

Council stands firm on slots revenue decision

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Hamilton city council refused to backpedal Wednesday night on its decision to take the Flamboro Slots revenue from Flamborough and share the annual \$4-million bonus with all city residents.

The controversial decision was made despite the presence of close to 100 angry Flamborough residents in the gallery, despite rural Flamborough (Ward 14) Robert Pasuta's humbling 'thank you' to Hamilton for allowing the revenues to be used to mitigate tax increases in Flamborough for the past seven years and despite Flamborough councillor Margaret McCarthy's insistence that taking the money wasn't the right thing to do.

By a narrow 8-7 margin, council voted to reaffirm the decision made at its committee of the whole meeting on Monday by a vote of 9-7. No one changed the way they had voted on the issue at the previous meeting. Councillor Bernie Morelli, who backed the decision to take the slots money and put it into Hamilton's general levy, was absent from Wednesday night's meeting.

As the results of the vote were announced, an angry spectator shouted, "The war is on," meaning that the decision resulting in a 9.8 per cent tax hike in Ward 15 and 8.7 per cent increase in Ward 14 has unleashed not only a huge public outcry but calls for civil disobedience and withholding taxes from the city.

Others in the audience shouted, "Shame," obviously disagreeing with arguments put forth by Hamilton councillors Terry Whitehead and Brad Clark that taking the slots revenue and putting it into the general levy is the fair and equitable thing to do.

Pasuta and Mayor Fred Eisenberger urged councillors to consider a phase-out so the tax hit wouldn't be as staggering, but Whitehead suggested delaying the inevitable would cause even more dissension, leaving the door open for council to be challenged on the phase-out every year.

McCarthy reminded councillors that taking the slots money won't provide much benefit for Hamilton taxpayers but will hurt Flamborough significantly. Hamilton ratepayers face a 3.8 per cent tax hike but will see a .5 per cent drop when the slots money is shared. In Flamborough, the hike in taxes attributed to the lost revenue will be 4.7 per cent. Essentially, it equates to about a \$15 saving for Hamilton taxpayers and a \$200 increase for Flamborough residents.

McCarthy argued that the slots money should continue to be used to ease Flamborough's tax burden, which she insisted has been consistently heavier than any other part of Hamilton.

At a hastily called community meeting at the Flamborough Town Hall in Waterdown just hours preceding Wednesday's council meeting, McCarthy consulted with about 100 residents about the pending tax hit.

Angry residents suggested a number of strategies, the most popular being withholding the portion of taxes that go above the Hamilton average. Flamborough resident Anton Lerchner advocated withholding all of the taxes and paying them to an independent third party until an audit is done to determine where all the tax money is being spent.

Others suggested civil disobedience, picketing Queen's Park and charging a toll for motorists using the Clappison's cut.

McCarthy acknowledged that withholding taxes has some merit, but only the portion that is above the Hamilton average. After the council meeting, she said her next step includes holding another meeting with area residents "to explore options." She said that she's also considering "taking a leaf out of FORCE's book" in mounting a public protest of council's decision. FORCE (Friends of Rural Communities and the Environment) is a grassroots citizen's group that has launched a well-organized,

effective campaign against the establishment of a quarry in northeast Flamborough.

Councillors voting to take the slots revenue from Flamborough and put it into the general levy were Maria Pearson, Chad Collins, Brian McHattie, Tom Jackson, Scott Duvall, Sam Merulla, Whitehead and Clark. Opposed were Dave Mitchell, Lloyd Ferguson, Russ Powers, McCarthy, Pasuta and Mayor Eisenberger.