

Stouffville Tribune

A Metroland community newspaper
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EDITORIAL

Drivers alone in fight for gas price fairness

There are few topics that can send the average person into a rage quite like the price of gas.

It's sky high when the price of crude oil is low, it always seems to go up on long weekends and, since there are only four oil companies controlling the stations in the GTA, they have us all over a barrel.

Unfair gas price hikes caused riots in the streets of Jamaica, mass consumer protests in the United States and, here in Canada, we're supposed to boycott gas stations for a day tomorrow.

Perhaps this will demonstrate our displeasure to the folks at Esso, Shell, PetroCanada and Sunoco, but it will hardly bring them to their knees. They know we'll be gassing up Thursday or Saturday.

And that is one of the roots of the problem. With so little real competition in the gasoline industry, the free-market forces that are supposed to control prices can be easily distorted.

And if the situation seems even worse lately, it may be the fallout from a price war last year that drove many independent stations out of business.

At the time, Liberal MP Dan McLeague warned that the big four were holding prices artificially low — and that, if they succeeded in wiping out the independents, consumers would suffer.

Oak Ridges MP Bryon Wilfert was part of the Liberal Committee on Gas Pricing, which spent eight months holding hearings on the oil industry and concluded that the Competition Act needed more teeth to protect drivers from predatory pricing.

But his government has not acted on those recommendations.

At the provincial level, Markham MPP David Tsubouchi, who is Minister of Consumer and Commercial Relations, formed a 'gas busters' watchdog group last summer.

Four MPPs travelled around the GTA on holiday weekends checking prices at different gas stations.

The current leader of this watchdog group is Simcoe Centre MPP Joe Lascona, who met with the Canadian Petroleum Products Institute Tuesday to air his concerns about price hikes on the Easter weekend.

It's worth noting that while our politicians gather public support demanding to know why gas prices are so high, they're the main reason why gas costs so much more here than it does in the United States.

Taxes make up more than half the price of a litre of gas in Ontario.

And not only aren't our provincial 'tax fighters' cutting this tax, they won't even spend the money where it's supposed to be spent — on roads.

The Ontario government collects \$3.53 billion in gas taxes and spends only \$1.32 billion on highways. Ottawa collects \$5.3 billion in gas tax and spends \$250 million on highways.

Recently, business groups from Markham, Aurora, Richmond Hill, Vaughan and Whitchurch-Stouffville, along with the Ontario chapter of the Canadian Automobile Association, demanded the province create a highway investment fund.

All gas tax money should go straight into this fund, which would be designated to build or maintain roads.

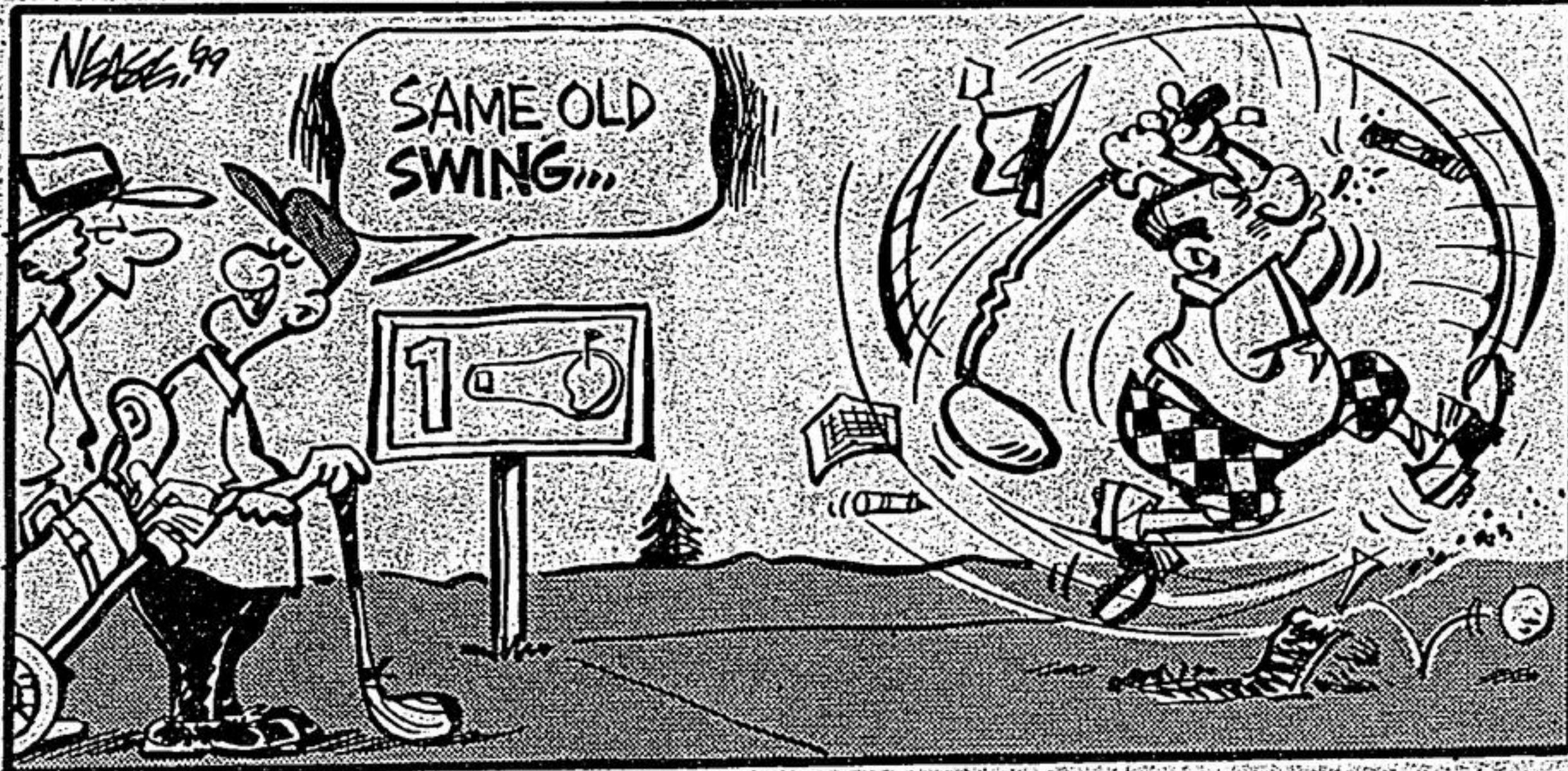
But the Ontario Ministry of Transportation has rejected the idea of a designated roads fund, saying the government needs the flexibility to use gas taxes for health care or education if necessary.

The Liberal transportation critic also refuses to support the idea.

So when it comes to gas taxes, Ontario's drivers are on their own. The good news is that there are a lot of us.

Perhaps if we all stay away from the pumps Friday, it will get the gas companies' attention, but we will have to follow that up with larger-scale protests if we really want to get prices under control.

OPINION



Doug Devine

Region residents still subsidize big city perks

It took more than a year, but fairness, equality and justice have finally prevailed in the GTA. In no particular order, Toronto councillors have agreed to harmonize the following:

- Free recreation programs for all children. This includes everything from beginner swimming lessons (up to level five), beginner skating, karate and gymnastics lessons, beginner dance lessons, day camps, after-school programs, family leisure swims, family skating and city-run youth clubs.
- Free garbage collection for all homes and businesses. Residential garbage will be picked up once a week in winter and twice a week in summer.
- All businesses will get free garbage collection twice a week, but those that have been getting up to six pickups a week will have to start paying the city a fee of up to \$1,600 a year.
- All sidewalks will be cleared of snow by the city, and all driveways will be cleared of the snow that piles up at the ends as the road is plowed.

I'm sure our politicians are working feverishly to address the outrageous inequity

As for those of us still foolish enough to live north of Steeles, the city councillors agreed to make sure none of us sneak into their free pools, ice rinks and community centres.

Which means York Region residents will still have to pay hundreds of dollars a year for their children's lessons in swimming, dance, gymnastics, skating, karate, etc.

And we'll still have to pay for after-school programs, summer day camps, youth clubs, family swims, family skates, etc.

And most York businesses will still have to pay extra for adequate garbage collection, including co-op and condominium housing projects.

And we'll still have to shovel our own driveways, and some of us will still have to shovel our own sidewalks under threat of a fine from the bylaw office if we don't.

Oh, yeah, and we'll still have to send the city \$93 million a year — about \$500 from each homeowner — because the city just can't afford to pay its own huge social costs.

But don't worry. I'm sure our politicians are working feverishly behind the scenes to address the outrageous inequity in all of this, aren't they?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Consumers can have say by supporting gas boycott

I have always been of the opinion that as consumers, we have a great deal of power.

Last week, I was speaking to my daughters about the fact that we have the power to influence gas prices and bank service charges.

I pointed out there are ways to do this, one of them being if everyone stopped buying gas for a day or two each week over a prolonged period of time. My daughter suggested I put this idea on the internet.

This Tuesday I read your *Stouffville Tribune* newspaper, and discovered that someone else had a similar idea and was planning to boycott buying gas on April 30.

I was ecstatic, surprised and pleased to know there were others who shared the same feelings, and I hope tomorrow's boycott is the start of something bigger.

This idea is not intended to try and stop the oil companies and banks from making profits (that would not be beneficial for us), but instead to stop them from gouging consumers.

The idea is designed to make them aware that consumers recognize they can take actions other than just complaining.

Let the banks and oil companies start looking at us as a group, rather than individuals, and realize how much clout we have.

Achieving this goal can be started by a small group, but it would take the support of most consumers for it to be effective.

Let us all get together and show our strength as consumers by not buying gas tomorrow, and by doing the same on May 5. We can also make the banks listen to our concerns by taking similar actions

VINCENT MARSHALL
MARKHAM

Tribune exceptional

Today I received three *Stouffville Tribunes* in the mail — April 3, 6 and 8.

I'd like to express how kind and considerate the receptionist was to send me these as we have moved out of the area. We live two hours away and have no access to them.

And congratulations to staff writer Joan Ransberry for the exceptional front page stories.

Your papers and employees are fantastic.

LAURA LINTNER
SPRINGBROOK

Big Brothers says thanks

On behalf of the children, the staff at Big Brothers of York want to take the opportunity to extend appreciation to all agency volunteers. Last year was tremendous and we predict 1999 will be equally successful.

Thank you to our Big Brothers and mentors, the exceptional people who take the time to enhance the lives of children through positive adult friendships.

This dedicated group is building futures through their volunteer efforts.

KATHRYN HENDERSON
RECRUITMENT OFFICER

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Serving the community since 1888

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