

THE PROVINCIAL ELECTION: Direction of next government crucial to environmental future of York Region

Life or death for moraine

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

"I don't believe," Oak Ridges Tory candidate Frank Klees was saying last week, "that the size of the budget for the Ministry of Environment can be equated to its effectiveness."

Sitting in a Stouffville doughnut shop the day before he gave out 1,000 tree and shrub seedlings "as a way to embrace Ontario's natural environment," Klees made the case that the Tories consider the environment important.

But the Mike Harris government's many environmental critics disagree.

Fines against convicted polluters are at their lowest level in a decade — one-third of what they were in 1995 — and the ministry has lost half of its 1995 budget and a third of its staff, the Canadian Environmental Law Association announced this week.

The government's own environment commissioner wrote a scathing report on the Tories' pollution record, calling Ontario's air quality "a public health crisis."

What the Tories have is not just an image problem, argued David Bell, a York University professor and director of the university's Centre for Applied Sustainability. "They've done more to undercut environmental capacity in the Ontario government than anyone could have imagined," he said.

As MPP for the now-defunct riding of York Mackenzie, Klees wrote a report that, when made policy, slashed budgets for conservation authorities in order to "re-focus" them on their original mission, flood control.

This encouraged authorities to move into self-sustaining partnerships with municipalities and the private sector, Klees said, adding he's heard the new approach is working.

"We've removed the restrictions they at one time had."

But managers of the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority in Klees' old riding say the lake is a provincial resource, and the government should be spending more to save it.

Since the province cut funds, the ability of the authority to carry out projects "to keep the lake healthy and clean has diminished dramatically," said Gayle Wood, chief administrative officer for the authority.

Tree-planting and other improvement projects are now done on a fee-for-service basis at a time when new development around Simcoe and its watershed is sending more phosphorus into the lake, she said.

Lake trout no longer breed in Lake Simcoe, added Mike Walters, the authority's manager of environmental services. "Whitefish are going the same way and things like herring are totally gone."

The next term of provincial government is crunch time for the Oak Ridges Moraine in York Region. It's the source of all York Region rivers and also a new frontier for development.

All three major parties are officially silent on the issue.

The Liberals recognize the moraine is a special area, but offered no statement.

"We don't go into these kind of details," a



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Melissa Brown, 8, jumps on her shovel to dig a hole while treeplanting at the headwaters of the Rouge River in Stouffville recently.

party spokesperson said last week.

Richmond Hill practically begged the province this year to grant it money or new powers for its plan to establish protected corridors on the moraine.

The province offered nothing.

Debbe Crandall, co-chairperson of Save The Oak Ridges Moraine (STORM), wants candidates to reveal what their parties will do to legislate moraine protection while there's still time.

"We may make changes to the surface which have impact on that lower strata" of the

moraine, she warned.

The Liberal candidate for Oak Ridges, Vito Spatafora, is a proponent of "carefully managed growth" on the moraine, but warned all development can't be stopped. "To stop growth is to stop jobs," he said.

A Richmond Hill councillor, Spatafora said he doesn't know if the province should buy the hundreds or thousands of acres of private tablelands which are needed for the town's corridor plan. "Maybe there are incentives (for landowners) that we can take a look at," he suggested.

Klees said he supports STORM, but the group's efforts must be balanced against scientific studies (on which developers spend hundreds of thousands of dollars) and the rights of property owners.

Last month, the Harris government dedicated 1,630 acres of public land to Rouge Park, forming an almost-unbroken protective zone around a major tributary, the Little Rouge, through Markham from Steeles Avenue to Major Mackenzie Drive.

Markham Tory MPP Dave Tsubouchi is also promising to work for 30-metre protective buffers along the banks of the Rouge River. "This is one of the jewels we still have in this province," Tsubouchi said.

His pledge drew praise from Glenn De Baeremaeker of Save The Rouge Valley System, one of the groups battling for greater protection for the river. "I'm hoping there is a momentum building," he said.

Ontario's Planning Act states developers must set aside a maximum five per cent of land for parks, and often developers argue they must dip into required parkland to provide wider buffers.

But Markham Deputy Mayor Frank Scarpitti, chairperson of the region's planning committee, said the province can change the law to let municipalities protect woodlots and 30-metre buffer zones along watercourses in addition to the legal requirement.

The region's tree cover is declining, Klees said he wants the government to look again at granting municipalities the power to issue stop work orders against illegal tree-cutting.

But De Baeremaeker said the easiest way to protect the region's remaining forests and woodlots is to buy them. This can be done, he argued, if governments spend on "green" infrastructure as heavily as they do on "gray" infrastructure, such as sewers and roads.

Groups like FROG (Forbid Roads Over Greenspaces) in East Gwillimbury and the 407 Action Group still hope to stop highway expansion in York Region, charging the province has failed to consider alternatives.

Chuck Cundari, a Preston Lake resident in Stouffville, doesn't consider himself a left-winger, but said he hopes Klees and Harris can start dealing with the environment in a "common sense sort of way."

A volunteer member of Stouffville's environmental advisory committee, Cundari wants an environmental charge put on development, money that could go to a fund to buy up farmland, he suggested. "It makes sense to protect our land for our kids."

Looking stateside for leadership

Does New Jersey Governor Christie Whitman know something Mike Harris doesn't?

Like Harris, the popular Republican governor came to power promising tax cuts, tougher measures on crime and work for welfare.

But unlike Harris, Whitman has been focusing on another issue — land preservation. Last summer, she pledged to protect a million acres of open space in New Jersey, half of it farmland, within the next decade.

New Jersey preserves farms by selling eight-year or permanent easements to farmers, preventing non-agricultural development on the land.

Last June in Maryland, where a state farmland preservation program has existed since 1977, 152,000 farm acres were permanently protected and owners of 323,000 additional acres had accepted voluntary restrictions.

Ontario's Tory government, meanwhile, is selling off 8,000 acres in Markham and Pickering, farmland previously protected as an agricultural preserve.

The province's land agency objected to municipal easements aimed at preserving the farms on the Pickering side, but later withdrew the objection after a compromise was reached.


Farmland is rapidly disappearing under subdivisions around the Greater Toronto Area, but neither the Tories nor the opposition Liberals have plans to start a preservation program like New Jersey's.

"The Liberals are missing a big opportunity here," York University professor David Bell said last week.


New Democrat leader Howard Hampton said he would stop the provincial land sale in Markham and Pickering, plus create other permanent agricultural preserves.

Steven Haylestrom, Green Party candidate for Oak Ridges, also supports designated agricultural districts. "As we lose farmland, we lose our ability to produce our own food."


— By Mike Adler



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