

## Issues & Answers

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE NEWS AND THE NEWSMAKERS

# Subdivision unplugged

Homeowners claim so-called 'smart' houses not so clever

BY DAWN LIERSCH  
STAFF WRITER

**T**he Stonehaven West project, which gained prestige as Canada's first subdivision of smart homes, will have its state-of-the-art technology unplugged at the end of the year.

Officials from Intercom Ontario, a consortium of high-tech industries and cultural and government agencies involved in the Newmarket technology trial project, informed residents during a meeting last week that the deal ends Jan. 1.

"I wasn't surprised because everything else had gone wrong with my house. This has been so misleading," said Jennifer Serota, who moved into the subdivision off Bayview Avenue in March.

"Knock on wood that the house doesn't fall down."

Residents said the high-tech trial was botched from the start, adding they still haven't received about 80 per cent of technology services promised.

Dennis Rogers was horrified by the news, particularly when he learned the project folded because consortium members weren't locked in for the full four- to five-year trial period, but were instead renewing memberships on a yearly basis.

Rogers learned only three of 32 consortium members remain, so there isn't enough money to continue the project.

Paul Hoffert, director of Intercom Ontario, confirmed consortium members won't support the project any longer.

"We only planned it for this amount of time, but we always hoped members of the consortium would find value in it and extend it beyond that time period," Hoffert said, explaining the technology being used isn't being supported by the telephone industries involved.

"Many residents were also hoping this would go on longer. I think that's a testament that a wired community seems to be a desirable thing," he added.

The \$130-million development, launched in 1995, had touted cutting-edge communication technology as an added bonus to the modestly priced homes, beginning at \$169,900.

Because the homes would be linked to a broad range of services, homebuyers were promised they could do their banking, get government information, choose entertainment programming or even have an interview with their child's teacher from home.

In exchange for the free services, residents agreed to let researchers monitor the system during what was expected to be a four- to five-year trial.

Residents had been told they would be able to continue using the technology for a monthly fee at the end of the trial.

But that's not going to happen. The fibre-optic system wired to each home will essentially be dead when the trial runs out, officials explained.

Hoffert said discussions are ongoing with technology providers to see if it can be replaced by an alternative.

"But there may be a gap," he admitted.

One option being considered is a newly launched, high-speed access technology through Bell Canada called 1-meg



PHOTO/CELIA BRONKHORST

A fibre-optic cable which was to deliver state-of-the-art technology to the Stonehaven West subdivision in Newmarket will be unplugged Jan. 1.

modem.

Tim Hollett, Bell's associate director of business development, said the alternative technology is preferred by his company because it runs through phone lines instead of a coaxial cable.

He called the technology comparable to what had previously been offered at Stonehaven West.

Bell spokesperson Shawn Murphy explained the 1-meg modem is about 17 times faster than a standard 28.8 modem, and is in demand for the home office or high-end users.

Currently being used in the Ottawa-Hull area, the technology will be brought to Montreal, Toronto and Quebec City in 1999, Murphy said.

Meanwhile, Bell will offer free dial-up service to Stonehaven West residents until June, with the option to buy the service at a monthly rate.

But residents aren't buying the hype about the replacement technology. Rogers said he has been led astray too long.

"The issue is, we bought the house based on it having all the technology buried in the ground before we even moved in. We thought once it was in, it was in," he said.

"We were told our houses would be wired for the future...

they sold it to us like it's an extra value to the house, like a third garage. Now we're nothing but a regular subdivision with wires in the ground."

Rogers said he still hasn't received many of the technology services promised, such as video on demand. He said the technology to date amounts to little more than being hooked up to the Internet at high speeds, with access to a web page.

To top it off, he lists numerous problems with the home aside from the technology bust, which he has had to report to the Ontario New Home Warranty program.

Ron Armstrong, regional manager with the warranty program, said Stonehaven West hasn't received an abnormal number of complaints.

Cary Solomon of Spectrum Communities — the project's builder — couldn't be reached for comment.

Serota echoed Rogers' complaint that the homes have been unacceptable.

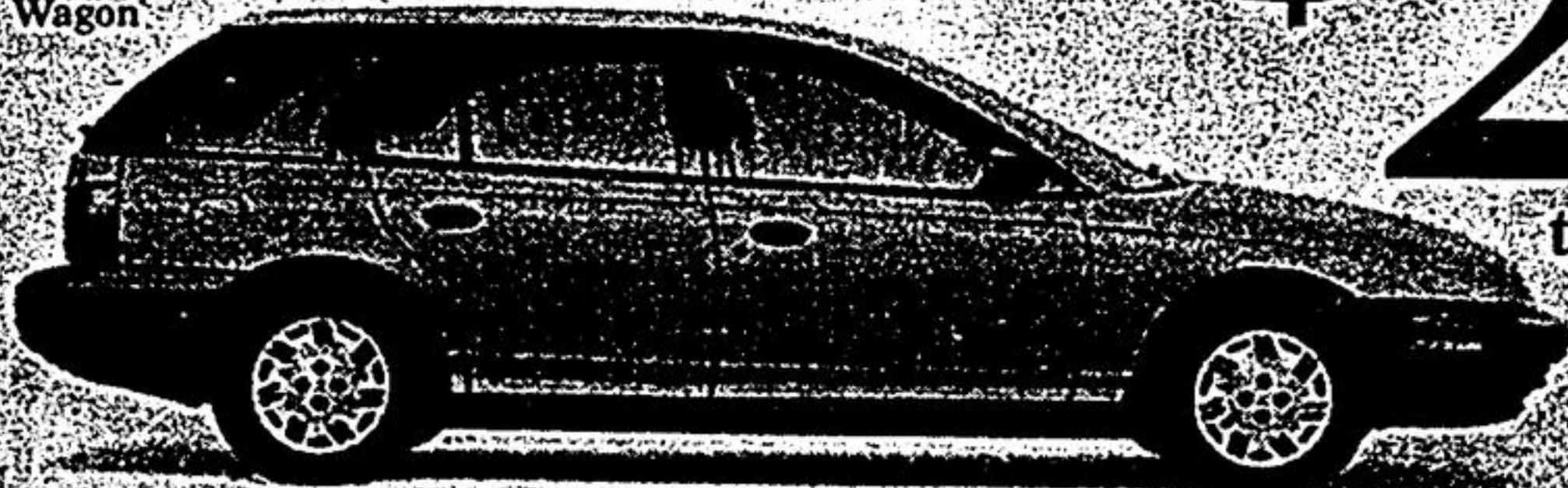
"If you saw pictures of my home when I first moved in, you would have just died. There was no heat, no electricity, no carpets. They made us feel like we would be in the year 2000 and now they've sent us back to the 1800s," Serota said, adding many features promised are still outstanding.

"We thought we had bought our dream home, but it has become the worst nightmare we've ever had."

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