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YORK REGION: Smoking in shopping mall food courts an emotional issue
Markville may go smoke-free

BY MIKE ADLER
STAFF WRITER

An era of little foil ashtrays is coming to an end.

Once a common ornament for a food court table, the foil ashtray is now rare in York Region shopping centres, because mall managers are seeing smoking customers as a liability, and not a plus.

Upper Canada Mall in Newmarket went smoke-free in September. Last week, the Tannery Mall, home of that town's municipal offices, did the same.

The Promenade in Vaughan, because of a city bylaw banning public smoking, has no choice.

And on March 1, Markham's Markville Shopping Centre, which lets half its food court customers smoke, is offering to chase those smokers away — if that's what most mall customers seem to want.

"We don't propose to read people's minds," Markville manager Clive Baxter said, but added the comments he's received so far are "overwhelmingly in support of a non-smoking food court."

This week, the coming ban annoyed smokers. A few, like Geraldine MacLean of Etobicoke, said they drove to Markham just for a chance have

a smoke at lunch, something their Toronto malls no longer provide.

"That's the time a cigarette tastes best, after a meal," said MacLean, who quit for 10 years before starting again. "Now that I smoke, I don't expect anyone to complain unless it's in their own homes."

Smoking is legal, and cigarettes are sold in Markville, so the mall should have a place to smoke, Richard Wilson of Markham argued.

"This place is full of more smokers than people that eat," Lynn Marie Benson of Claremont said.

At Hillcrest Mall in Richmond Hill, smoking is making a last stand.

The smoking section, small and surrounded by non-smokers, contains barely more than a dozen tables, and teens say it's often hard to find a seat. Hillcrest smokers puff between two large signs, one defining the space, and one warning against loitering.

Food court smokers, particularly younger ones, stress how many drinks or meals they must buy to sit and and indulge their habit.

Still, Hillcrest surveyed its tenants, and some vendors were concerned that cutting off the

smokers might hurt business. "It's really mixed," manager Rick Heward said.

Before Markville announced its plans, food vendors there expressed support for a ban, Baxter said, and some of the customers had complained.

"I won't even buy food over there," Trish Gregory of Markham said, pointing around the smokers on Tuesday while spoonfeeding her infant son.

Upper Canada Mall had the same 50/50 split in its food court for several years, but after smoking disappeared, most reactions were positive.

Young families could now have a meal in any part of the food court and not smell the smoke, manager Ron Dinelle said.

Any claims of lost business are hard to prove, he said. "There was some, but we were able to overcome that."

If Markville goes smoke-free, the decision may increase pressure on the few malls that still allow smokers, like Market Village in Milliken Mills.

Johnson Yip, marketing and promotion manager, said sooner or later, the mall will be smoke-free.

"That's the trend. Personally, I believe that trend is good for the community," Yip said.

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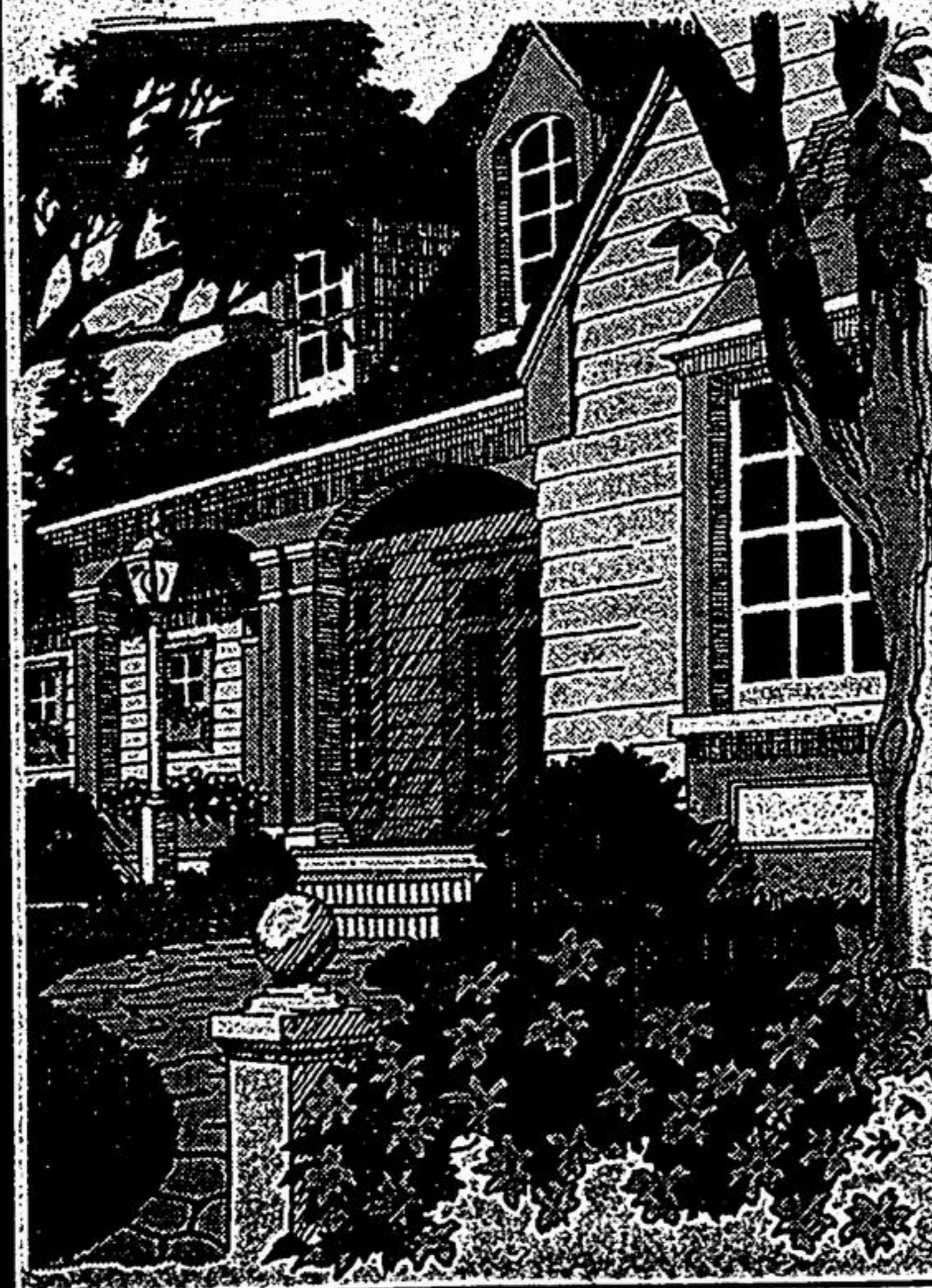
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Publication date
February 23rd, 1999
Deadlines
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