

Land swap under investigation

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

A land swap in Markham to move a Box Grove cemetery further east is the target of an environment ministry investigation.

The ministry is investigating whether the government agency that arranged the exchange, the Ontario

Realty Corporation, properly studied 170 acres north and east of Steeles Avenue and Reesor Road before it offered the land as a new cemetery site.

Municipal Affairs Minister Chris Hodgson approved the swap last month — more than two years after it was proposed — as part of a deal that will see the current Box Grove ceme-

tery, at Hwy. 407 and Ninth Line, rezoned and developed.

David Donnelly, counsel for the Canadian Environmental Defence Fund — the group whose complaint launched the investigation — said he was astounded the exchange was approved before the inquiry was complete.

"I'm greatly dismayed that our efforts to secure a proper review of the transaction were for naught," Mr. Donnelly said.

The province's environmental commissioner has criticized provincial land sales by the ORC, seeing the province's pressure to increase sales revenue as "the root of the problem, causing ORC to pursue that mandate at the expense of environmental policies and legislation," according to Commissioner Gord Miller's 1999/2000 report.

In particular, the commissioner reported the ORC had been selling environmentally sensitive lands without following requirements for environmental assessment.

Mr. Donnelly said provincial law requires a thorough environmental review of a sale if the land contains significant natural or heritage resources.

Jim Murison, a farmer who lives opposite the Steeles Avenue parcel and has farmed it for decades, said it contains both types of resources.

"There was a very large (aboriginal) village there and also there are artesian wells on that property which go into the Rouge," he recalled.

An MOE official, Eugene Macchione, said the ministry investigation into the deal "is in the final stages," and should be finished by next month.

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