

Justice in a trailer park

Lost files, prisoners and research part of the fallout from York Region's mould-infested courthouse

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Staff Writer

For workers wondering what troubles would arise in running York Region's court system out of a bunch of trailers, it was a bad sign.

Days after toxic mould forced hundreds of employees out of the Ontario Superior Court of Justice building in Newmarket, a truck was set to move thousands of files to a maze of trailers that would serve as temporary courtrooms in the courthouse's parking lot.

But the truck backed into an overhang and police charged the driver with drunk driving. Without anyone to drive the truck, workers had to use carts to move the files.

It was the first of many difficulties that would dog employees who had enjoyed a relatively smooth two decades in the red brick building at 50 Eagle St. W.

Officials predicted workers and the public would endure less-than-ideal conditions for 60 days but nearly a year after the courthouse closed on June 30, 2000, employees continue to experience problems — even with a move to five temporary court facilities in Newmarket and Richmond Hill.

Clerks have lost files, police lost prisoners who escaped from courthouse custody and lawyers lost valuable research materials readily available when the courthouse was open.

For lawyer Clive Algie, a loss of respect for traditional judicial institutions remains the biggest difficulty.

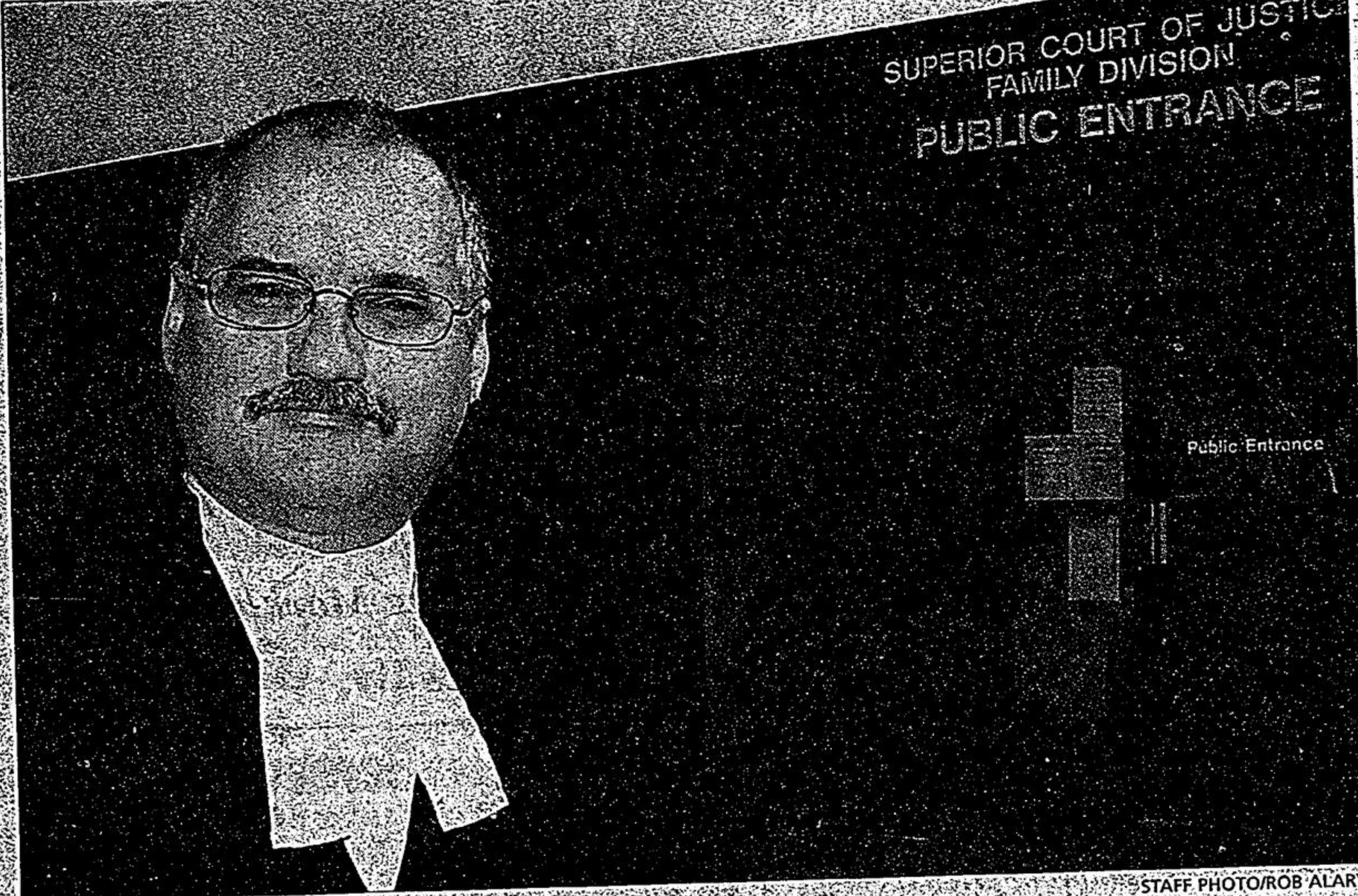
"It's hard to get the idea you're dealing with serious matters when you're running around in a trailer park," he said in a warehouse now known as the Cane Parkway court.

Algie, who practises family law in Newmarket, has dealt with some aggravating inconveniences: poor acoustics that make it tough to hear in courtrooms, working in three courthouses rather than one and driving to too few parking spaces that "suck."

But after watching him speak with clients who would've been able to sit on seats outside a regular court, it becomes apparent he deals with those difficulties through humour.

"Have a stand," he instructed them in a bare hallway.

"Personally, I haven't had a problem," he later joked. "It's no big deal. We were out in trailers during the summer months. It was like summer camp."



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Lawyer Clive Algie: "It's hard to get the idea you're dealing with serious matters when you're running around in a trailer park." According to provincial officials, York Region's troubled courthouse should be back in operation by the end of June.

Algie's amusement is illustrated best through a calendar he helped make and distribute to court employees.

Called *Memories of Mould: Walking in a Winnebago Wonderland*, the 2001 calendar features photographs of workers hauling files or standing next to trailers and portables.

In a joke caption accompanying October's photo, one policeman says to another, "The fella who jumped the wall and dropped 15 feet trying to escape was lucky."

"Yeah. He was wearing his light fall jacket," the other cop replies.

The caption brings levity to a situation that could've become deadly serious.

In October 2000, a prisoner York Regional Police described as a man with "a horrendous record of violence" escaped from a temporary court while waiting to make an appearance on two criminal charges.

During the escape, which ended in a dramatic takedown the following December, the man slipped through handcuffs that secured him to a pipe in a fenced area.

He scaled a 15-foot fence outside the facility in making his getaway.

Sgt. Ted Horton, one of several police officers working with a security firm to look after safety, conceded the prisoner would likely not have left the regular courthouse.

"We haven't had any prisoners escape in the last six to eight months," he said.

Horton said the 25-year-old escaped because he had "an opportunity to see daylight" over the fence.

Police kept up to 50 prisoners handcuffed to bars in a loading bay — covered only by a tent in the fenced area — before putting them in cell blocks at 50 Eagle St. W. last February.

Despite another escape last summer, Horton said the detention facilities did not pose a threat to the public.

"We haven't had any prisoners escape in the last six to eight months," he said.

But life isn't so pleasant for police who have endured "deplorable" working conditions, he added.

Bad weather, electrical breakdowns and longer travel times are three difficulties they've dealt with in carrying out a range of duties.

"When you fracture a building like Eagle Street, you split all those functions," Horton noted. "Now we have to do the same functions times three."

Police have muddled through by adjusting schedules, taking on tasks they ordinarily wouldn't, working overtime and using extra officers.

According to Brendan Crawley, a spokesperson for Ontario's Ministry of the Attorney General, other workers have coped well with the move and its fallout.

"Everybody was very understanding and supportive of what was done and made adjustments," he said.

Many employees worked on only a few hours' sleep the weekend they spent moving offices for eighteen judges and 14 justices of the

peace, as well as setting up public washrooms, service counters and dozens of other items.

Off-site facilities provided by York Region and a local golf course have helped.

Videoconferencing terminals have allowed prisoners and judges to communicate with one another during court proceedings from locations kilometres apart.

"It made things so convenient," Crawley said.

But not everyone is as upbeat about the move, which has cost taxpayers millions of dollars.

Clerks refused to speak about it but an employee newsletter says they've complained about tap water containing pipe sediment, stuffy air or temperature fluctuations and the disappearance of computers.

One attorney said it's remarkable more items haven't gone missing. But that's of small consolation to Ken Hill.

The civil litigation lawyer is one of many attorneys who lost research materials for cases with the closure of 50 Eagle St. W.

"When the courthouse closed, that cut off our access to its legal library."

Books and computers were crated up and have been unavailable to us for the better part of a year now," he said in his Newmarket office.

Hill has coped by researching cases at libraries in Toronto but noted extra travelling has cut into time with loved ones.

Clerks have done a fairly good job keeping tabs on legal paperwork, he added, despite delays in dealing with cases.

Donna Douglas is all too familiar with delays.

The Sutton resident said several trips to the regular courthouse were quick and without any losses of her files.

But on a recent trip to a temporary facility, she complained about waiting an entire day to plead guilty to an impaired driving charge and about clerks losing her information.

"I was in here at 8:30 in the morning and at five o'clock I finally got out of here," she said.

"There were tons of people standing outside that courtroom. I just hope they get that courthouse put back together real fast."

And relief is on the horizon. Provincial officials now predict regular operations will start to resume after June 24.


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