

Health care, education top Grit spending

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BY ROY GREEN
Staff Writer

The Ontario budget delivered yesterday is designed to improve education and health care, rebuild the province's crumbling infrastructure and erase the deficit.

It takes a page, however, from the recent federal budget — much of the money is contingent on the Liberals winning the next election in 2007.

The centrepiece of Finance Minister

Greg Sorbara's second budget is a five-year, \$6.2-billion plan for post-secondary education, but only \$683 million of that money is earmarked for this year.

The Vaughan-King-Aurora MPP also projected a deficit of \$3 billion for 2004-05, down from last year's \$6.1-billion deficit and said the budget would be balanced by 2008-09, a full year later than promised in last May's budget.

"We could have balanced the budget in 2007-08," Mr. Sorbara said. "We

chose, instead, to make historic new investments in the priorities of the people of the province."

The promise of a five-year, \$30-billion infrastructure fund is critical to York Region, Markham Liberal MPP Tony Wong said.

"They kept none of the promises from the previous three; why would anyone believe they'll actually follow through on this one."

"What this means is we're more likely to get funding with respect to Viva (rapid transit) and Markham Stouffville Hospital expansion," Mr. Wong said.

But the speech lacked any real details about that plan, York North Tory MPP Julia Munro said.

"There's a lot of hoopla about \$30 billion, but there's no indication of where it's going to come from, except perhaps investment through some bonds," Ms Munro said.

Calling the budget "long on rhetoric and short on substance", Oak Ridges Tory MPP Frank Klees said extending the deficit by another year is just another broken promise.

"This is the fourth document this government has presented Ontarians

BUDGET HIGHLIGHTS

- \$6.2-billion for post-secondary education over five years, including \$683-million in 2005;
- \$650 million for elementary and secondary schools this year and by 10 per cent more by 2007-08;
- \$30 billion over five years for Ontario's sagging infrastructure, including private-sector investment;
- Health care spending up by \$1.8 billion, to \$32.9 billion this year and;
- Deficit to be eliminated by 2008-09, a year later than promised in last May's budget.

with over two years," Mr. Klees said.

"An election platform, a budget, an interim budgetary statement and now this. They kept none of the promises from the previous three; why would anyone believe they'll actually follow through on this one."

But critics are missing the point, according to Thornhill Liberal MPP Mario Racco.

"They have to criticize; that's what they do, but they're out of touch with the people of Thornhill," Mr. Racco said. "They want more money for education and health. And they know if you need more money, it's got to come from somewhere."

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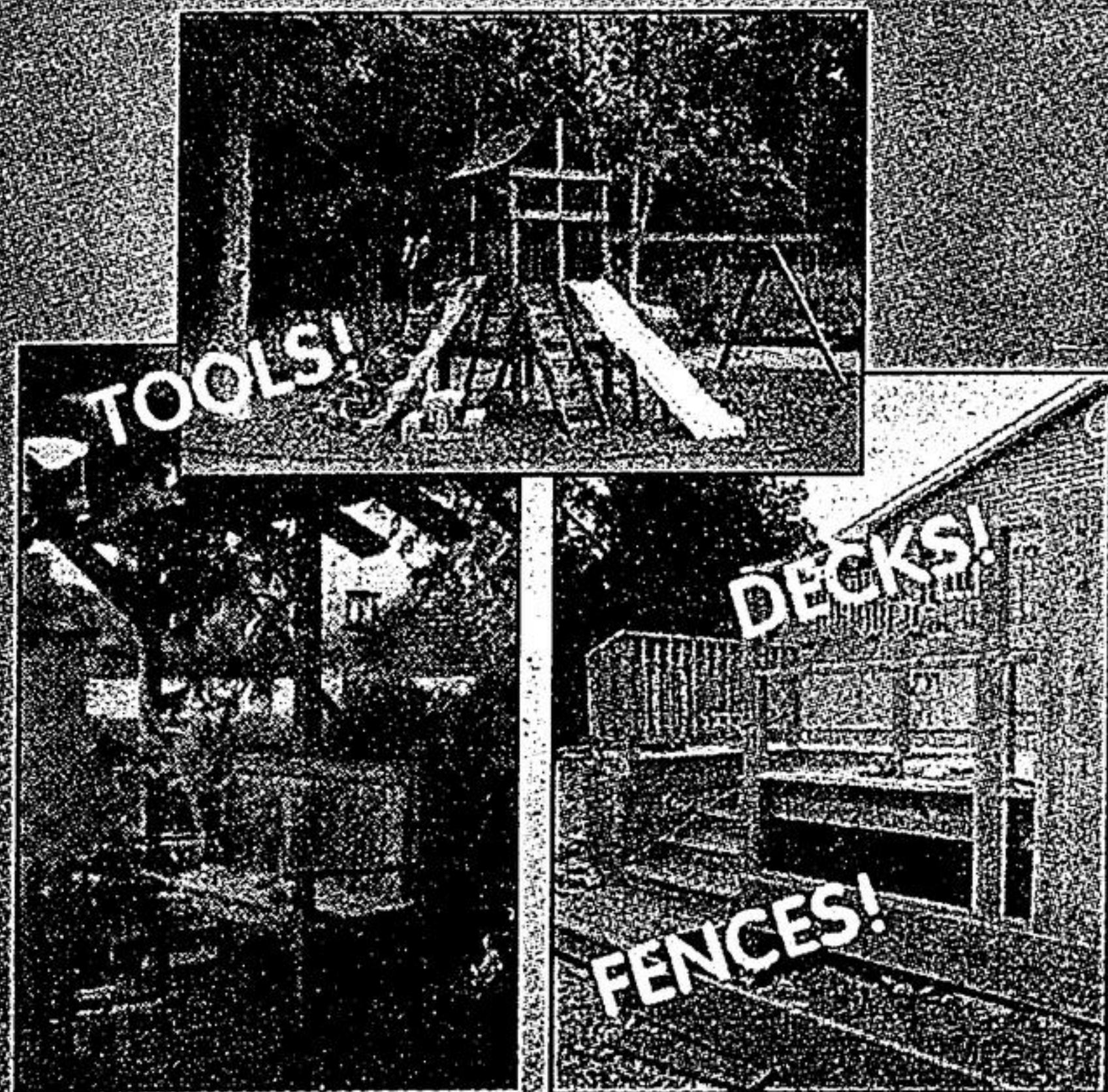
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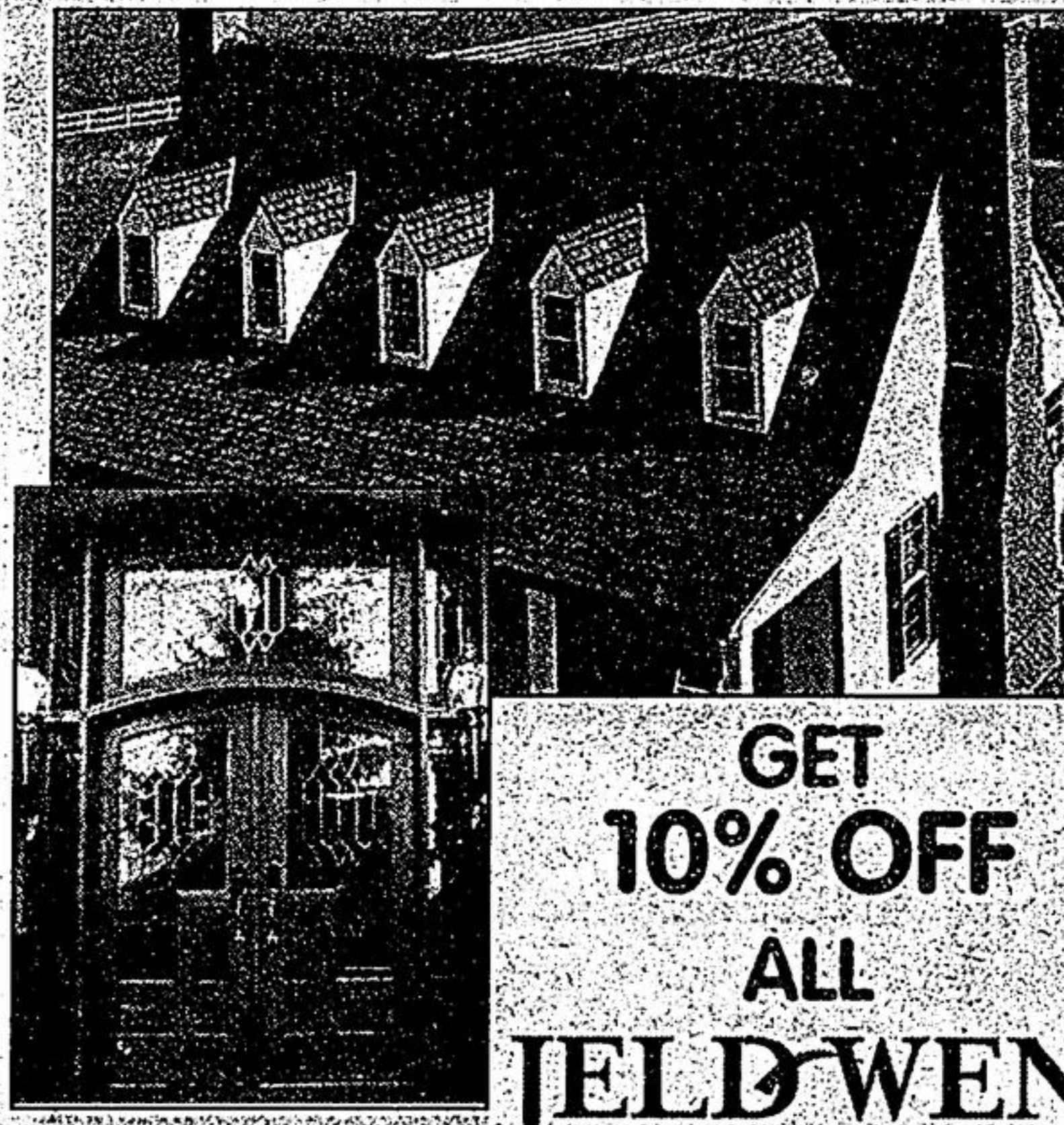
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