

Christmas spending habits similar to last season

BY ROGER VARLEY
Staff Writer

Across post-Sept. 11 North America, various government leaders have been urging average citizens to fight the effects of the terrorist attacks by helping revive the economy.

"Spend, spend, spend" has been the message.

"Buy that big ticket item, take that airline trip, spend those extra dollars."

United States President George Bush indicated it was Americans' patriotic duty and Prime Minister Jean Chretien expressly encouraged Canadians to continue to shop.

In Ontario, Premier Mike Harris advanced planned tax cuts — including cuts to personal income taxes — by three months as part of that fight.

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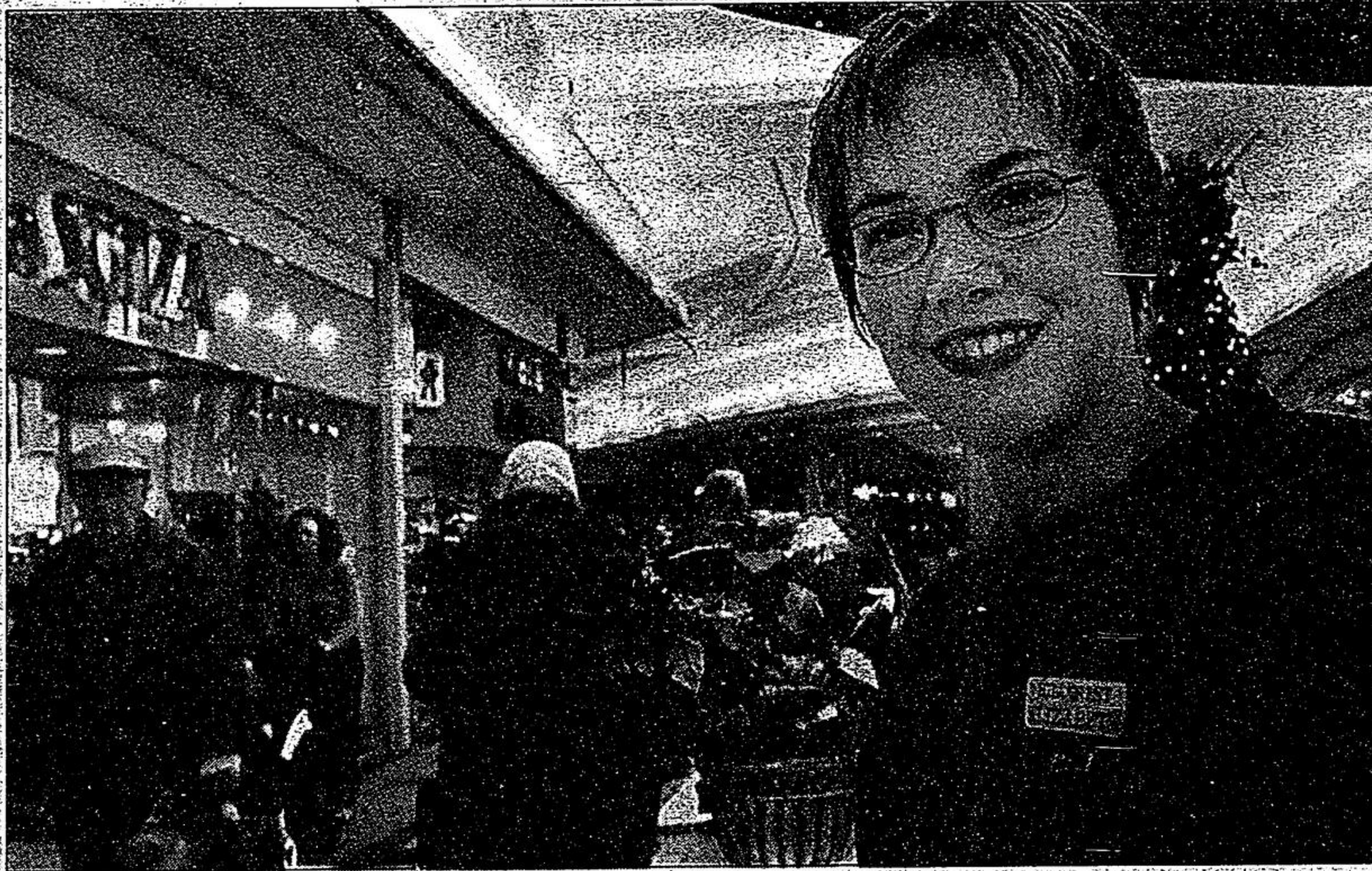
"While some have said we should not proceed with these tax cuts in light of recent events, I believe they are more important than ever before to show our faith in the tremendous growth potential for Ontario," Harris said in October.

He said tax cuts represented "money (Ontarians) can use to buy hockey equipment for their kids, or put toward some home renovations, or help pay for that vacation they weren't sure they could afford."

The question is, have Ontarians and, particularly, residents of York Region, bought into the spending campaign?

Jennifer Ryman of Newmarket says she has.

"We've got to keep businesses going," said Ryman as she took a break from shopping with her infant son at Newmarket's Upper Canada Mall. "I like going to smaller stores to support smaller businesses."



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Elizabeth Skelhorn, customer service representative at Richmond Hill's Hillcrest Mall, says the number of shoppers this Christmas season has not decreased since last year.

Although she expects her Christmas spending to be about the same as last year, she said she has shopped more than usual since the September tragedy.

"I think I'm spending a little more now," Ryman said. "There's more sales on."

Jackie Brown, another young mother from Newmarket, also agreed with Harris' approach, but a little more cautiously.

"If we don't put money into (the economy) soon, it won't come back," Brown said. "We have to spend as we have been."

She, too, expects Christmas shopping will cost her about the same as last year.

Although her spending has remained about the same, she hinted she is being careful.

"We have to watch our pennies and maybe think twice before making a big purchase," she said.

Over at Markham's Markville Shopping Centre, Reta Foster of Richmond Hill said her spending is dictated by a tight budget, not by a desire to help the economy.

"I spend if I can afford it, if I have the means and the needs," Foster said. "I certainly won't be spending more (than last year) on Christmas."

Ralph Garbe of Unionville was

concerned about what people have already spent.

"The thing that bugs me is somewhere along the line you have to pay back what you owe," Garbe said. "How can you spend when you owe all this money? If people concentrate on paying their debts instead, they don't have the money to spend."

The Retail Council of Canada (RCC), however, says Canadians have, for the most part, been answering the call.

"Canadians have shown the resilience needed to sustain the economy through a challenging period," president Diane Brisebois said, adding although many wallets have been bruised since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Canadians still are shopping.

Brisebois said retailers are expecting overall holiday retail sales will reach last year's record levels.

Major malls in the region have similar predictions.

Melody Fallis, marketing director at Markville, said customer traffic declined almost everywhere following Sept. 11.

"It was very traumatic, but since then there has been recovery and we're anticipating a very good Christmas," she said.

Lisa Resnic, marketing director of The Promenade in Thornhill, said a good indicator people are feeling good about the economy is increased jewelry sales.

"Jewelry sales are up," she said. "Where people might have gone on holiday, now they want something more lasting and meaningful. People are making themselves feel good."

Owen Friedman, The Promenade's general manager, said customer visits to the mall have been recovering in the past few weeks after the initial decline.

"These things normally find an equilibrium," Friedman said.

He said retailers have been noticing "the size of transactions have been getting bigger. Maybe there has been some pent-up demand."

To keep those transactions moving along, the RCC wants the federal government to follow Ontario's lead to help reach those levels.

The organization vigorously lobbied Queen's Park to cut its taxes in order to help small businesses in the province. Now it wants federal Finance Minister Paul Martin's upcoming budget to offer more tax cuts to sustain consumer confidence and incomes.

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