

Tax outrage hits Flamborough

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News

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If the numbers attending Wednesday night's tax meeting in Flamborough are any indication, tax anger has turned to outrage.

Close to 1,000 people gathered in the North Wentworth Arena at Clappison's Corners for a 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. As the rain poured down outside and Hamilton Police stationed themselves around the arena to provide security in what some wrongly suspected might become an unruly meeting, 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.

Many in the audience had to park their vehicles along Hwy. 5 and cross the busy highway in the rain while police officers sat in cruisers blocking the entranceway to the overflowing arena parking lot.

A longtime resident of Millgrove reminded the mayor and councillors that services in the rural suburbs 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." Now, "we have taxes that would throttle not just a horse, but an elephant," he charged. A resident in the city for 35 years, said she's almost afraid to say she's from Flamborough for fear of hearing from other Hamilton residents, "Oh, you're the rich people." She suggested the myth that Flamborough is rife with wealthy people is being perpetuated around Hamilton's council table and should be quashed.

But Mayor Eisenberger said 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 countered, "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."

One woman in the audience wanted to know why she pays \$4,200 in taxes for her Flamborough home valued at \$300,000 when someone in the city's Ward 8 has a \$500,000 home and pays \$3,400 in taxes. She noted that the city dweller has many municipal services including bus service, 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."

Mayor 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 their decision. Rural Flamborough councillor Robert Pasuta is also working towards the same goal.

In the meantime, a citizen's 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 Faithful," said the province should replace the "flawed" market value assessment with a fairer tax system. She also encouraged residents to keep themselves informed of the group's efforts by visiting its website, expected to be up and running by this Friday, at www.thefaithful.ca.

For more on the tax meeting, see next Friday's issue of the Flamborough Review.