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Province may punish Richmond Hill for tax boycott

BY LINDA JOHNSON
Staff Writer

The province may find ways to punish Richmond Hill council for refusing to hand over $15.6-million in taxes meant to offset social service costs in Toronto.

Holding back the long-awaited gas tax refund slated to fund transit projects may be one way to persuade Richmond Hill to reverse last week's decision, a finance ministry spokesperson said Thursday.

The province may also impose interest charges for late payments, said Sean Hamilton, press secretary to finance Minister Greg Sorbara.

He estimated the gas tax refund the province planned to pay to the region at $5.6 million, part of which would be slated for Richmond Hill projects.

"Obviously, we're disappointed in Richmond Hill's decision. The GTA pooling is a provincial matter and it is a legislated responsibility of all GTA municipalities," he said.

"It is too early to say (what we'll do), but we hope that Richmond Hill will see the importance of pooling for the GTA."

Council voted unanimously Monday not to pay the town's share of this year's tax pooling bill, money collected in municipal property taxes and sent through the region to Toronto to help fund the city's social services and welfare costs.

Mayor Bill Bell has often complained about the practice, saying it is unfair to require the municipalities to remit taxes to another jurisdiction when they have no input into how the money is spent. As well, as their populations grow, area municipalities have an ever-greater need for funding for services.

The region has paid about $600 million to Toronto since 1998, the year the arrangement was introduced.

Ministry officials do not believe the protest is warranted and do not expect other municipalities to join Richmond Hill's action, Mr. Hamilton said.

"We believe that GTA equalization is a fair and reasonable approach to sharing costs. So, hopefully, everyone else will choose to stay," he said.

Other councils in York Region have yet to follow Richmond Hill's lead.

Newmarket Mayor Tom Taylor agrees with Richmond Hill Mayor Bill Bell's point, but stressed York Region municipalities can't make that decision.

"I agree with what Bill Bell is doing in Richmond Hill, but Richmond Hill doesn't really have a choice. If we don't do it, they will deduct from transfers," Mr. Taylor explained.

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