

Consumer Week promoted awareness

It pays to shop smart and that means learning about new laws passed this year to protect consumers, experts say.

In keeping with their theme - Shop Smart, It Pays - organizers of Consumer Week '89, which was held Oct. 23 to 28 throughout the province, promoted shopper education.

In the year since Consumer Week was last held, many new rules and regulations have been passed said Consumer Minister Gregory Sorbara. The legislation addresses such issues as fitness club contracts, car repairs and propane refrigerator safety.

Car owners gained important legal protection with the enactment of the Motor Vehicle Repair Act.

The law requires repair shops to provide warranties on new and reconditioned parts, as well as associated labor. They must also give written estimates on request and post signs listing repair rates. Under the new act, actual charges cannot exceed the estimate by more than 10 per cent.

"If you aren't familiar with this new piece of legislation and you own a car, it would be a good idea to get a fact sheet from the ministry now," said Marilyn Gurevsky, a head consumer advisor with the Ontario Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations (MCCR).

"We've developed a lot of new protections, but you've got to know how to make them work for you. It's always easier to insist things are done by the book from the start, rather than trying to untangle a mess of mistakes later."

Another new regulation of vital importance, particularly to cottagers, prohibits the sale of propane refrigerators that do not vent directly outdoors. This rule was adopted due to concerns about the number of fatalities linked to malfunctioning propane fridges every year, Gurevsky said.

Although they won't be fully approved until next year, new regulations governing funeral and cemetery services have also been developed by MCCR.

The proposed legislation would prohibit phone and door-to-door solicitations for cemetery lots, services and supplies. It also

sets out specific information that must be included in contracts for such purchases.

Helpful hints

With just a handful of guidelines, Ontario residents can avoid a cart-load of problems commonly reported by unwary shoppers, consumer experts say.

"Over the years, thousands of people have approached us for help with problems arising from their own mistakes," said Gurevsky.

"For example, every year, hundreds of people ask us to help get back deposits on goods they decided not to buy. Most deposits aren't refundable. So, while we sympathize with the consumers, there's not much we can do."

Before making major purchases, consumers not familiar with Ontario marketplace laws should study the following list compiled by the ministry:

- * Never expect a refund or exchange unless a notice, posted in the store or on the receipt, indicates that is the policy.

- * Never leave a deposit unless you intend to follow through with the purchase. Deposits are almost always non-refundable. Gurevsky says consumers often leave substantial deposits on cars, mistakenly thinking they can get their money back if a better deal comes along.

- * Get all important promises and product guarantees in writing.

"It is illegal to give false sales promises, but how do you prove it without a written statement?" Gurevsky asks.

- * Never give your credit card number over the phone to an unfamiliar caller and always tear up carbons from receipts.

- * When joining fitness clubs, making travel arrangements, or contracting for home renovations; when buying houses, cars, insurance or anything that seems complex, consumers should do particularly careful research.

Free brochures and advice, and information about Ontario's consumer legislation, old and new are available from the ministry's information centre at 555 Yonge St., Toronto, Ont., M7A 2H6 or, in the (807) area code residents may call (416) 326-8555 collect.

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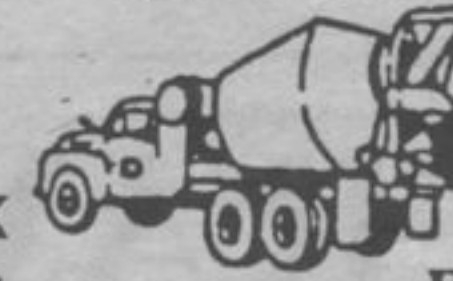
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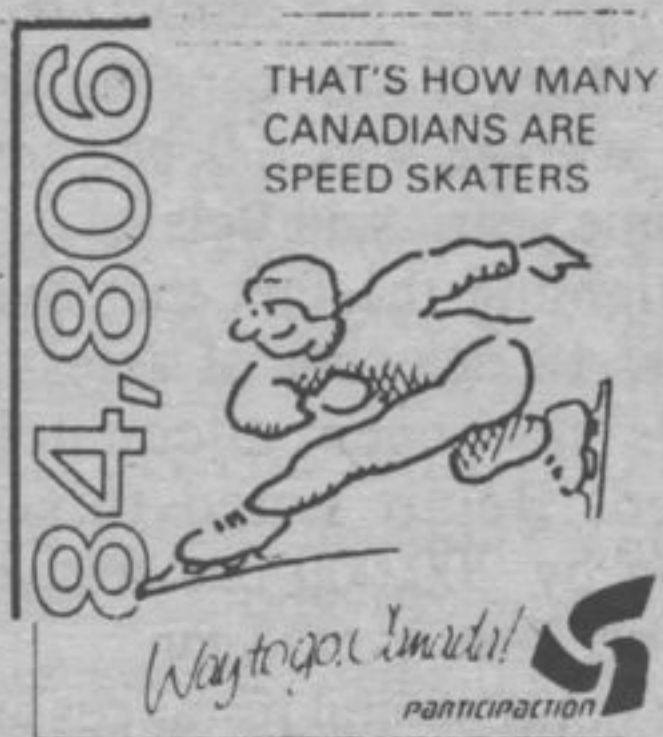
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John Este
 Roads Superintendent