

LIVING

WATER

Guarding our liquid treasure

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

Retired teacher Bob Holland was miffed about paying 67 cents a litre for gas until he bought a bottle of water.

That was \$1.99 a litre, plus tax. There in the gas station kiosk, Holland started thinking about the Oak Ridges Moraine, a 160-kilometre ridge of sand and gravel which covers a third of York Region, its unseen pockets and caverns supplying water to dozens of rivers and thousands of faucets.

How much water is down there, and what's it worth, packaged in little plastic bottles, Holland wondered? Billions of dollars? Trillions?

Nobody really knows.

Yet this vast underground treasure trove, to Holland's way of thinking, is endangered by the haste to put housing developments on the moraine. Housing that may prevent the moraine from absorbing some of the water or degrade its quality.

"It's the value of water in those deep aquifers that we're putting in jeopardy," the Richmond Hill resident suggested last week.

Southern Ontario is one of the few places left where people could find such logic hard to grasp.

Canada has more fresh water for each of its citizens than any country on Earth, and water bills in York Region are incredibly small — about \$1.06 per cubic metre.

Elsewhere on the planet drinking water is increasingly scarce — more than a billion people lack it already, and global consumption is doubling every 20 years.

SELLING TO A THIRSTY WORLD

But here, it has taken news of declining Great Lakes levels and years of grassroots campaigns for the moraine and the future health of our local rivers to stir concern about the wealth of water we have, and perhaps stand to lose.

"We've had an abundance mentality," said Dr. David Sharpe, a hydrogeologist with the Geological Survey of Canada. "Now we're starting to recognize that there are issues to resolve."

There is growing pressure on Canada to sell our fresh water to a thirsty world. Companies have tried to sell Canadian water reserves like Shell Oil sells crude, and one day they may succeed.

Average Canadians drink 22 litres of bottled water a year, but that growing market is small compared to Europe, where average consump-

tion is 94 litres a year per person, according to the Richmond Hill-based Canadian Bottled Water Association.

York Region, cheap as its water is, is preparing to spend incredible sums to bring more to a growing population. It wants to increase the amount of Lake Ontario water it receives through Toronto's pipeline, build a new plant to draw Lake Simcoe water for Georgina and build a completely new pipeline to Lake Ontario through Durham Region.

Aurora and Newmarket will continue to draw water from the moraine, but soon the region will begin mixing it with lake water — 5 per cent at first and up to 35 per cent in 2031. Lake water must be added or the underground reservoir under Aurora, known as the Yonge Street Aquifer, will start to run dry, said Debbie Korolnek, the region's long-term water project manager.

Lake Simcoe filled early this year and is not far below its normal level, Bruce Kitchen of the Trent-Severn Waterway said last week. "We just

don't want people to think that if the Great Lakes are low, everything else must be bad."

But Lake Simcoe has been troubled by phosphorus pollution, the result of everyday runoff from farms and residences.

OUR LAKES CAN'T BREATHE

And in Richmond Hill, tiny Lake Wilcox on the moraine is so unhealthy it needs an oxygen pump called a lake lung to breathe.

Such a tragic scene — a delicate kettle lake disrupted by pollution — is one reason why the City of Toronto tried to become involved in the upcoming Ontario Municipal Board hearing on moraine development in Richmond Hill. Your water is our water, too, Toronto politicians told their York Region counterparts.

Although some scientists say the moraine's groundwater is not endangered by development, over 450 experts recently signed a petition to give greater protection to the landform and establish a 2,700-acre moraine park in

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Saving money, a flush at a time

None of her toilets has worked the same since the day Sandy Brooks invited contractors from York Region into her bathrooms.

Brooks thinks the toilets flush just as well, and she's thrilled. All three are water-savers now, fitted with a flap-per that keeps water in their tanks from being wasted.

The work a few weeks ago in Brooks' Thornhill home took minutes. "I would've paid for it," she said last week.

But anyone can have all the water-saving toilet flappers or low-flow showerheads they want — installed free — as part of the region's Water For Tomorrow program.

One of the largest campaigns of its kind in North America, the goal is to save 19 million litres of water in the region a day — enough for a town of 50,000.

A single toilet retrofit — and the program has installed 89,000 toilet flappers since its launch in 1998 — can save a household 30,000 litres of water a year.

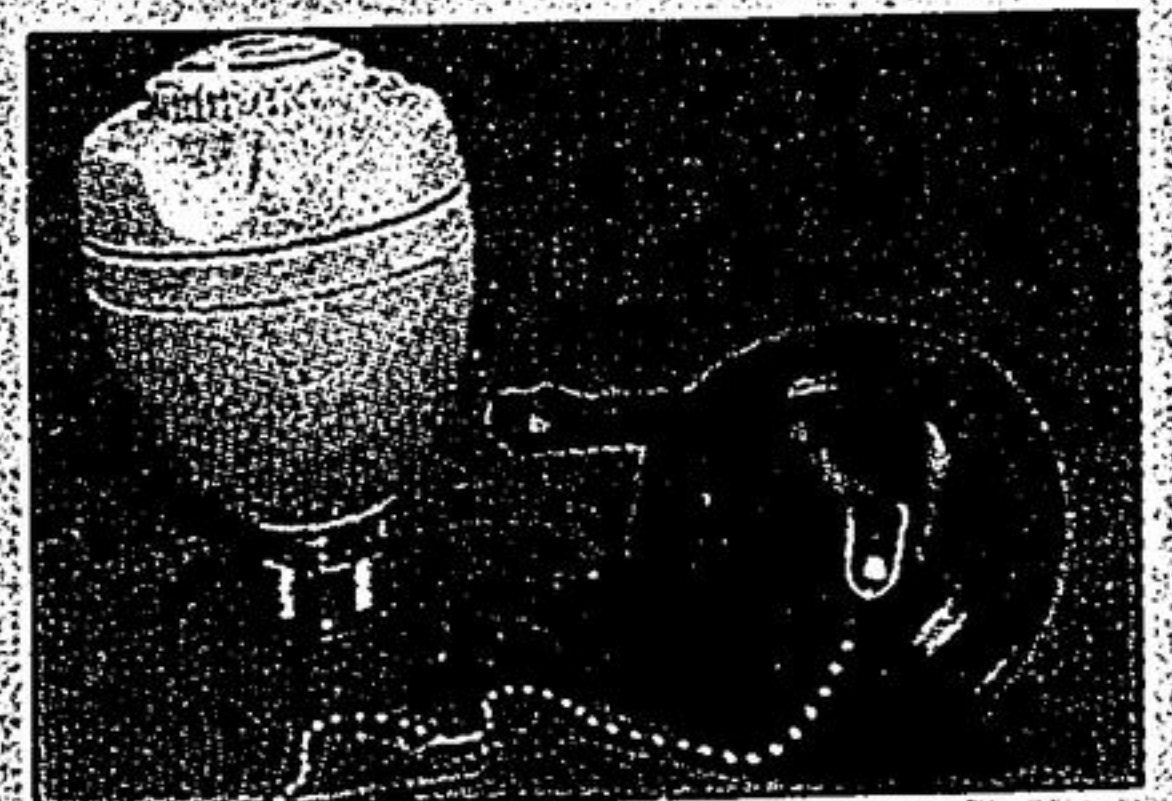
One low-flow showerhead of the 43,000 retrofitted so far can save 25,000 litres a year, not to mention heating costs. Families that install both water-saving devices can save a combined \$70 a year on water and energy bills, said Water For Tomorrow project manager Michael Brooks.

The region is spending \$10 million over six years to "find" wasted water, about eight per cent of its total demand, in bathrooms and local industries and leaks in its own network of pipelines.

Spending to eliminate the water losses, Michael Brooks (who is unrelated to Sandy Brooks) explained, is a lot cheaper than building new pipes to supply the same amount.

So far, the region's consulting engineers have done water audits on 16 institutions or industries, suggesting

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Low-flow showerheads (left) and toilet flappers can save a household 55,000 litres of water a year.



MACULAR DEGENERATION

Age-Related Macular Degeneration (ARMD) is a progressive deterioration of the macula, an oval area at the center of the retina that helps us see details clearly. As the name suggests, this is a more prevalent disease within our aging population. Symptoms include blurred vision and gradual deterioration of the center of the field of vision. It is not accompanied with any pain or other warnings.

Lifestyles that include smoking, poor diet, obesity, or high blood pressure can promote progression of the disease. The role of nutrition including vitamins and minerals is under active investigation at the

present time. Diabetes is NOT a risk factor.

ARMD is an illness that, unfortunately, cannot be treated. When it reaches advance stages, laser treatments help to slow down further deterioration. This is not a cure. Usually, vision is severely affected and this affects quality of life.

There are however, special lenses we call Telescopes (for improving vision at far distances) and Microscopes (for reading and near tasks) that can often significantly enhance existing vision. Yellow or amber tinted lenses in spectacles also help improve vision by reducing glare and light scattering.

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