

Will moraine act protect York's groundwater supply?

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

Large holes in the ground and what goes into them is an issue that may remain close to the surface after Ontario's new Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Act is passed.

Gravel pit owners want to fill their old quarries for profit. Some farmers want to fill natural potholes and gullies left by glaciers.

But it's not just the presence of aggregate mining — which will be allowed to continue or even expand over most of the moraine — that troubles some residents.

It's a persistent worry that not all of the fill deposited in these pits and farm fields will be clean. If something hazardous seeps through the moraine it could affect the groundwater, which thousands of York Region residents rely on.

The problem of fill is "the only crutch" in the province's whole plan for the moraine, according to Whitchurch-Stouffville Mayor Wayne Emmerson.

The moraine legislation contains no promise from the province to check fill being deposited, despite years of appeals from the town.

"I don't think they're listening to us," said Emmerson, who sees "pressure" on moraine municipalities to give pit owners the right to dump clean fill.

The town has three applications on hold to place fill in unused gravel pits, all turned down last September but resubmitted later. Since the gravel industry is under provincial control, the province should be responsible for pit rehabilitation, Emmerson said.

"I, as a small municipality, don't want to be the monitoring system for something I did not create."

Pit owners who accept fill from paying customers can later convert the site back to agriculture or other uses.

But farmers on the moraine have also applied to put fill into natural depressions on their land, Emmerson said. "They're coming all the time to us asking, because they want to level their land."

Development services director Tom Parry said Paul Hulshof received an estimated 200-300 truckloads of fill to cover two kettle depressions on his Bloomington Road farm.

Hulshof, now having topsoil spread on these areas, said parts of



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

A truck and a front-end loader traverse the LaFarge gravel pit in rural Whitchurch-Stouffville, near the border with Durham Region. Persistent worries about the fill going into old pits being rehabilitated were not addressed in the province's Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Act, say critics.

the property had been unsafe to work. "The guy before me rolled a combine on one of the hills," he said last week.

Another farmer recently finished filling in low areas on a McCowan Road property but Parry said the town, after changing its fill bylaw, refused a proposal to fill some land in order to create a riding area and paddock.

"I can't have a person sitting there all day watching what goes into the hole," he said.

Such alterations to the moraine's rolling landscape haven't been unique to Whitchurch-Stouffville. Former King Councillor Jane Underhill recalled that in 1998 a Weston Road property owner received the township's permission to use fill, although the operation later stopped. "He was starting to fill in a huge gully."

Gravel pits and their affect on the moraine were a sore point at public meetings this summer that helped shape the protection legislation.

In the end, the province did not heed environmentalists' calls to keep future extraction out of natural linkage corridors that enclose many sensitive areas of the moraine.

At one meeting, Denis

Schmiegelow, a past president of the Aggregate Producers' Association of Ontario, pledged gravel producers will leave extraction sites "as good as and maybe better" than before.

"We are just as concerned about the environment as most of you," he said.

"I can't have a person sitting there all day watching what goes into the hole."

Stouffville Councillor Mark Carroll responded that the town "has found asphalt, building materials, (and) all sorts of crap" dumped in pits.

Last week, Schmiegelow said pit owners would be stupid to contaminate former quarry lands they want to sell. However, he admitted there have been cases where inappropriate material has been used.

Fill going into pits will be more closely monitored under the legislation, he noted. And in linkage areas extraction will be controlled so that it can't harm the purpose of the link, which is the movement of

plants and animals.

A municipal bylaw could charge dumping fees high enough to cover the cost of a full-time municipal inspector at the site, he argued.

Meanwhile, a spokesperson for the province's natural resources ministry fended off suggestions from Emmerson that it has insufficient staff to watch filling of pits.

"It's a difficult thing. You can't watch every single person and every situation," said Brian Hollingsworth.

In Vaughan, the City of Toronto is intent on converting an old pit into a golf course by the Keele Valley Landfill on Major MacKenzie Drive near Dufferin Street.

Vaughan Planning Commissioner Mike DeAngelis said he is uncertain whether the application, on which the provincial environment ministry has the final say, will be affected by the moraine legislation.

Linda Pim, a spokesperson for the Federation of Ontario Naturalists said her group does not agree with the province's plan to allow extraction in "corridor" areas and thinks the industry should pay the province or municipality to monitor pit-filling.

Pim said public hearings on the legislation are needed to examine fill and other issues.

Info Box

• beenTHERE •

Creep low like snake

"I didn't let my instructor know my back was beginning to cramp as I held my awkward but balanced position, then slowly transferred my weight from one leg to the other, arms outstretched, trying to remember to grip the floor with my toes."

Staff writer Kathleen Griffin tries tai chi at the Markham branch of the Taoist Tai Chi Society on Main Street North. See *Been There, Done That* on page 24.

• movieREVIEWS •

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• surfin' CITY •

www.anxieties.com

This website addresses a number of anxiety problems, including panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder and fear of flying. Each of the problems includes a brief description, which can be clicked on for more information and a free self-help program. Those with fear of flying can learn to understand their fear and follow a seven-step process for overcoming it. There's a self-assessment questionnaire on the home page.



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