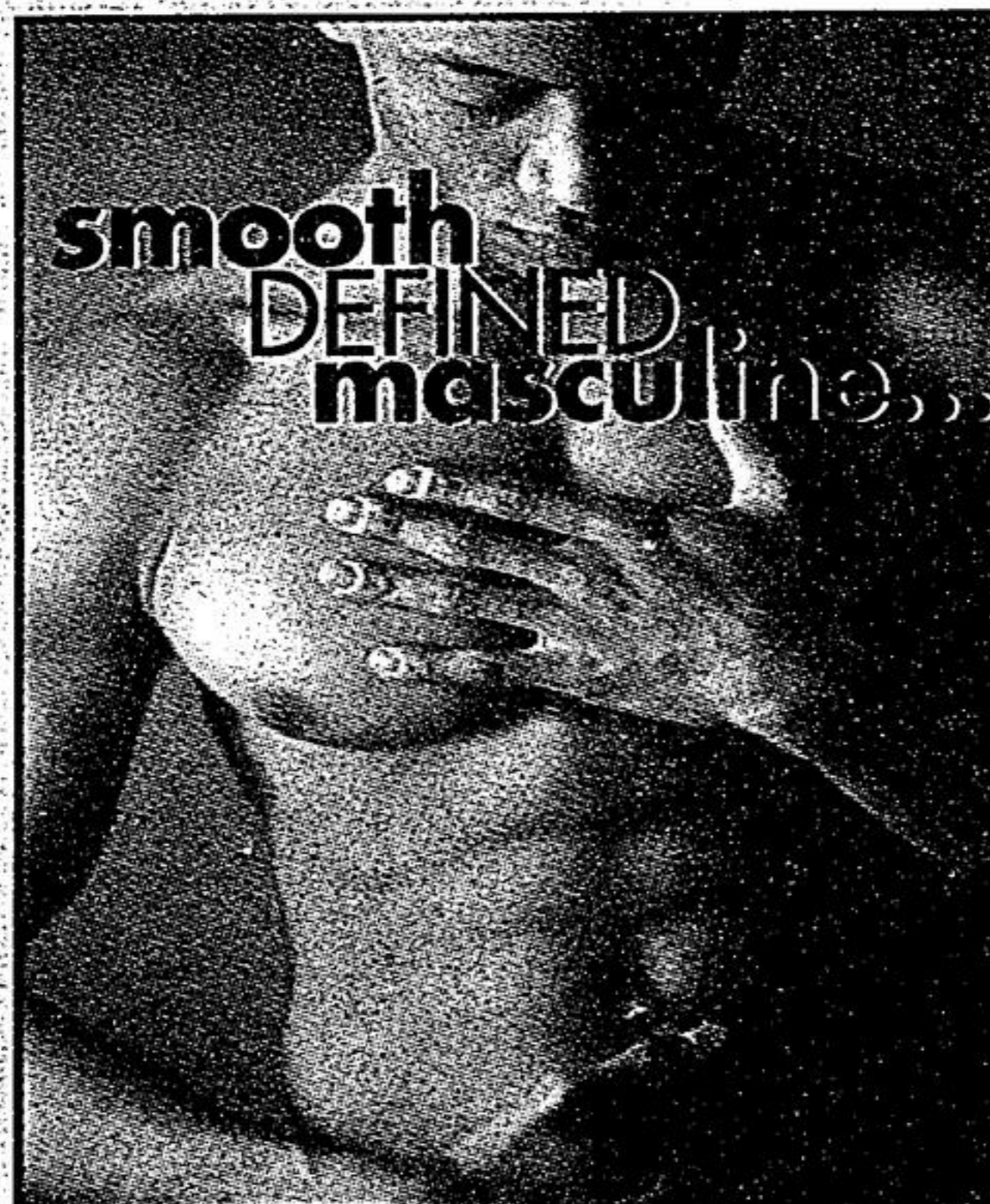
"The issue for high-growth areas such as York Region will be, is the funding going to be enough?"

Meanwhile, Wyn Chivers, executive director of United Way of York Region, expressed shock that social services received no mention in Thursday's speech. A lack of funding is strangling the services that assist the province's most vulnerable and needy, she said.

"Agencies are incredibly stretched and if something isn't done, they're going to snap," Ms Chivers said.

She said social agencies are gearing

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