

# Moraine's too valuable to compromise, activists say

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heard. A complaint by prospective developers of the moraine in York Region led to a provincial cabinet minister's resignation last month. Since then, anything connected with the moraine — a 160-kilometre band of gravel and sand that filters water and produces rivers — has made headlines.

Residents fighting to keep the Ontario Heritage Foundation from selling part of Anne Bartley Smith's 97-acre Aurora estate discovered the land is environmentally significant, a high point on the moraine that contains headwaters of the Holland and Humber rivers, said Evelina MacEachern, a spokesperson for the South West Aurora Taxpayers.

The moraine land is so permeable, there are no puddles after a rainstorm, she said. "The water just runs right down, right into the ground."

*What good is it that you have a booming economy if there's no drinking water?*

A group that opposes the widening of St. Johns Sideroad in Aurora has linked its cause to the nearby moraine. And people who for years have fought the extension of Hwy. 407 through east-end Markham see a new angle: The road will cross the Rouge River and creeks flowing south from the moraine.

"They're moraine watersheds," Karen Deer, a Markham resident, insisted this week.

The no-compromise approach has a history of big accomplishments: If people weren't willing to lie in front of bulldozers in the 1970s, the thinking goes, the federal government would not have shelved its plan for an international airport in Pickering. And if people took no for an answer in the 1980s, Rouge Park in Scarborough — soon to expand to Markham, Richmond Hill and Stouffville — would not exist.

Saving the moraine would be an even bigger accomplishment for environmentalists. In Richmond Hill, the coalition wants governments to buy 2,700 acres for a Kettle Lakes Park. That would cost \$100 million now, and more than \$1 billion if the land is rezoned.

The land is part of an urban separator Richmond Hill's Official Plan indicated would remain undeveloped, and it contains forests, wetlands and several kettle lakes.

When town council voted to turn it urban last month, it had its compromise plan ready — a system of green corridors proposed to link sensitive environmental features together.

Should the coalition get the money for the park, "I would take my hat off to them," Bell said, "but they will probably end up settling for much less."

But the environmentalists say their proposed park would stop an east-west splitting of the moraine, it's too valuable to compromise.

It's easy for planners to put green lines on a map, but their goal is corridors 30 to 60 metres wide —



too thin for use by wildlife, De Baeremaeker said. "You and I could toss a Frisbee across that."

Developers, however, have spent large amounts on studies to show proposed moraine subdivisions won't stop water from filtering and flowing out.

The science of building on the moraine is very clear, but people who are not hydrogeologists don't understand it, Lloyd Cherniak, executive vice-president of developer Lebovic Enterprises, argued recently.

To back up its plans to build more than 2,700 homes around tiny Bond Lake, the firm hired Ken Howard, a Toronto professor who Cherniak calls the world's leading expert on groundwater. Howard supported Lebovic's application, Cherniak added, "through science, not through nonsense."

But others say scientific opinions can differ and more needs to be known about the moraine.

Marsh, a landscape architect and co-chairperson of the coalition, lives in a house overlooking Lake Wilcox, the region's largest kettle lake.

Some people got drinking water from the lake when Marsh came here in 1977. Then more houses were built nearby, weeds robbed the water of oxygen and fish began dying. It dawned on people Wilcox was not a healthy lake.

"We were seeing dead birds and ducks," Marsh said.

These days, Wilcox has a "lake lung," an artificial oxygen pump working like the filter for a giant fish tank. On a family fun day last June, no one was allowed in the water because of toxic algae.

The most surprising thing about the moraine scandal is how it changed political attitudes. Before the June provincial election, all three major parties were officially silent about the moraine.

But this month, the Liberals demanded a freeze on moraine development and proposed a new planning control body similar to the Niagara Escarpment Commission. When the party's municipal affairs critic Mike Colle spoke about municipalities being held hostage by developers, he sounded a lot like Glenn De Baeremaeker.

Colle and others are hoping to champion a new trend in politics, toward quality of life issues like a healthy environment and workable transportation system.

"What good is it," he asked this month, "that you have a booming economy if there's no drinking water?"

# Restoration makes a difference

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degraded" condition and a major supplier of phosphorus to the lake.

But small restoration efforts have made a difference. For 11 years, students of Sacred Heart Catholic High School in Newmarket have cared for a stretch of the river in Aurora, planting trees there and fixing its eroded banks.

"Today, you'll find many species (of fish) there," including brook trout, Sacred Heart Science teacher Kerry

Dupuis says.

A local man, Ernie Crossland, has proposed a trail system for the East Holland.

And John McRogers of Newmarket urged his neighbours around Haskett Park, which contains an East Holland tributary, to put scores of trees and shrubs there. Many contributed because they thought about the environment, he says.

"It's all these little things that add up to a healthy community."

**the bay**

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