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A METROLAND COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER VOL. 145 NO. 77 TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2004 \$1.00 (GST included) 44 PAGES "Using Communication to Build Better Communities"



Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Helping hands

Milton Lions Club volunteers Rikki Proctor (left), 10, her friend Chanelle Belanger (centre), 11, and Rikki's younger brother Brady, 6, help unload donations collected during the Milton Fire Department's food drive for the Salvation Army Food Bank Saturday.

Landowner tells court trees cleared for use by farmer

By STEPHANIE THIESSEN

The Champion

While the words 'golf course' have been uttered by nearly every witness to date in a case investigating tree-clearing activity on an environmentally-sensitive property, it scarcely came up at all in court Thursday.

For the first time, court heard from George Vastis himself, the Burlington resident facing nearly \$1 million in tree-cutting charges stemming from clearing activity last year on his Fourth Line property that borders Milton and Oakville.

"Did you ever intend to build a golf course on this property?" asked defence lawyer David Crocker.

"Never, sir," Mr. Vastis replied.

Through Mr. Vastis' testimony, the defence painted a picture of a hardworking and environmentally-concerned Greek immigrant who didn't know his land fell in an Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA), and was therefore protected from tree cutting under Halton Region's tree conservation bylaw.

It was a far cry from the shrewd, do-what-it-takes businessman portrayed by Crown Attorney John Olah in previous months.

Justice of the Peace J. Woloschuk heard the case — which has been ongoing for more than a year — at Milton provincial court.

Mr. Vastis and the numbered company of which he's president were charged in June of last year with 40 counts of destroying trees in an ESA and destroying trees in a woodlot.

Two more tree-cutting charges were added in July of last year.

It's alleged Mr. Vastis was responsible for destroying trees from April 4 to 11, 2003 and again July 14 and 15, 2003.

He could be fined up to \$840,000.

Mr. Vastis pleaded not guilty to the charges in June.

Court heard Thursday that Mr. Vastis was in the business of buying raw land — often in Halton — and putting up gas stations. He said the land in question — located on Fourth Line, south of Britannia Road and north of Hwy. 407 between Regional Road 25 and Trafalgar Road — would be a good location for a gas station since James Snow Parkway is slated to connect with Hwy. 407 at the property.

He told court he didn't know of any designations associated with the land and wasn't advised of any restrictions to the use of the property.

"All I knew is it was farmland," he said.

He said he was in for a shock when he walked the forest of his newly-purchased land and saw that it was in an unruly state with piles of neglected appliances and debris. Many trees had been cut, he said.

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