

Women warned of pyramid scheme operating in region

BY DAWN LIERSCH
STAFF WRITER

Despite the facts six of its members — including one who is a police officer's wife — have been arrested, a female-only pyramid scheme is continuing to operate in York Region.

In fact, members of the illegal scheme are actually trying to lure new members to the group by pointing out a York Region officer's wife was involved, warns Margaret Black, a member of York Region's police services board.

However, York Regional Police arrested that woman, along with six others, in the Newmarket area last November and seized \$16,500 being used in the Women Helping Women pyramid. Five of the women are married to firefighters.

Six women, who could face hefty fines or jail terms, are to appear at a pretrial hearing Sept. 28 in Ontario Court, provincial division in Newmarket. Charges were withdrawn for the seventh woman May 8, police said.

"I know someone was approached and told there was a policeman's wife involved and other professionals. What they don't say is that these people have been charged," Black said. "People think it's okay to get involved because of the kind of

people in it... It's this credibility thing."

Toronto lawyer Uriel Prives, a retired Crown attorney in private practice, has been brought in to prosecute the women to avoid a conflict of interest.

York's 23 Crown attorneys work closely with police officers and firefighters, head Crown attorney Robert Ash said.

Charged with participating in an illegal scheme are Wendy Sant, 38, of Vaughan, Sabine Metzger, 50, of Vaughan, Roxanne Douglas, 36, of Newmarket, Karen Fraser, 36, of East Gwillimbury, Lisa Bellanger, 32, of Uxbridge and Nellie Snider, 44, of British Columbia.

Meanwhile, Black, who is mayor of King Township, said she was informed by several women that they had been approached about investing in the scheme, in which a police officer's wife was involved.

Black has had to explain the schemes are illegal and that, in fact, it's unlikely the officer knew his wife was involved. "I checked into it and discovered that the women were told not to tell their husbands because they might laugh," Black said.

York Regional Police Det-Sgt. Chris Barratt said it's not suspected the officer was involved. "The officer hasn't been

charged, so we're certainly giving him the benefit of the doubt. It hasn't been proven that he knew anything," Barratt said.

"These things thrive on secrecy... It's not usually a cold soliciting — you are usually approached by friends, acquaintances or even relatives."

In this scheme, women have been asked to invest \$5,000 cash, with a promise of receiving \$40,000 in a short time period, Black said. "I'm concerned they can get people who are desperate and in real need of the money, some probably don't even know these things are illegal," she said.

The schemes are illegal because the investments are unregulated and aren't taxed, she added. "But I always say, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. These things always fold. You'd probably have better luck at a race track."

Black said it appears more than one pyramid is operating in York Region, with some even offering a product to make them appear legitimate.

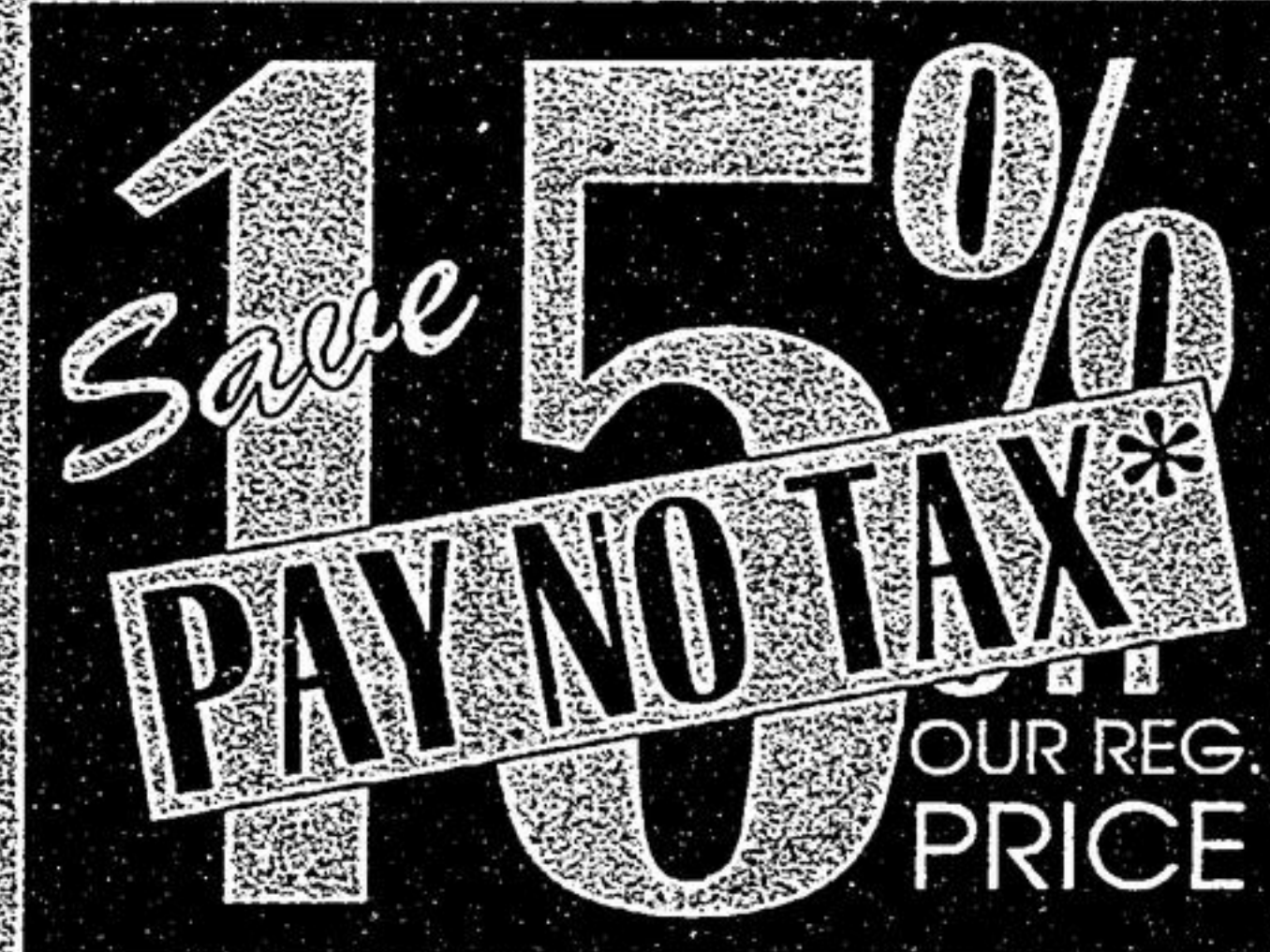
Barratt warns that police are aware of the growing number of schemes. "We want to warn people that we're out there and we will arrest people and seize the money — it's double jeopardy," he said.



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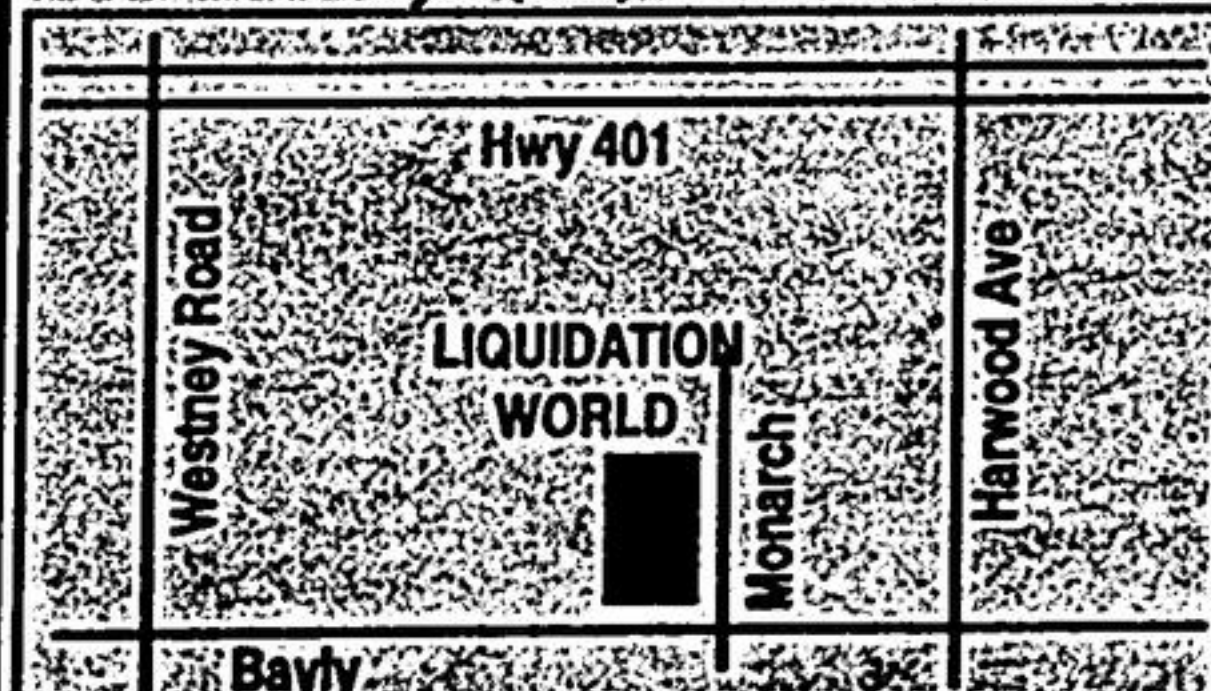
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