York Region police win lobby to wear beards

RICK VANDERLINDE
Metroland Staff

York Regional Police officers will now be allowed to wear beards, even though acting-Chief Peter Scott doesn't like the idea.

Scott told the police services board yesterday he has grudgingly given in to allowing uniformed officers to grow beards, because he would likely lose a legal challenge.

"I am personally against beards for police," he said. "The problem is, that isn't enough."

Scott said his legal department has advised him the department's policy against facial hair wouldn't stand up in court, especially since the OPP, Metro Toronto Police and Peel Regional Police allow it.

"I think it will become a novelty when it first starts, then there won't be more than five or six officers who will wear them," Scott said.

Board chairperson Lorna Jackson said she disagrees with police officers wearing beards for safety reasons — attackers could pull on them during a fight.

But some York Region officers feel strongly about the right to wear beards.

One officer even returned to work following his vacation with a full beard a week before the board was expected to pass the new policy.

The officer, who asked not to be identified, said he received a call from a senior officer who said he was "disappointed" in him.

However, official discipline did not follow.

"I've always felt strongly about this," he said. "I've always been a hard worker. I'm not a troublemaker, I just want to wear a beard."

The officer said he decided to keep the beard because he would have to wait for another extended vacation to grow another beard. Under the new policy, beards can only be grown on days off.

Chief Bryan Cousineau, who is on a paid suspension while under criminal investigation by the OPP, also disapproved of beards. In January 1995, Cousineau suspended a police officer for refusing to trim his Fu Manchu moustache. Under the old policy, moustaches could not extend below the upper lip.

The issue became a public battle between the police association and the chief, prompting union president Paul Bailey to call the chief's action "silly."

Under the new policy, beards must be between one-quarter inch and one inch in length. Goatees are not allowed.

Officers who must wear gas masks as part of their duties cannot wear beards.

Under the force's revised dress code, police officers will also be given the option of not wearing a tie, a provision that was only allowed during the summer in the past.

Ties must still be worn during court appearances and ceremonial functions.

Scott added it's unlikely York police will ever switch to the large-brimmed state trooper hats now worn by OPP officers.

"The OPP hats have been a disaster," Scott said. "They have saved us the trouble of trying them out."

Scott said OPP officers have cut themselves on the hats when the brims fray and have found them difficult to place inside their cruisers because of their size.

TAKING A BREAK: Mark Jeffery of GO Transit buys a coffee from Barbara St. John who manned the Alzheimer Coffee Break table at the Stouffville train station yesterday to raise funds for local programs for people with Alzheimers. *Photo by SJOERD WITTEVEEN*

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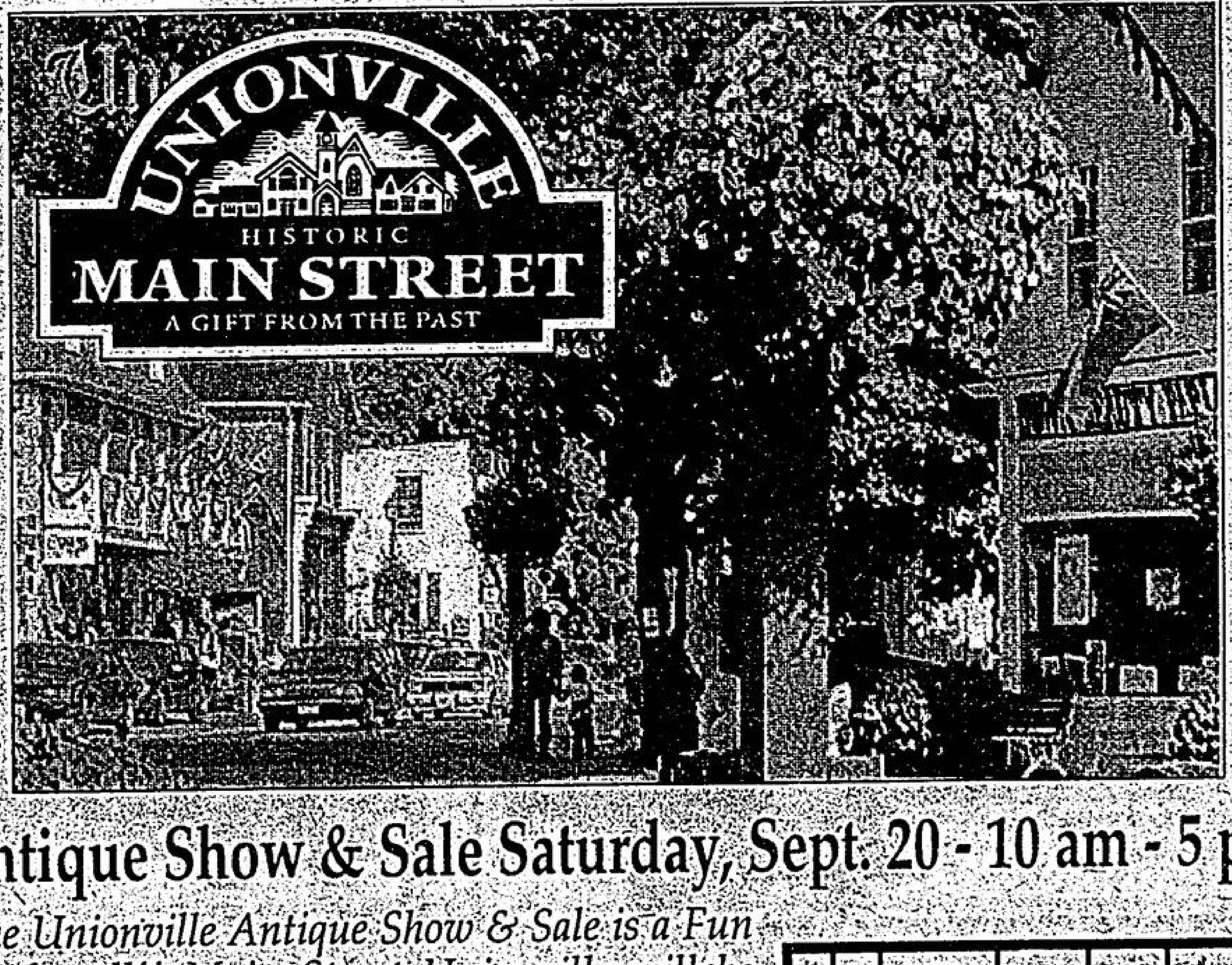

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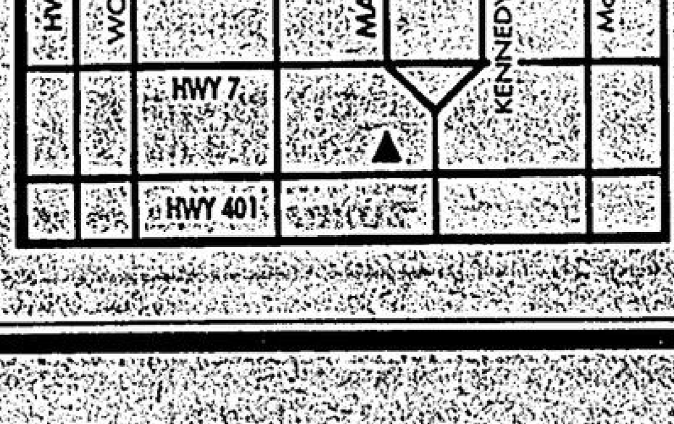

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