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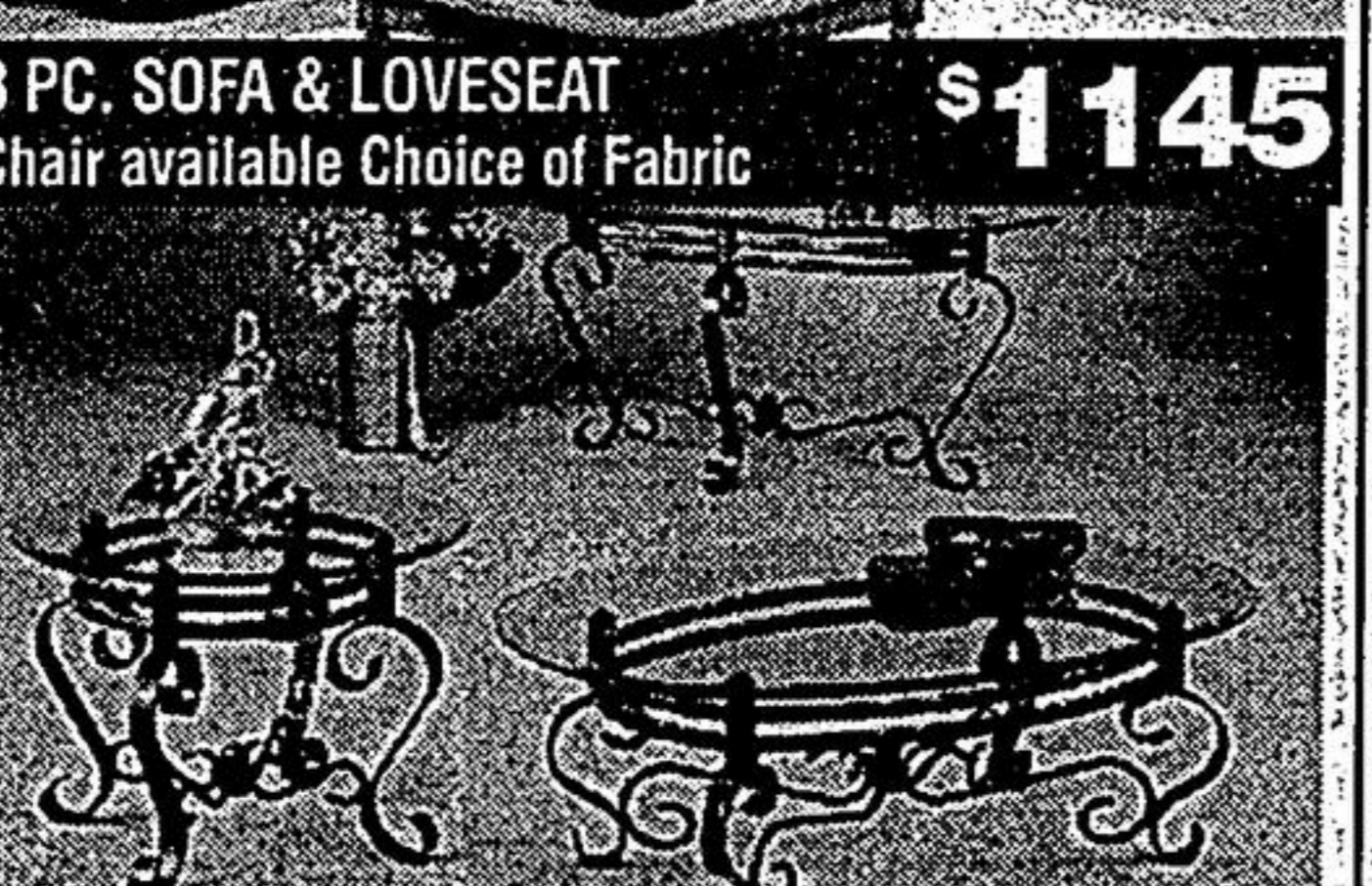
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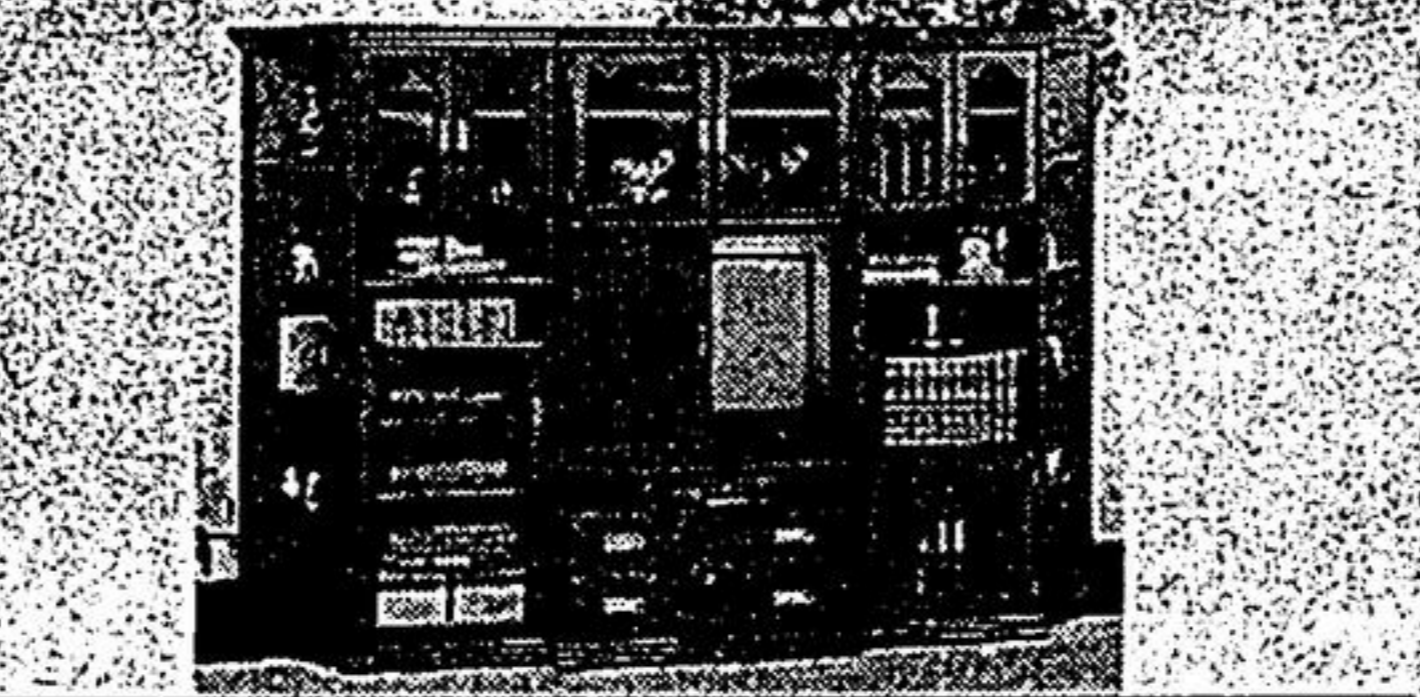
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# Region plans \$29,000 survey on transit

BY PATRICK CASEY  
Staff Writer

York Region taxpayers will foot the bill for a \$29,000 survey on the merits of a regional transit system, even though the service should be running early next year.

Enviro-nics Research Group will poll 1,000 residents, asking them to discuss their views on transit co-ordination, spending priorities, transit service levels and future expectations.

On Thursday, Markham Regional Councillor Frank Scarpitti questioned his colleagues on their decision to approve the survey, calling the expense a disappointment, especially since previous studies have already demonstrated the need for improved bus service.

"You are trying to show the public does support a regional integrated system, but the public is way out ahead of all of us," stressed Scarpitti. "If it was up to them, we would have done it a long time ago."

"How much information do people need before they feel satisfied that we do have the support of the people? Unfortunately, we are going to have to spend another (\$29,000) to indicate one more time that people are supportive of the system. I hope this type of information is the last report we have to do."

Expected to be finalized by January 2001, the York Transit Commission would pool the existing bus services of Newmarket, Aurora, Richmond Hill, Markham and Vaughan into a seamless schedule across the region.

Politicians from regional municipalities have yet to grant final consent for the plan, while the provincial government remains a critical hurdle, since new legislation must be passed this spring to authorize the new agency.

The Enviro-nics survey, to be completed by the end of May, will take about eight minutes for respondents to complete and include between 10 and 20 questions.

With 1,000 telephone responses, the survey has a statistical reliability of plus or minus 3.2 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

Newmarket Councillor Diane Humeniuk, who is chairperson of the YTC, took exception to Scarpitti's comments, stating previous surveys are outdated and fresh ideas are needed.

"This is not just an exercise in public acceptance. The demographics have changed, and we had a 6-per-cent increase in population last year over the year before," countered Humeniuk.

"We have to look at views, service levels, pattern of usage, travel time, costs and reliability. It's important for people to provide us with their views. Certainly the intention of this exercise is not to hash over the old information."

With more than 400,000 new residents expected to call York Region home within the next 20 years, transportation gridlock has already become the most critical issue for taxpayers.

However, the region owns the worst record across the GTA for public transit use, with a meagre ridership of just 5 per cent.

Scarpitti said Markham discovered a method to make transit competitive with the automobile by establishing express buses that scoot commuters across Hwy. 7, allowing them to reach the Finch subway station in quick fashion.

And when Hwy. 407 opened, Scarpitti said bus ridership soared 50 per cent.

Meanwhile, Markham Regional Councillor Gord Landon accused the region's smaller municipalities of attempting to de-rail the regional transit scheme, and stressed the need for the public to become more involved in the process.

"We need to get the public out to the public sessions to show them that this is important," he said. "And if there is disagreement amongst the municipalities, and we don't get an agreement from them, the province will not be prepared to look at the regional transit system."



FRANK SCARPITTI: Markham councillor says a study isn't necessary because council knows the public supports integrated transit.

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