

Province holding hospitals hostage, officials say

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"We have wondered to what extent those discussions might hinder the availability of funding coming forward and whether it may sidetrack things," Lussing said.

"But there is no sense that will happen, I think there is enough of a sensitivity around our needs."

York County Hospital president Dan Carriere points out that no matter where people live, they will be served by one of the three hospitals.

"I don't care how they break up the region, health care is still going to be an issue," he said.

"Even if the region is broken into two or three, everyone will end up with a hospital in their back yard. Everyone needs a relevant health-care service and there's a cost to that."

The request put forward to the region by local hospitals is for \$73 million or 38 per cent of the total cost of all three projects. The province pays for 62 per cent of the bill.

MARKHAM STOUFFVILLE SEEKS \$30 MILLION

All three hospitals have plans to expand their facilities over the next four years — York County in Newmarket at \$103 million, followed by York Central at \$69 million and Markham Stouffville at \$30 million.

And in the case of York County, the clock is ticking to secure the local portion.

"We have to know now," Carriere said this week.

"We've received correspondence from the Ministry indicating we have to say where our community share is coming from."

Carriere said confirmation from the region on the funding might come next month.

"Our project is very advanced and the ministry needs to know this. If we don't get it, it will mean we will have to either halt the project or delay it."

Hospitals have to have all funding in place before the projects are approved by the Ministry of Health. York County is ready to go ahead, but the project is being held up by a lack of approval because a commitment from the region is needed.

While prepared to make a commitment, regional officials are frustrated it has been dumped on their laps.

"The province is holding our hospitals hostage," said Georgina Mayor and regional councillor Rob Grossi.

"We'll end up doing the right thing, but it's another example of the province downloading on the local municipality."

"It is a hugely dangerous (precedent), but what's the alternative?" said Grossi, who suggested the region could debenture the costs to help pay for the capital costs.

"I think we'll do the right thing to support the hospitals, but it is a fundamental change from the way it has been done in the past. It shouldn't come from local municipal dollars. But if we don't they'll blame us if nothing happens."

OFFICIALS COUNT ON LOCAL SUPPORT

But Carriere and others feel confident there will be local support for the projects.

"We feel very strongly there is support from the region. They've studied it and analysed it," said Dr. Jim MacLean, president of Markham Stouffville Hospital.

"I think funding will be independent of the political landscape around us."

Markham Stouffville will be the last to begin its expansion plans, while York Central is set to begin in July.

In the past, local capital projects have usually translated into campaigns held by local hospital foundations. But this time the amount needed is too large.

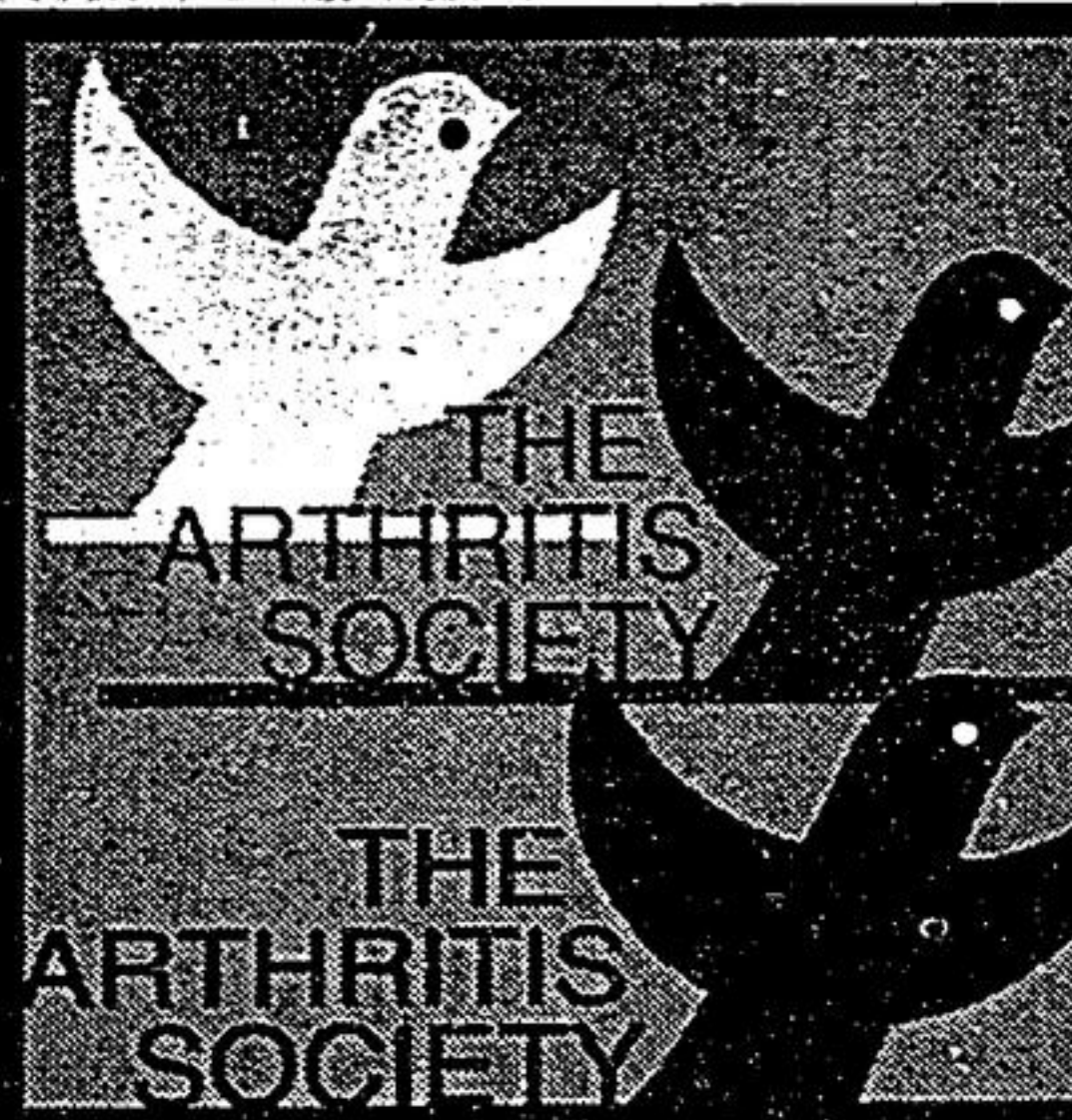
The community share is usually forthcoming from the foundations and through things like bake sales, but bake sales aren't going to do it this time, said Lussing, pointing out that the local municipality should step forward because most of the redevelopment issue is driven by growth.

Carriere adds that even if the region commits to helping the hospitals, he believes there is also a role for developers.

"We can't place 100 per cent of the onus on the development industry, but it is a factor."

Changes to the Development Charges Act in 1997 disqualified hospitals from receiving a portion of lot levies.

But hospitals like York County and York Central have needed redevelopment for 15 to 20 years.



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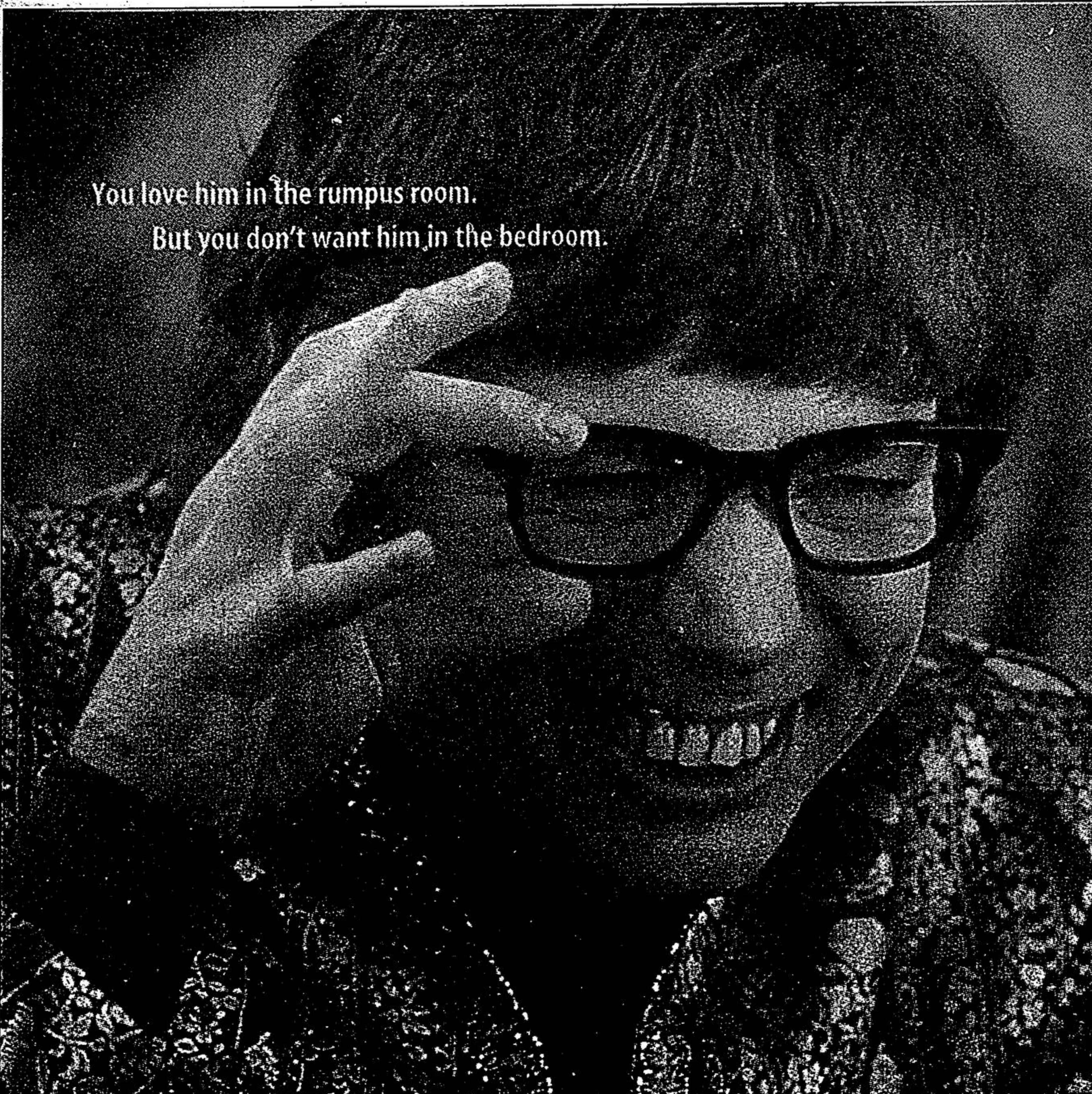
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