

Health

Contaminated crayons can cause learning problems

BRUCE STAPLEY
Correspondent

Color us cautious.
That was the mood expressed by regional and federal health officials after 11 brands of bargain priced, imported Chinese crayons were pulled off the shelves in the United States due to excessive lead content.

The crayons, which have been coming into the U.S. since 1990, were recalled by American Consumer safety authorities Tuesday after it was discovered they contained enough lead to pose mild, or in some cases severe health hazards to young children who might eat or chew them.

Lead poisoning can cause learning disabilities in children.

When alerted to the situation by *The Tribune* Wednesday, officials at the York Region Public Health Office attempted to contact provincial and federal health departments to see if there was any potential danger to consumers in Canada, and more specifically, in York Region.

"We haven't heard anything from the province as of yet," Philip August of the York Region Public Health Office

told *The Tribune* Wednesday. "It would appear that this is a problem in the U.S. only."

But officials from Health Canada suggested that while there have been no reports of toxic crayons causing health problems in Canada, they may have found their way onto Canadian shelves.

"There have been no incidents in Canada up until now, but we have a good indication there are some (of the crayons) in Canada," said Isobel Sauve, Regional Manager of Product Safety, Health Canada, Ontario Branch.

Sauve said all crayons sold in Canada must meet toy regulations set out by the Hazardous Products Act. However, she conceded the inspections are not fool proof.

"It does happen that products are found on the shelf that are non-compliant. I wouldn't say (the regulations) are 100 per cent effective."

Sauve said it was important to note that eight of the 11 brands of crayons fingered in the U.S. contained very low levels of lead, and that it would be necessary for a child to eat or chew many of the crayons over a long period of time to experi-

ence symptoms of lead poisoning.

She acknowledged the potential for fear among Canadians and said her department was undertaking a complete investigation and would release its findings for the Canadian consumer. "Since the U.S. release hit the media, people are worried. We'll release our findings, and if there is a problem, the stores will be notified."

Mike Gvildys, a product safety officer with Health Canada, advised parents against overreacting. "People shouldn't be panicking," said Gvildys. "But if they think they might have one of the products that were pulled off the shelves in the U.S., just put them away until we finish our investigation."

A *Tribune* survey of local bargain, variety, and grocery stores found none which could confirm selling crayons imported from China. One bargain store manager wasn't certain of the country of origin of crayons sold over the past Christmas shopping season, while others said they would check their shelves for suspect crayons after being notified of the U.S. recall by *The Tribune*.

Some residents suggested people in Stouffville should still exercise caution. "I think everybody should be alerted," said Liz Troyer of Children's House Nursery School and Day Care on Church St. "There are a lot of people buying crayons from dollar stores." Troyer said her centre uses Crayola crayons, which were found to be safe in the U.S. studies. Most stores contacted by the *Tribune* carried Crayola, which account for 50 per cent of the U.S. crayon market.

Dr. Patrick Wat, of the Stouffville Medical Centre, said he was unaware of any problems involving toxic crayons in this area.

He said a child would have to ingest such crayons on a regular basis to experience the symptoms of lead poisoning, which include severe stomach cramps and headaches. "There would have to be a fairly high toxic level," said Wat.

"I would imagine a child would have to swallow a lot of them for it to be serious. But with minimum exposure, the symptoms will go away."

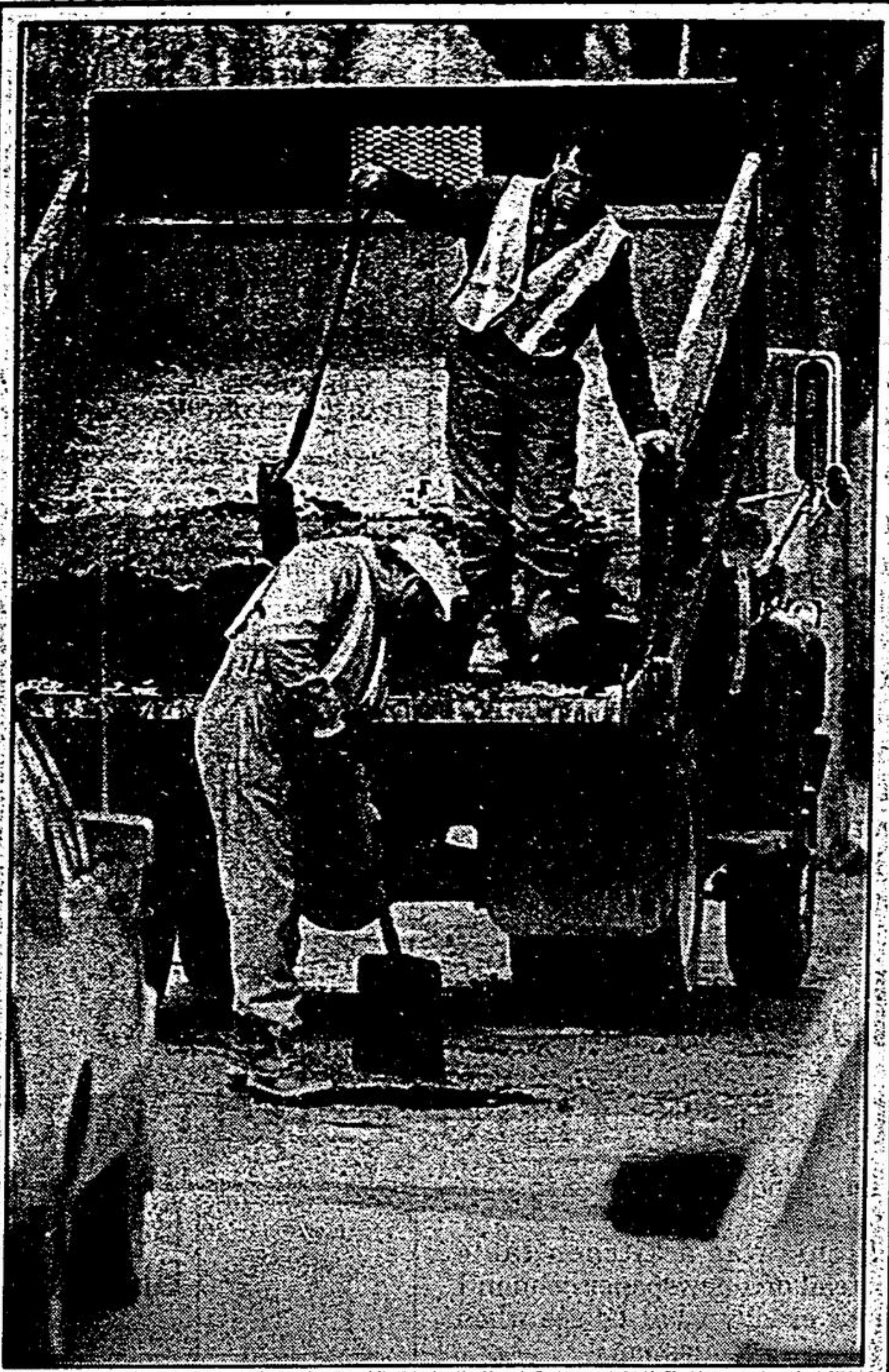


Photo: JOERD WITTEVEEN

That time of year

Bill Reid and Ted Tindall (on truck) fill potholes along Albert St. in Stouffville Wednesday.

Police undertake Town investigation

(From page 1)

utes as far back as 1988, and to view cheques, invoices, oaths of offices and any other information deemed pertinent.

Project 80 investigators have also been known to check into public officials' personal real estate holdings as well as any conflict of interest declarations

while serving as an elected official. Project 80's move to Civic Avenue follows about five months of preliminary interviews with dozens of former and present politicians, concerned citizens, community activists and registered complainants.

In a press conference on Thursday morning, after receiving a

call from *The Tribune* two days earlier, the mayor said not all councillors had yet been formally notified of the impending police investigation because of the long Easter weekend.

Ward 6 councillor Ken Prentice expressed "disappointment" that fellow councillors and staff weren't briefed on the matter

before the mayor called a press conference.

Thieves hit short-circuit

A ring of thieves that tossed unwanted computer parts into the Rouge River has been short-circuited. The owner of a Cardco Dr. business in Stouffville told police that one of his vans was being borrowed without permission. After an investigation, police arrested two men in the van and another in a car following. A search of two Scarborough homes turned up computer equipment stolen from a Mississauga school over the weekend. Any equipment with a serial number was tossed into the river, police said. All the computers, valued at \$125,000 to \$130,000, were returned.

Four men have been charged, including a former employee of the Cardco Dr. company.

Town can't pay for share of water improvements now

(From page 1)

budget discussions next week.

Last week, Minister of Environment and Energy (MOEE) Bud Wildman urged Whitchurch-Stouffville to commit to the project in order "the people who have had to endure this problem for so long and be dependent on bottled water will have safe, clean drinking water for their communities."

Wildman addressed his Queen's Park colleagues after O'Connor asked for reassurance that the NDP government is addressing the drinking water quality problems in the Ballantrae-Musselman's Lake area.

"We're looking forward to the municipality taking advantage of this grant," Wildman said. When O'Connor asked Wildman about the

time frame for installation of a communal water supply project, the minister said Stouffville council "will be given time to consider the nature of its contribution."

Wildman also encouraged local interaction. "If ratepayers are concerned, they should be encouraged to attend a (Stouffville) council meeting and make their views known," he added.

O'Connor concluded by offering to "work closely" with Stouffville politicians to "ensure that water purification facilities can begin serving the communities in the near future."

Stouffville council has already sent its OPA90 to the Municipal Affairs Ministry for approval and maintain the town's plan regarding a water supply system is the next step.

One town takes province up on offer

At least one Ontario municipality is grasping at the province's offer to bring its residents a communal water system.

The Municipality of St. Clements, located in the London area, was thrilled to receive \$2.69 million (\$600,000 more than expected) from Ontario under its Clean Water Agency fund - the same deal offered to Whitchurch-Stouffville last February for

the Ballantrae/Musselman Lake areas.

In 1991, the St. Clements project carried an estimated cost of \$3.5 million with the province paying \$2.1 million, the region paying \$875,000 and the township paying \$525,000.

St. Clements sent an application for a provincial grant in late 1993 focusing on the health risk problem posed by an already ineffective existing

system. That's the only difference between the two situations - St. Clements would replace an aging system; Whitchurch-Stouffville would be constructing a new system.

Local officials say once the development boundaries (OPA90) for the two northern hamlets is approved by the province, the town will discuss how to implement and pay for a water system.

- Tracy Kibble

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