

Developers 'go to war' over moraine freeze

BY LINDA JOHNSON
Staff Writer

Two months after former Toronto Mayor David Crombie was hired to broker a deal between developers and environmentalists over housing on the Oak Ridges Moraine, the two sides seem more polarized than ever.

At issue is a plan by various developers to build 8,000 houses on the environmentally sensitive area to the east and west of Yonge Street at Stouffville Road in Richmond Hill.

Environmental groups say the massive development will ring Bond Lake and Philips Lake with houses, cutting wildlife off from their habitat.

In August, after a lengthy struggle at the Ontario Municipal Board, Municipal Affairs Minister Chris Hodgson asked Crombie to reach a compromise between five development consortiums and environmental groups.

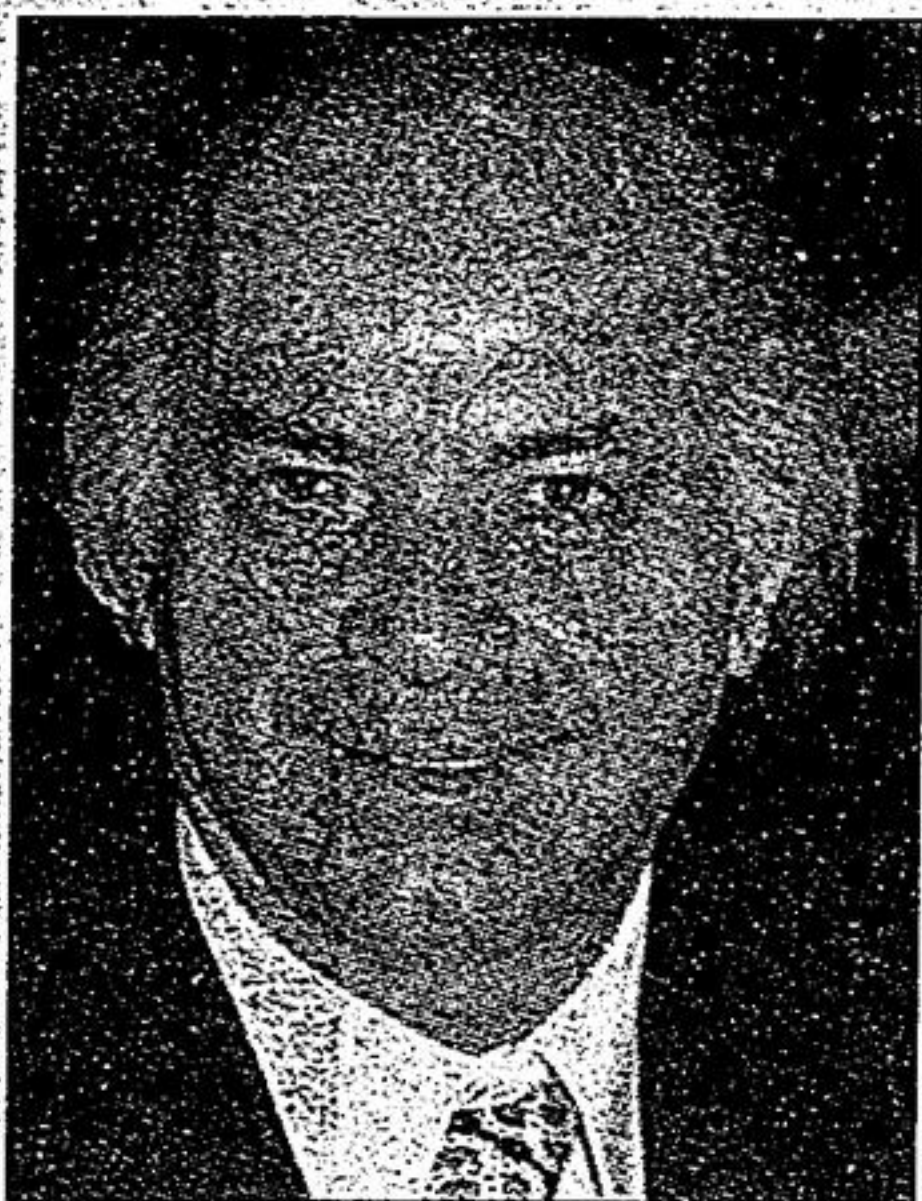
But both sides now say any compromise is highly unlikely.

"It's not going very well," said Fred De Gasperis, president of Con-Drain and Metrus Developments. "We're very disappointed in the provincial government, they tried to muzzle us. They're falling in the footsteps of the environmentalists. We're very upset but we're not finished with them."

Environmentalist Glen de Baeremaeker agreed the chances of progress are slim, saying developers are attempting to bypass public will.

"The developers have said, 'We didn't listen to Richmond Hill or York Region or to the Conservation Authority, we didn't listen to the provincial government and we're not going to listen to you. We think we can beat all of you by going to the OMB'."

De Baeremaeker said his group, Save the Rouge Valley, believes any construction in the disputed area is "environmentally, democratically and morally



FRED DE GASPERIS: Developer says he'll 'buy a lot of pigs' for property on the Oak Ridges Moraine.

wrong."

But he said the group supports offers from the provincial government to buy developers' land or swap it for property in built up areas. But, according to de Baeremaeker, developers have consistently rejected the idea.

"That way the developers who've invested their money won't lose a lot because they can build houses somewhere else," he said.

At the same time, he said developers have refused to reduce the number of houses they want to build in one of the last open areas on the Yonge Street corridor.

"Not a single house," he said. "It's an ideological position now, they think they have a right to build everywhere. They have not moved one inch."

But De Gasperis denied this, saying developers have agreed to give 1,500 acres — about half the land — and reduce the number of houses from 8,000 to 3,500.

"Now they're going to get nothing," he said. "We like to protect the environment we do a lot. But when people want to take advantage, the answer's absolutely not."

He said developers may turn to farming, if plans to build homes don't get off the ground

soon.

"We're allowed to put pigs in," De Gasperis said. "So we're going to buy a lot of pigs and we'll be in business."

"We offer half the land, all the environmental land, the wetland, the trees, everything. They can get it for nothing. But it's not good enough; they want more. So we're upset now. Now, we go to war!"

De Baeremaeker said environmentalists are now looking to the provincial government's forthcoming legislation, which it must introduce when its six-month freeze on Oak Ridges Moraine development is lifted Nov. 17. He expects the new law will set a minimum width for wildlife corridors, from about 600 metres to 1.2 kilometres wide.

"Where the law applies to their development applications, they won't be able to build a single house, not even a tool shed," he said.

De Baeremaeker said developers are playing a high risk game.

"They're gambling they can change the legislation, they're hoping they can weaken or overturn it before it gets entrenched in law."

But De Gasperis said he doesn't believe the provincial government will go as far as the environmentalists hope. "This is not Russia, it's Canada and nobody's taking anything away. We work so hard in this world to make a dollar and I don't want anyone to take it away from me. I bought land, I didn't steal it."

Alexandra Gillespie, a spokesperson for Hodgson, said the ministry would still prefer the parties to reach a settlement amongst themselves. She said the government did not want to influence the outcome by indicating what it will do if talks are unsuccessful.

"We have to let the negotiating process run its course and we are still hopeful that will resolve itself that way," she said.

Welfare charges for family

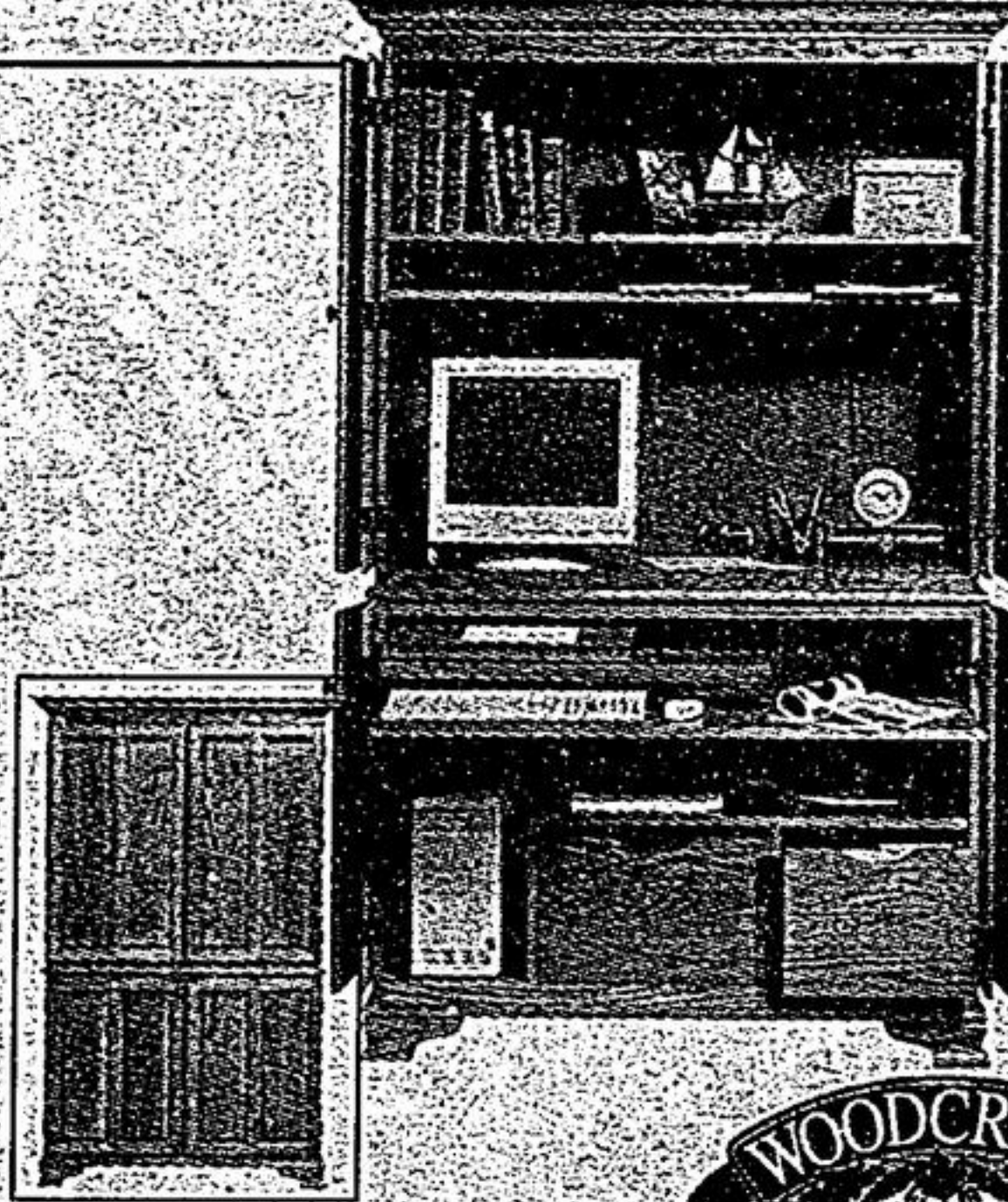
Four members of a Markham family have been charged with welfare fraud following a 10-month investigation which culminated in York Regional Police making the final arrest in the case Monday.

The investigation began following a complaint from the York Region Community Services and Housing

Department that a family, which had been on welfare together since 1995, were employed and earning undeclared income.

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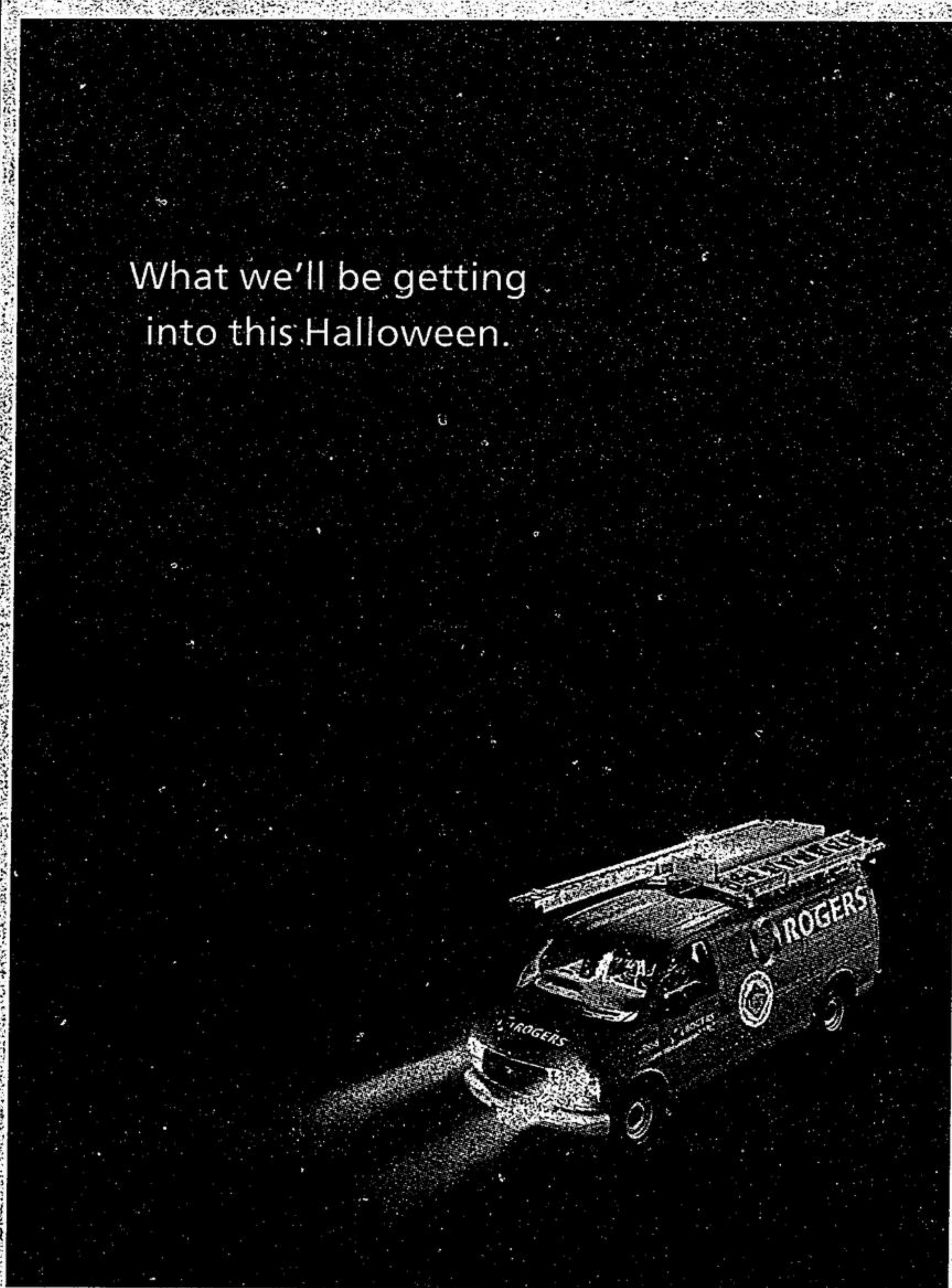
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