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Toronto demands pooling cash as York freezes contributions

BY MICHAEL POWER
Staff Writer

York politicians are tired of watching some of the region's tax dollars flow to Toronto to prop up welfare and social services in Canada's largest city.

And like last year, the region has capped the amount it's mandated to send to its neighbour to the south.

But that decision could see the region hit with provincial penalties, according to a letter from Shirley Hoy of the City of Toronto.

"I'm not only in agreement with (the decision), I don't think we should be sending anything," said Georgina Mayor Rob Grossi. "There shouldn't be transfers between municipalities."

According to provincial rules set out in 1998, social housing and some welfare costs are pooled from municipal taxes across the GTA.

The money then goes toward funding social services programs in Toronto.

In 2005, York Region taxpayers were on the hook for \$86.7 million to go toward those programs.

But the region balked and paid only \$81.7 million, resulting in a \$5 million shortfall.

This year, the shortfall from the \$90.8 million the province is asking for equals \$6.6 million.

York taxpayers have been forced to contribute a total of more than \$650 million since the pooling scheme was introduced by the Conservative govern-

ment. The province could withhold provincial grants to York as a penalty for the region's refusal to pony up the pooling money, said Richmond Hill Mayor Bill Bell.

Toronto sent a letter to the region last month, saying it could get hit with penalties if it doesn't pay up.

Ms Hoy wrote regional councillors to formally notify York it had payments outstanding. She also wrote that Toronto would seek relief from the province if the cash remained outstanding.

'Hell, that kind of money in one year, we could operate the Town of Aurora for four years based on what (York) sends to Toronto.'

But she also stated in her letter, Toronto sympathized with York.

"The city shares the view that continued funding of income redistribution programs from the property tax base is not appropriate," she wrote. "Nevertheless, up to now the province has been reluctant to make the necessary legislative changes to upload social housing and social assistance."

And although the money gets collected in York, taxpayers here have no say in what happens to the money once

it leaves regional coffers.

"It's taxation without representation," Mr. Bell said. "Nobody gives the region an accounting (of how the cash gets spent). It doesn't belong on the property tax base. The province should be doing this."

So where does the region go from here on the issue?

"I don't know," Mr. Bell said. "The province is starting to rattle its chains, but I don't know where we're going. And Toronto's pretty good — the louder they whine, the more they seem to get."

York Region's refusal to pay the pooling money shortfall was a deliberate attempt to draw attention to how unfair the funding scheme is, said Aurora Mayor Tim Jones.

Hopefully, that refusal to pay will help get the province to re-think an arrangement that sees between \$80 million and \$90 million of York Region's tax dollars go to Toronto each year, he said.

"Hell, that kind of money in one year, we could operate the Town of Aurora for four years based on what (York) sends to Toronto," the mayor said.

In the letter written last month, Ms Hoy gave the region until Feb. 22 to make the payment, however, regional chairperson Bill Fisch has said it has not been paid and has instructed staff to report to council in May what Toronto could do legally to force payment.

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