

Too many lawyers

STOUFFVILLE — Stouffville lawyer Gordon Ness of the legal firm of Button, Armstrong and Ness, has been elected president of the York Region Law Society for 1983. He refers to law as "an honorable profession that's in real danger."

The biggest problem, he explained, is there are too many lawyers and too many students graduating each year. "It's unfair to them, (the graduates), and to us."

Approximately 100 of the 186 lawyers in York Region belong to the association. Their fees pay for such services as a library and lounge at the Newmarket court which Mr. Ness said is "very expensive." He said he considers it "unprofessional" for the other 86 lawyers not to contribute financially when they also use the facilities.

Mr. Ness said the excess of lawyers in Ontario is increasing the "unprofessional attitude". He said he was one of 300 Ontario students that graduated from the Bar admissions course in 1968. At that time there were 6,000 lawyers in Ontario, one for every 1,100 people.

Since 1976, there have been 1,000 students graduate from the five Ontario law schools each year. In 1981, there were 14,000 Ontario lawyers, or one for every 550 people.

He said private practice has been "glutted" and lawyers have had to cut their fees to attract clients, therefore, rates have been "almost frozen for several years."

"Most people think being a lawyer is a licence to make money," he said, "but it's not." He said lawyers, especially those in small firms, are "finding it as difficult as anyone else."

He said the public will probably approach this problem by saying "nuts to

you, we're glad you're hurting," but it will eventually effect the standard of service they receive. "People are still obtaining good service, but it can't last forever with so many graduates each year."

He explained professional competence will be effected because graduates are not training under established lawyers, as was traditionally the practice. Now, law firms are being opened by graduates who "have no where else to go," he said, citing that almost half of Ontario's lawyers have been practicing only five years.

Another possible danger for the profession and public is government intervention. "If the lawyers can't get their act together, the government will make sure they do," Mr. Ness explained.

Mr. Ness sees the upcoming election of the 40 members who will form the Law Society of Upper Canada, "benchers", as a way to begin solving the problem. The presidents of the county and district law associations have formed a group to deal with the concerns and "have become very vocal," he explained.

The presidents recently sent out a questionnaire to all the benchers candidates asking them several questions, including how they would handle the "numbers problem." There has also been lobbying and campaigning to rid the society of the benchers who are "complacent" and replace them with those who are a "little more firey and willing to go public."

He said in the past the Law Society of Upper Canada has avoided being "the ogre" and turning people away after nine years of school, so there has been "little failure" in the Bar admissions course. Although Mr. Ness doesn't fully agree with the concept of limiting the number of

graduates per year, he said some of the benchers elected should be in favor of the concept so numbers won't be left entirely up to the schools, as they have been in the past.

An information and public relation campaign has also been started to inform students that there are few jobs available. Mr. Ness said 65 per cent of this year's and 25 per cent of last year's graduates have not found work in their chosen field. "It's unfortunate for the kids who have gone through," he said. "They have a right to be upset."

Mr. Ness said communication with the government and law schools is necessary and thinks the campaign will be helpful in solving the problem.

The Ontario Lawyers' Association was formed last fall to help solicitors lobby the government and the Law Society and protect their interests. Although the Law Society was originally formed to promote the standing of lawyers as well as to protect the public, Mr. Ness said it has been "very unwilling" to do this. He said it is "natural" for the society to emphasize their role as public protector because they don't want to look like a "clique."

The Ontario Lawyers' Association has approximately 1,000 members at the present time and Mr. Ness said it should be in "full swing" by this fall. He said the society will help lawyers by bringing their problems to the public's attention.

Mr. Ness said the profession is "a very traditional one" and some of this tradition needs to be retained to ensure law stays a profession and does not become a business. "I'm very proud of the profession," he said, "but I'd like to be prouder."

County Honors



Two Stouffville girls, Charmaine Lintner (left) and Melony Minz, received their 4-H County Honors' Diplomas at a York South Achievement Day, April 30 in Victoria Square Community Hall. Charmaine is a member of Stouffville I and Melony belongs to Stouffville II. To win a County Honors' Certificate, a participant must complete four projects.

—Jim Thomas

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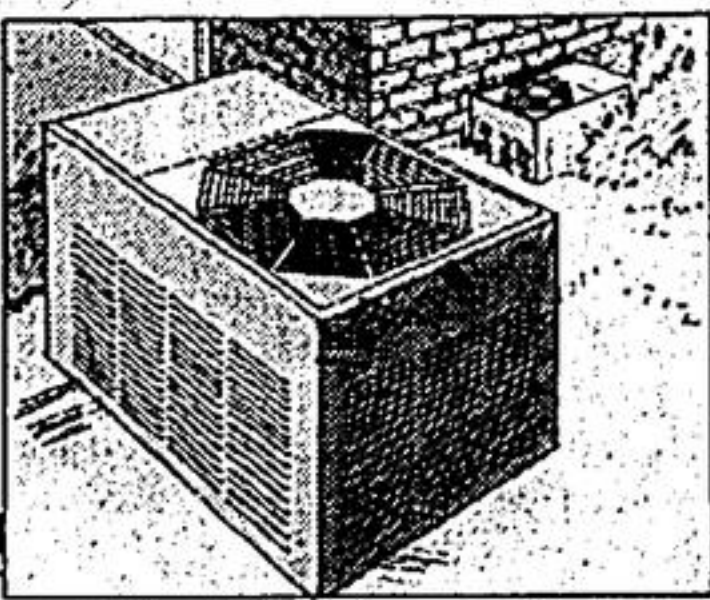
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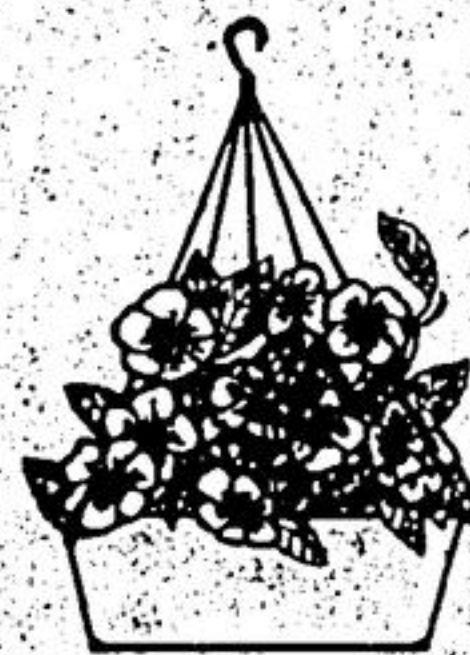
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