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Chief defends copter

FROM PAGE 1

released yesterday, showed the helicopter assisted in 176 calls when it was being used by York Regional Police.

The calls range from a noise complaint to robberies.

Chief Julian Fantino has been promoting the helicopter program over the past six months as a needed weapon in a modern police arsenal.

"It's a very important aspect of our patrolling operations," Fantino told the board today. "It's enabling our people to be far more effective and efficient on the ground."

Although the helicopter has yet to find any missing persons, it can rule out large rural areas with its infrared camera.

For instance, when a 14-year-old girl went missing in Richmond Hill on June 28, the helicopter was able to search open fields quickly, leaving ground units to check other areas.

Fantino said the helicopter has also helped catch aggressive drivers, nabbing two cars racing along Hwy. 407 at

200 km/h on Sept. 7.

"It's been useful in ferreting out road outlaws," the chief said.

But Kingston said the helicopter hasn't prevented a police chase yet, or nabbed a fleeing armed robber.

Supt. John Girvan, however, believes the helicopter should be judged by how it handles the day-to-day calls, not high-profile cases.

"Everyone is waiting for the big kill to justify it, but I'm not so sure that's the way to justify it," Girvan said. "I'd rather see it help us do the practical things better."

While helicopters are expensive, so are front-line officers, Girvan said.

It cost about \$250,000 a year to put one officer in a cruiser, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

There have been few critics of the helicopter program so far.

Markham Mayor Don Cousens questioned the cost in the beginning, but yesterday said his position has "softened."

For instance, Cousens said the helicopter has helped scare off vandals in a problem park in his town.

"It's nipped it in the bud. It may be petty stuff, but it's still aggravating to the community."

Cousens said the helicopter appears to be working, but added Fantino will have to prove its worth at the end of the six-month pilot.

Cousens said he'll be looking for an in-depth statistical analysis from police before he votes in favour of the helicopter.

"Sharing it hasn't appeared to work too badly," Cousens said. "Perhaps we can share one among other GTA municipalities."

But Kingston said to be truly effective, York Region would actually need two helicopters patrolling its skies.

"If you're not right on top of the situation right away, they're no damn good."

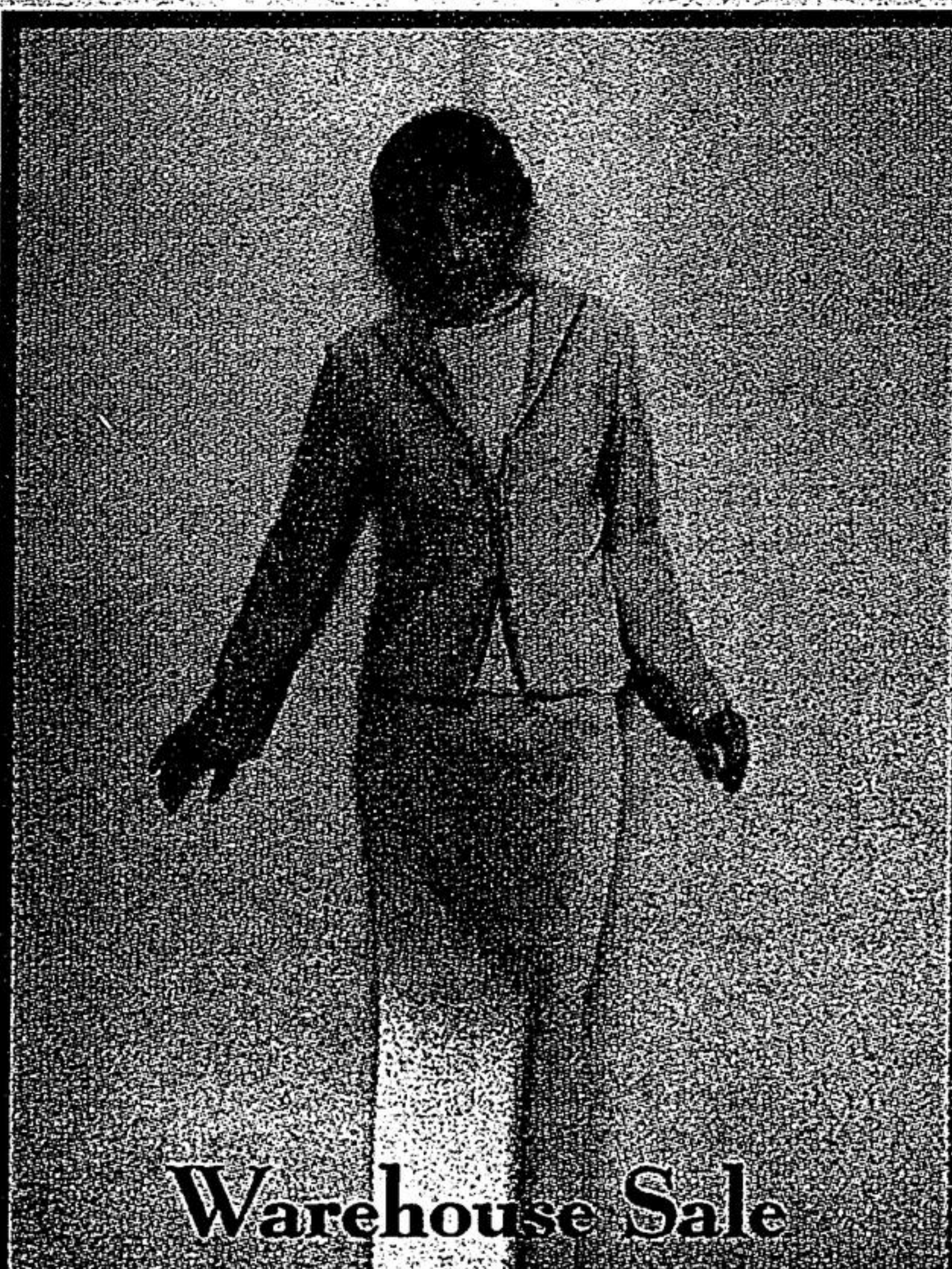
HERBAL MAGIC

CORRECTION NOTICE

The advertisement that appeared in the Economist & Sun/Tribune on Sept. 21 for 50% off All Full Weight Management Programs had the wrong expiry date.

The expiry date should have read "Sept. 29, 1999".

We apologize for this error.



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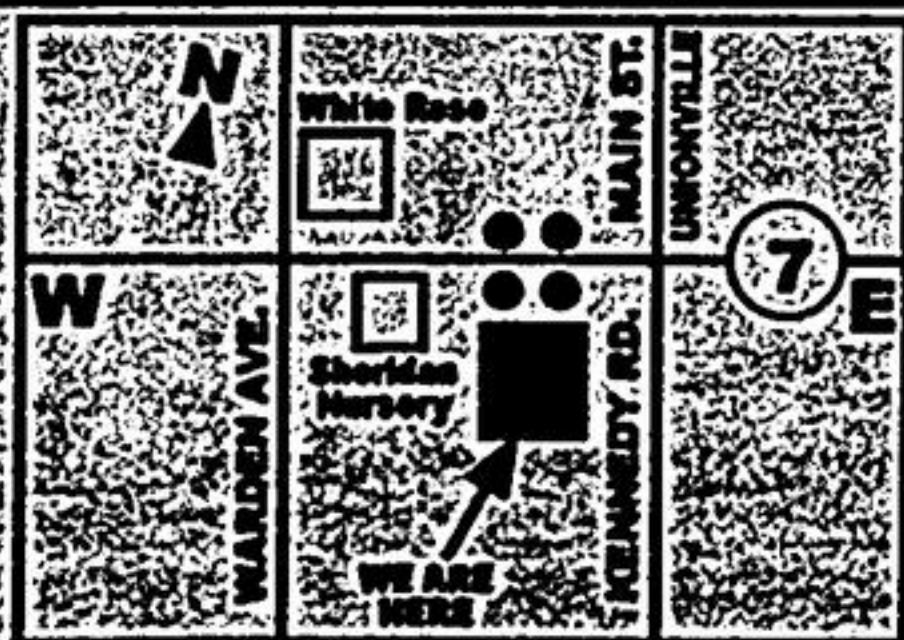
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