

Our File/N/Réf.
Your File/V/Réf.

DATE 28 April 1997

TO/DEST. The Chair and Members of Council

FROM/EXP. Chief Administrative Officer

SUBJECT/OBJET **MEGA-WEEK PUBLIC INFORMATION PROGRAM**

BACKGROUND

At its meeting on 4 March 1997, the Corporate Services Committee approved funding of up to \$250,000 to cover the cost of a public information program on the impact of Mega-week in Ottawa-Carleton.

In January, the Provincial Government announced a series of changes that would lead to a new system for funding and delivery of services such as general welfare and family benefits assistance, long term care, social housing, public health, public transit and child care, among others. The government positioned these series of announcements as the creation of a sum total revenue-neutral environment. For example, local taxpayers could pay more for social assistance on the property tax bill, while funding for education could be removed from the property tax bill and become a provincial responsibility, paid for through other Provincial revenues.

During Mega-week, the Province of Ontario through its respective cabinet ministers made daily major announcements on the various services. At the time of the announcements, the residents of Ottawa-Carleton had to rely primarily on the news media for information as regional spokespeople and locally-elected representatives strived to put the announcements in context. However, in the following days and weeks it has become clear that the planned changes in responsibilities for service delivery and funding could place significant stress on Ottawa-Carleton and many other municipalities across the Province.

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The Province has come to recognize the difficulties inherent in the initial announcements and the potential impact on property tax bills. If the transfers were implemented without change, the Region would be faced with unmanageable upswings in costs associated with welfare and long term care, with the result that services would have to be reduced and/or property taxes increased. More recently there have been indications the province has been rethinking parts of its strategy. However, what is clear is that residents need a lot more information than they now have in order to be prepared for the changes ahead, whatever the details may be.

DISCUSSION

There is a need to heighten awareness and address the confusion behind the Mega-week announcements. The region's accountability to its taxpayers requires a local effort to clarify what is happening and what the changes mean to them. Clearly if these changes are implemented by the legislature, 85 per cent of the services that will be on the property tax bill by 1998 will be region-wide services. The responsibility rests therefore with the Region to demonstrate leadership, provide clarity and a continuous flow of useful information to everyone in the region.

Our public information program will focus on increasing the quality and quantity of information that is now available to residents about the Mega-week changes. The Region has already been proactive in addressing these changes through ***Window on Your Region***, which was delivered to all homes during the week of April 14. Throughout the next six months, the intention is to intensify the focus on these issues through a variety of media, including daily and community newspapers, and the RMOC web site, to ensure that residents understand not only what the transfer of responsibilities means, but how it will affect them and their property taxes. We will also involve residents in the dialogue by participating at community meetings and supporting regional councillors with a variety of new reference tools such as fact sheets to aid in providing clarity behind the proposed changes.

Another issue of ***Window on Your Region*** is also scheduled for the Fall. We will continue to use Window on Your Region to provide information to residents that answers their questions about regional services and we expect this will be a useful vehicle for continuing to raise awareness and understanding about Mega-week.

The communications process around the Mega-week changes will continue up to and including the phase after Mega-week changes are finalized. Further changes are being announced to Mega Week by the Province as this memo is being finalized and will be communicated as soon as possible. This information program will be led by the Information & Public Affairs Office supplemented by additional resources as required.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

At its meeting of April 9, 1997, Regional Council approved that up to \$250,000 be identified and allocated from the Region Wide Capital Reserve Fund. Expenditures will be made in accordance with existing policies and procedures and reported periodically to Council.

*Approved by
C.M. Beckstead*