

Rapid growth causes residents concern, politicians say

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tremendous rate at the expense of the environment, Hogg explained.

"We're choking to death on urban sprawl."

She also said the great media attention to the plight of the Oak Ridges Moraine since late last year woke people up to existing urban issues.

Witness the municipal campaigns of Jane Underhill of King Township and Erin Shapero of Thornhill.

Underhill, a former King councillor, lost the race for mayor by a mere 25 votes to incumbent Margaret Black. She ran in part, she said, to stop the construction of the Big Pipe, the extension of the York Durham Sewer System, that would bring more development into the area.

"Seventy per cent of King lies in the Oak Ridges Moraine," she said. "We need to really pressure the provincial government for legislation to protect it."

Mike Colle, MPP and the Liberals' Municipal Affairs critic, would agree.

"The government and town councils haven't caught up with the will of the people," he said,

although he was very pleased with the election results throughout York Region.

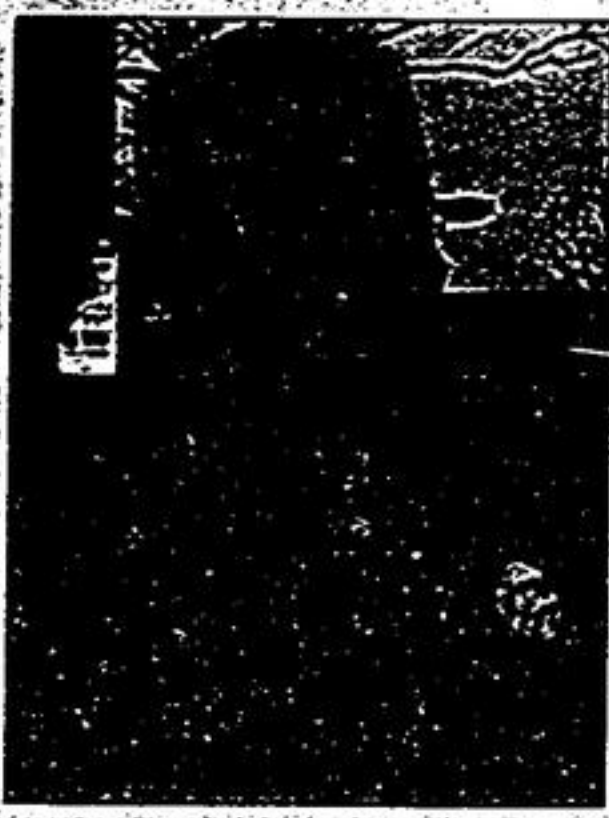
Colle said he was amazed at the overwhelming support the public has shown this year, particularly in Richmond Hill, for the protection of the moraine. It's an indication, he said, that people are willing to put the environment ahead of development.

The moraine is the source of York Region's groundwater and the starting point for its rivers flowing north and south. It's made of layers of sand and silt that filter water like a sponge.

Drinking water for the region is taken from aquifers deep beneath the moraine. Supporters of the moraine fear new development of the land will jeopardize this water supply as well as take up precious green space.

As Hogg said, people are seeing the erosion of the quality of life. Small towns are disappearing rapidly to accommodate the influx in population and that's upsetting for many people, she said.

That's how Hogg jumped into politics. Late last year, she became concerned with the



MIKE COLLE: Liberal MPP launched a campaign to save the moraine this year.

town's quick approval for rapid development on sensitive land.

"It was incredibly ambitious and arrogant," she said.

So Hogg voiced her concern. Suddenly, environmentalists appeared from the woodwork to support her and, 12,000 votes later, she said, sounding surprised, "I'm deputy mayor."

The same sentiments could be said of Shapero, who went to Hogg earlier this year for advice on running in the municipal election.

Shapero, a "green" candidate from Thornhill, stormed her way into a seat on Markham's town council also waving the environmental flag.

She said her 63-per-cent victory in Ward 2 was clear indication that 905-area residents are very concerned about the environment, the Oak Ridges Moraine, protecting water and what green spaces are left.

"It's been a spectacular year for the environment," she said, "but you ain't seen nothing yet."

Shapero said "a sleeping giant" had been awakened in the public's mind and residents won't support politicians who don't demonstrate care and concern for the environment.

"Any politician stupid enough not to support a green platform will be voted out of office," she said.

But it isn't just the politicians who have become more earthy. True environmental activists are still a persistent force.

Glenn de Baeremaeker, spokesperson for Save the Rouge, has been a thorn in the sides of many.

"York Region doesn't have a green record, it has an asphalt record," he said. "There are

fewer trees and streams every year. The York Region record is an embarrassment. People will look back on this region in the years ahead with disgust."

He said 1.5 million trees were cut down in York Region between 1975 and 1990, adding the Town of Markham, for instance, has less than 5-per-cent tree cover.

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Already there's evidence that not only are these protectionist voices being heard, but action is ensuing.

Last week, King City's new town council voted to suspend any further work on the Big Pipe.

The four new councillors who called the 4-3 vote were all sent into office this fall on a green mandate.

Councillors also voted unanimously to investigate a program of inspecting and monitoring septic and sewage systems to determine the appropriateness of the Big Pipe.

An Ontario Municipal Board hearing that got under way in late summer regarding the fate of Oak Ridges Moraine in Richmond Hill is in recess until Jan. 6.

The hearing will determine whether the land Richmond Hill had set aside in 1980 will be developed or preserved.

Developers have already pumped millions of dollars into an area that makes up about one-third of the town.

But there have been signs of help.

In December, the nine conservation authorities responsible for the moraine announced they were banding together as the Conservation Authorities Moraine Coalition.

Their new role is to assist the province and municipalities in creating legislation by providing the scientific data needed to make development policy.

So if 2000 can be considered a green year for the environmental progress that was made, it is also a green year because it marks the rebirth of a new, environmentally friendly approach to life.

"More people are moving forward," said Underhill. "The election showed that."

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