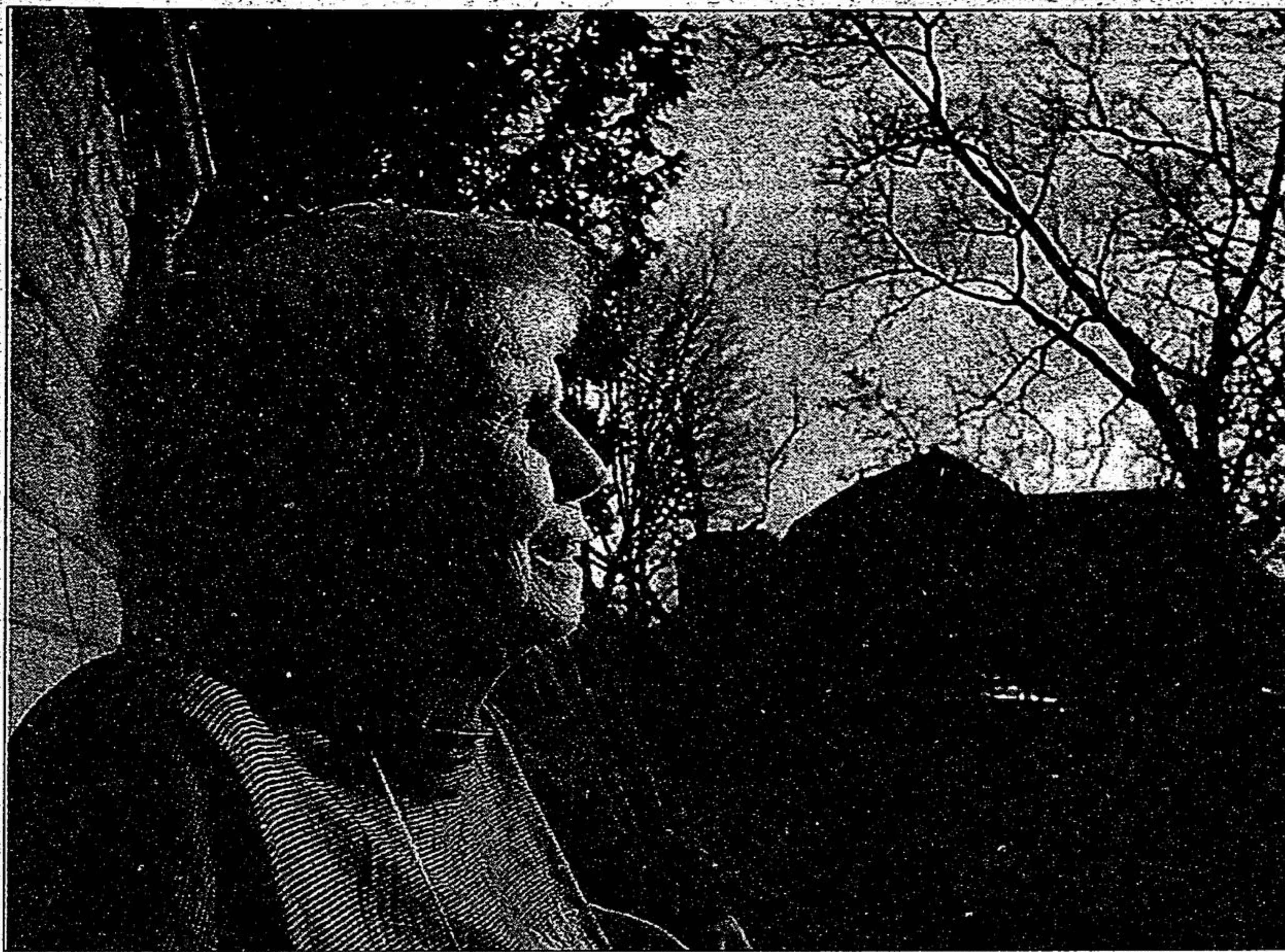


IS YORK REGION'S PACE OF GROWTH TOO FAST?



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

# Is the sun setting on York Region's rural roots?

Frances Walker (left), who has been living on the same York Region farm for 83 years, has watched a subdivision grow up beside her land. She vows to protect her farmland until the day she dies.

BY DAWN LIERSCH  
Staff Writer

When Frances Walker was offered top dollar from developers for her farm on Mulock Drive in Newmarket about 20 years ago, she flatly refused.

Believing it was the only way to preserve some of the rolling fields that used to cover the town, Walker vows to protect her precious farmland until the day she dies.

"I'll never sell it. We need some green space," said Walker, who has lived at the site for 83 years. Her grandfather, William Stickwood, bought the property from the Bogart family in 1884.

"It was a lot of money, but I didn't have any troubles turning it down. I just hope other people will want to protect it when I'm gone."

From her backyard, Walker can already see homes from the Stonehaven subdivision popping up on what was once sprawling green space — and she's hoping the same fate is not in store for her own land.

But with York Region deemed the fastest-growing region in the province, the next slate of politicians will have the tough task of trying to preserve green space and prevent traffic gridlock from spiraling out of control.

"Development and growth has proceeded at a horrendous pace and we can't keep up with the infrastructure or roadways. We have to take a serious look at whether we can allow the growth that's project-

ed," said Ruth Burkholder, president of the Markham Board of Trade.

Worried gridlock will escalate as the region's population grows, Burkholder's group has joined chambers of commerce across Canada in lobbying the provincial and federal governments to provide more money for roads.

In the meantime, the Markham Board of Trade plans to demand the region make changes to road systems, such as double-turn lanes to allow a faster flow of traffic.

"But it's only a band-aid solution," Burkholder warns.

Mary McCormack-Badinski, a Newmarket councillor candidate, suggests a major reform in planning is needed to deal with growth.

"It seems like we're always backtracking. We allow growth and we don't have the infrastructure to support it. If we don't bring the infrastructure up to speed, the results are gridlock and a strain on facilities," she said.

Using Newmarket as an example, McCormack-Badinski points to the congestion on Davis Drive and the fact a recent consultants' report showed the town is already lacking adequate parkland, as a sign it's time to ease up on growth.

"We have to let the town catch up to where we are. It's not easy for us to shut down growth, but why can't we make greater demands of developers. We have to use our influence to our greatest ability," she said.

Some councillor candidates are

even promoting a ban on development in certain areas.

Brenda Hogg, a Richmond Hill regional councillor candidate, is largely basing her campaign on preventing development of the Oak Ridges Moraine.

"It's not just a backlash on development, it's recognition of a special area. We can't save all the green space, but we have to save some environmentally sensitive areas like the Oak Ridges Moraine because we can't buy it back," she said.

*'We have to be responsible and put together official plans and secondary plans for growth ... You certainly have to do your homework as to what you can and can't do.'*

"Development already leads to problems with traffic and urban sprawl and developing the Oak Ridges Moraine will just compound the problem."

Cosimo Lacaria, who's running for Catholic school trustee in Vaughan, says dozens of students are being crammed into portables because the region is growing too fast.

Lacaria wants municipalities to tie-in new development to the availability of schools.

"We're growing too fast and we're

not providing the essentials to the community such as schools and recreation facilities. Children end up being bused to other communities or put in mould-infested portables," he said.

Joe Sponga, a Newmarket councillor candidate, wants all housing development in Newmarket — except for affordable housing — to be halted.

"Residential development provides the lowest tax base and it's also the most expensive to support," he said.

Pointing out that there is a lot of vacant space in strip malls along Davis Drive, Sponga suggests the town should concentrate on attracting high-tech industrial growth to those areas instead to boost the tax base.

"Development, yes, but from a different perspective ... We have to concentrate on development that fuels the economy, such as high-tech offices," he said.

East Gwillimbury also desperately needs more industrial/commercial development to build up the tax base, but mayoral candidate Jamie Young stressed the town must proceed with caution.

With nearby Newmarket running out of land to develop, Young fears developers will flock to his town and pressure council to allow them to build there instead.

"We need (industrial/commercial) development to offset the tax base but I want East Gwillimbury to be in a position that we can choose what we want in. We have to keep a

handle on development. We have to keep control," he said.

Young's top priority is to ensure the proposed Queensville development contains a mix of housing and industrial/commercial development.

Pointing out council has already re-allocated some commercial development to other areas, he worries the town may now allow housing in Queensville to proceed without the commercial development.

"I don't want to see another bedroom community in Queensville. I don't want us to stray from the plan," he said.

Georgina mayoral candidate Rob Grossi also stressed the importance of careful planning to preserve natural features of the town, while still allowing it to reap some of the rewards that come with new development.

In Keswick, where the most new housing has occurred, the community has also gained new schools, road improvements, a new twin pad arena and commercial development.

"New commercial development has made it easier to stay and shop at home. It has brought benefits but we've still allowed the community to remain very rural in nature," he said.

"We have to be responsible and put together official plans and secondary plans for growth ... You certainly have to do your homework as to what you can and can't do."

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