

Issues & Answers

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE NEWS AND THE NEWSMAKERS

The cost of suburban living

People who traded city for country watch as their surroundings are eaten up by development

BY JENNIFER BROWN AND LISA QUEEN
STAFF WRITERS

When giving directions to their home, Victor and Julie Andrade used to tell friends and family to turn left at a farmer's field.

They can't do that anymore.

Although Victor and Julie moved to Newmarket from Montreal only four years ago, a new subdivision now stands in the field at St. John's Sideroad and Bayview Avenue where the cows used to graze.

When the couple moved from Quebec, they searched for a community with green space. They didn't want to live in anything resembling a concrete jungle.

Victor and Julie felt Newmarket, and broader York Region, offered a good balance between urban services and respect for the environment.

"We wanted a community feel," Julie said. "York Region is a wonderful place to live. We would never move back to Quebec."

But the couple is worried rapid development is eating up valuable fields.

You drive by a woodlot and the next day it's gone and sewers are going in.

As parents of four-month-old Charlie, Victor and Julie have become even more concerned about growth hurting the environment.

At the same time, they acknowledge it was only a few years ago that their property was a farmer's field too. They know they've contributed to development and the loss of greenspace.

And they know stopping growth is an impossible task in a region slated to grow from today's population of 675,000 to 1.1 million in 2021.

But they also know development comes at a price. Victor is upset by the region's plans to widen St. John's to four lanes.

Even though he acknowledges his neighbourhood and other new subdivisions have contributed to the need for more roads, Victor believes widening St. John's could destroy the McKenzie March, a wetland home to many species of wildlife and vegetation.

"It's easy to sit here and be armchair quarterbacks. If we hadn't moved here, (St. John's) wouldn't have to be widened. But that doesn't detract from the point they are ruining a wetland."

Bill and Rita Byres grew up in Richmond Hill.

They've seen field after field turned into single family homes — and they're somewhat troubled as they watch bulldozers tear up the land.

"I used to Ski-Doo where the houses are being built on Bayview," Bill said.

Rita wonders how far the family will have to drive in the future before they are out in the countryside.

While Julie is worried about the environment, she is also concerned about the type of development councils are approving.

York's southern municipalities have faced development and growth issues for many more years than the communities to the north, and seem to be learning from their mistakes.

Markham's Deputy Mayor Frank Scarpitti is the chair of the region's planning committee. He says it's not realistic to try to stop growth. Scarpitti has lived in Markham all his life — when his parents moved there the population was around 15,000.

"I would have liked for Markham to stay that size," he said. "I don't think we should accept growth for growth's sake. I don't think we should say, 'It's happening, there's nothing we can do.' But we can't ignore the reality of the growth coming to the GTA."

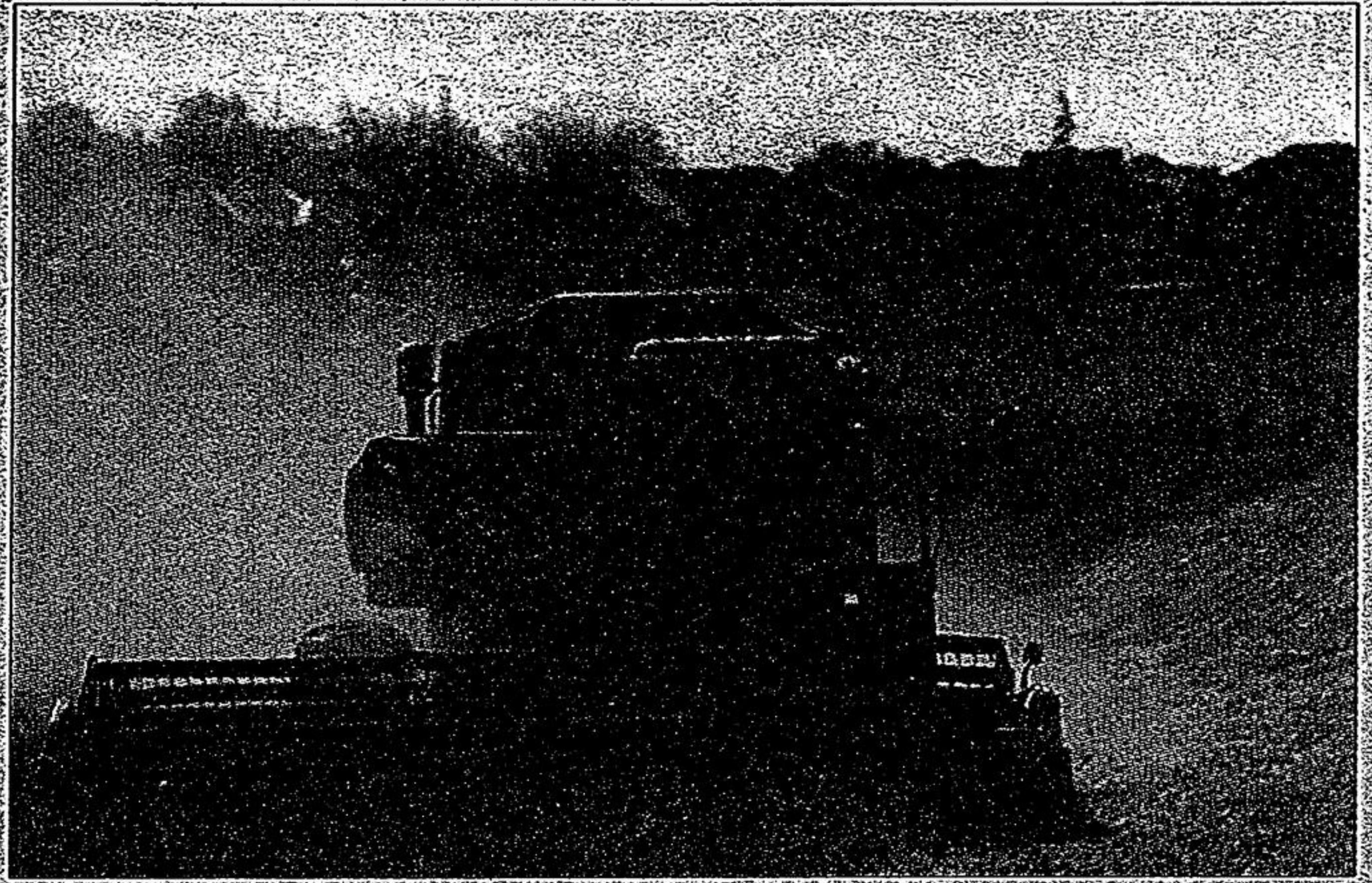
He says the best solution is good planning that enhances the lifestyle for existing residents. "It comes down to a question of really managing that growth. We have to look around and say, 'Yes, houses have popped up, but can you really call that a community?' Clearly, what people like are things that create a community."

In Markham, for example, neighbourhoods with mazes of suburban streets leading nowhere, homes fronted by big garages, and developing subdivision by subdivision in a piecemeal approach without regard to existing neighbourhoods is a planning style that has come and gone.

Now, premier developments in Markham, like the 10,000-home Cornell, boast a close-knit community-oriented feel.

Narrower streets encourage walking. Houses are close to the sidewalk, with front porches and well-lit back lanes. This kind of planning means closer contact and communication with neighbours, as well as better safety and personal security, designers say.

Neighbourhoods within neighbourhoods featuring corner stores, parks and schools within walking distance are all meant to strengthen community ties.



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

A combine harvests a crop in a field in the Ninth Line and Hwy. 7 area of Markham last month. Much of the land in this area is slated to be developed as part of the 10,000-home Cornell community.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

The third in a series of articles examining York Region's growth and how it affects the people who live here.

Newmarket Councillor Ray Snow admits many York municipalities have done a poor job making their towns into picturesque communities.

But he's more concerned about residential growth, which he fears is out of control.

Snow disputes the region's population forecast of 1.1 million residents in 2021.

He points out Newmarket is supposed to grow to 85,000, up from about 65,000. But council has already approved enough housing for 100,000 residents.

Growth puts a strain on facilities and infrastructure. Be it sports arenas, sports complexes, libraries, whatever. But one key thing is roads and traffic. You only have to drive across town to see that.

According to Snow, York politicians should either be prepared to stop growth as soon as it hits 1.1 million, even if it happens before the 2021 target, or take measures now to slow the rate of development.

"I'm really concerned about where Newmarket and the region are heading in terms of population and growth. It scares you," he said.

"You drive by a woodlot and the next day,

it's gone and sewers are going in."

Last week, Snow saw a buck standing on a pile of overturned topsoil where a new subdivision is being built in Vaughan.

"He was standing on top, large as life. A small woodlot was beside it. That's where he lived," Snow said. "But the bulldozers were there. You won't see him again. As corny as it might sound, we have to preserve these things for our kids and grandkids."

Snow has reason to worry about the devastating impact of development on the environment.

According to York's official plan, 90 per cent of the region was forested 200 years ago. By 1994, coverage had dropped to 18 per cent and much of that is fragmented and lacking in wildlife habitat.

The region is working to increase forest coverage to 25 per cent. Council also insists it's trying to preserve other significant environmental features, including the Oak Ridges Moraine, Lake Simcoe and the Don and Rouge rivers.

The province predicts 100,000 new residents will move into the Greater Toronto area every year for the next 20 years. Every region is expected to accommodate its share. The region will also have to change the type of housing it approves to meet the changing needs of families, including the aging population and growing number of single parent families.

— With files by Kathleen Griffin

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