

Meeting draws close to 1,000

Dianne Cornish

Published on May 16, 2008

Close to 1,000 people gathered in the North Wentworth Arena at Clappison's Corners for last Wednesday's community meeting called by Flamborough councillor Margaret McCarthy in the wake of a recent city council decision that took away the Flamboro Slots money from Flamborough and put it into Hamilton's general revenues.

For the past seven years, some of the \$4-million annual slots money was used to ease hefty tax hikes in Flamborough. By choosing to eliminate that buffer in one fell swoop, municipal taxes in Flamborough jumped 4.5 per cent to 9.9 per cent this year compared to an average 3.8 per cent increase for other residents across the city.

At Wednesday night's meeting, people vented. Police officers were stationed around the arena to provide security in what some wrongly predicted might become an unruly meeting, while people lined up at the microphone to tell Mayor Fred Eisenberger and the handful of city councillors in the crowd why a close to double-digit tax increase isn't acceptable.

A longtime resident of Millgrove reminded the mayor and councillors that services in the rural areas of Flamborough are severely limited and yet taxes keep going up. He and other residents talked about no water or sewer services, reduced police presence, limited fire protection and the threat of library closures in Flamborough.

Another Millgrove man recalled the days before Flamborough's amalgamation with Hamilton "when taxes were justifiable and sustainable."

A Flamborough resident, who was born in north Hamilton and taught school in the city for 35 years, suggested the myth that Flamborough is rife with wealthy people is being perpetuated around Hamilton's council table and should be quashed. Eisenberger countered there is misinformation about the tax situation in Flamborough as well. When one man charged that there is a tax imbalance when Hamilton's municipal taxes are compared to equally valued homes in nearby Oakville and Burlington, the mayor said, "Our taxes are no different on a per capita basis than other municipalities including Toronto, Oakville and Burlington."

While the meeting was ostensibly called to give Hamilton's manager of finance Joe Rinaldo an opportunity to make a presentation about tax impacts in Flamborough, residents became impatient after 30 minutes of a slide presentation that they couldn't see. While most were respectful, they didn't accept Rinaldo's comments that a house valued at \$400,000 in Hamilton is taxed more than an equally valued house in Flamborough and they jeered when he tried to explain why tax percentages are higher in Flamborough because, "If you take the average household, Flamborough pays higher."

An audience member posed a specific example: she pays \$4,200 in taxes for her Flamborough home valued at \$300,000 while someone in Ward 8 with a \$500,000 home pays \$3,400 in taxes. She noted that the city dweller has many municipal services including transit, a library, water and sewer services and snow removal. "I've got snow removal and garbage pickup," she said.

A Waterdown man told the crowd there are no concrete plans to resolve Flamborough's tax dilemma. "All we've done tonight is listen to ourselves talk." But McCarthy said plans are in the works to perhaps launch a judicial review of council's 8-7 decision to take the slots revenue. She has also written a letter to Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty, asking that he intervene and "implement fairness principles."

Eisenberger, who had hoped to persuade councillors to phase out the slot revenues gradually, said he'll continue to urge those who voted to take the money to reconsider. Rural Flamborough councillor Robert Pasuta, who was present for the meeting, is also working towards the same goal.

In the meantime, an advocacy group has been formed to investigate ways to stop the tide of rising taxes in Flamborough. Janice Downton, a northeast Flamborough resident and spokesperson for the group called "The F.A.I.T.H.F.U.L." (The Fellowship Advocating Integrity, Transparency, Honesty and Full Utilization of Law), said the province should replace the "flawed" market value assessment with a fairer tax system. She also encouraged residents to visit the group's website, at www.thefaithful.ca.

While the makeup of the group is unclear, other than what its website describes as being spawned from "an informal network of researchers, academics and all manner of uniquely skilled individuals," its fundamental

functions are to facilitate communication and to research.

The group is currently focusing on studying ethics and the law and how they relate to city council's vote on the slots issue. "It's about helping the community focus on the big issues," Downton said. This week, two discussion forums about property tax are featured on the group's website. Downton told the crowd at last week's meeting that the group hopes to get "the multitude's support" in order to restore integrity, transparency and honesty to government.

Councillor McCarthy told the Review this week that Downton's focus is "to look at everything from an ethical standpoint" and that includes the actions of "each and every councillor."

The Flamborough councillor said she is working from another perspective to try to protect Flamborough residents from hefty tax increases. "I'm looking at, where do we go from here, what challenges under the law are available to us and how can we get fairness and a more independent voice."

Commenting on the reaction of The F.A.I.T.H.F.U.L. and the Committee to Free Flamborough in protesting council's decision about the slots money, McCarthy said, "All of these residents are working towards fairness and restitution and having an independent voice. All may vary in their approach, but all are working toward the same goal."

<http://www.flamboroughreview.com/news/article/176301>