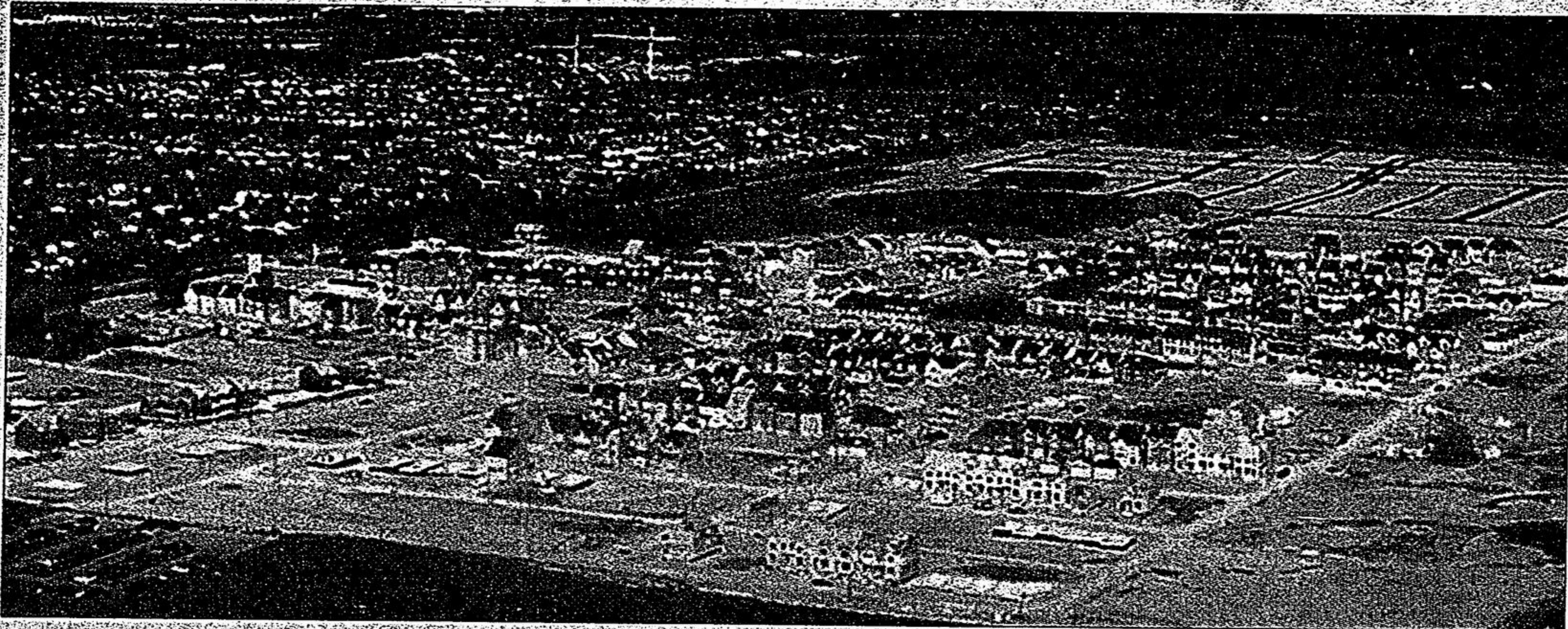


Issues & Answers

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE NEWS AND THE NEWSMAKERS



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE ADLER

The new community of Cornell, located north of Hwy. 7 east of Ninth Line in Markham, will have a big impact on southeast York Region.

Learning to live with the housing boom

Massive growth has meant big change for York Region and a growing number of its residents

BY JENNIFER BROWN AND LISA QUEEN
STAFF WRITERS

When Julie and Victor Kranitz-Andrade moved from the suburbs of Montreal to Ontario four years ago, they explored communities across the GTA before deciding to make Newmarket their home.

"We wanted a small-town feel," said Julie, who didn't want to be at the mercy of the 401 every day when heading to work. "I value my time and don't want to spend it on the roads."

The couple set up a financial planning business and last spring their first child, Charlie, was born — one of the 15,000 new residents who helped boost the population of York Region to 665,000 by June of this year.

They still feel the community has everything they were looking for, but the reality is that small-town feeling may be slipping away.

York Region is expected to grow to a population of 1.2 million by 2026, an increase of half a million people. And recent trends indicate the region's population is becoming more urban in character, which will mean an increasingly varied mix of housing, increases in the number of single-parent families and greater ethnic diversity, all expected to continue into the future.

And while Julie and Victor are undecided about whether they would support amalga-

mation of municipal governments in the years to come, they believe combining services such as fire protection is a must.

"Initially, the towns were very small, self-sufficient entities and now they're not," said Julie, who feels as the boundaries between towns are already blurred. "It would be beneficial if everyone could benefit from one service provider."

"I don't care if I'm living in Newmarket or Aurora and the house is burning down, please come. We should maximize service for minimum cost," said Julie.

Victor agrees, adding he doesn't think towns would lose their individual appeal if services were combined.

"Joining services doesn't mean losing the feeling one has that a town is your own — sharing departments doesn't make it any different. It's about economies of scale. Aurora is not going to go away," he said.

However, concentrating power at one level can also pose concerns. Julie questions some decisions made by regional government — for example, the median work being done on Yonge Street in Newmarket in front of the regional headquarters.

"I think they should ask, 'What is the

biggest priority?'"

In the final instalment of Under Construction, we talk to Julie and Victor Kranitz-Andrade and Rita and Bill Byres about their view of the future and how they feel about living in York Region. Do they think our communities should be amalgamated? Are they worried about services for their children and their parents? And, in the final analysis, are they happy living in their community?

biggest priority?'"

For Rita and Bill Byres of Richmond Hill, growth has crept up around them, approaching the tree-lined street on which they live, where century homes are protected by the local historical society.

They haven't necessarily liked the look of sprawling subdivisions with cookie-cutter monster homes sprouting up where Bill used to snowmobile as a kid, but they welcome the additional services and the new school growth has delivered.

Their primary concern for the future is if the school system that educates their daughters Marlena and Rochelle will be able to keep up with the influx of new people into their community.

Richmond Hill experienced the largest population growth in the region last year, with more than 5,000 new residents. Vaughan added 4,020, while Markham added 3,440.

To date, the three communities combined represent 84 per cent of the building permits issued in the region this year.

Housing sales in the region remain strong and the continuing boom means York Region has an unemployment rate of 5.9 per-

cent — lower than the GTA rate of 6.9 per cent and Toronto's 7.6 per cent. That will only serve to attract more people to the area.

But while young families like the Byres and Kranitz-Andrades represent the dominant group in the region's population now, seniors are projected to be one of the fastest growing groups, with the number of residents over age 75 increasing to 65,000 by 2011, from 18,000 in 1996.

That means demands for more affordable housing for the elderly, for better public transit and working toward reducing the dependence on cars or improving accessibility to shopping and recreation facilities.

Health-care needs for seniors are being addressed in Richmond Hill today as York Central Hospital launches the construction of a new 240-bed long-term care facility, which will actually be larger than needed when it first opens two years from now, but adequate to handle the region's needs for years to come.

That comes as a relief to the Byres, who are pleased to know that services will be available should their elderly parents need them in the future.

And knowing they live in one of the most prosperous parts of the country, the two families agree they wouldn't want to raise their children anywhere else.

"People should be proud of living in this area," said Julie.

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