

# A lifetime in the world of wildlife

Markham's Barry Kent MacKay loves to watch nature — when he's not painting or writing about it

BY CAROL COOPER  
Special

Barry Kent MacKay never knew a time when he wasn't interested in wildlife and birds.

They play a large part in the Markham resident's life and livelihood — in his painting, writing and animal advocacy work.

"I was never not utterly fascinated, not just with birds, but all animals and particularly wild animals. I never knew why and still don't," said the naturalist, columnist, wildlife artist and program co-ordinator: Canada for the American-based Animal Protection Institute (API). Mr. MacKay also serves on the boards of Zoo Check Canada and Animal Alliance of Canada.

His heart lies with birds and art. "The truth is, I'm happiest when I'm painting or birdwatching," Mr. MacKay said.

Like his interest in birds and wildlife, the drawing and painting of them has always been part of his life.

"I no more recall deciding to do it (drawing and painting) than I decided to walk or talk. It's just a part of what I've always done."

Long associated with this area, Mr. MacKay spent his earliest days in his grandfather's home on Main Street in Unionville, now the United Church manse.

With his father's transfer to Los Angeles when Mr. MacKay was still young, the family hoped the California climate would ease his childhood asthma.

While there Mr. MacKay had the opportunity to explore nature.

"It was an important, thought-forming time," he said. "I remember how happy I was a child in the desert, up in the mountains and at the seashore."

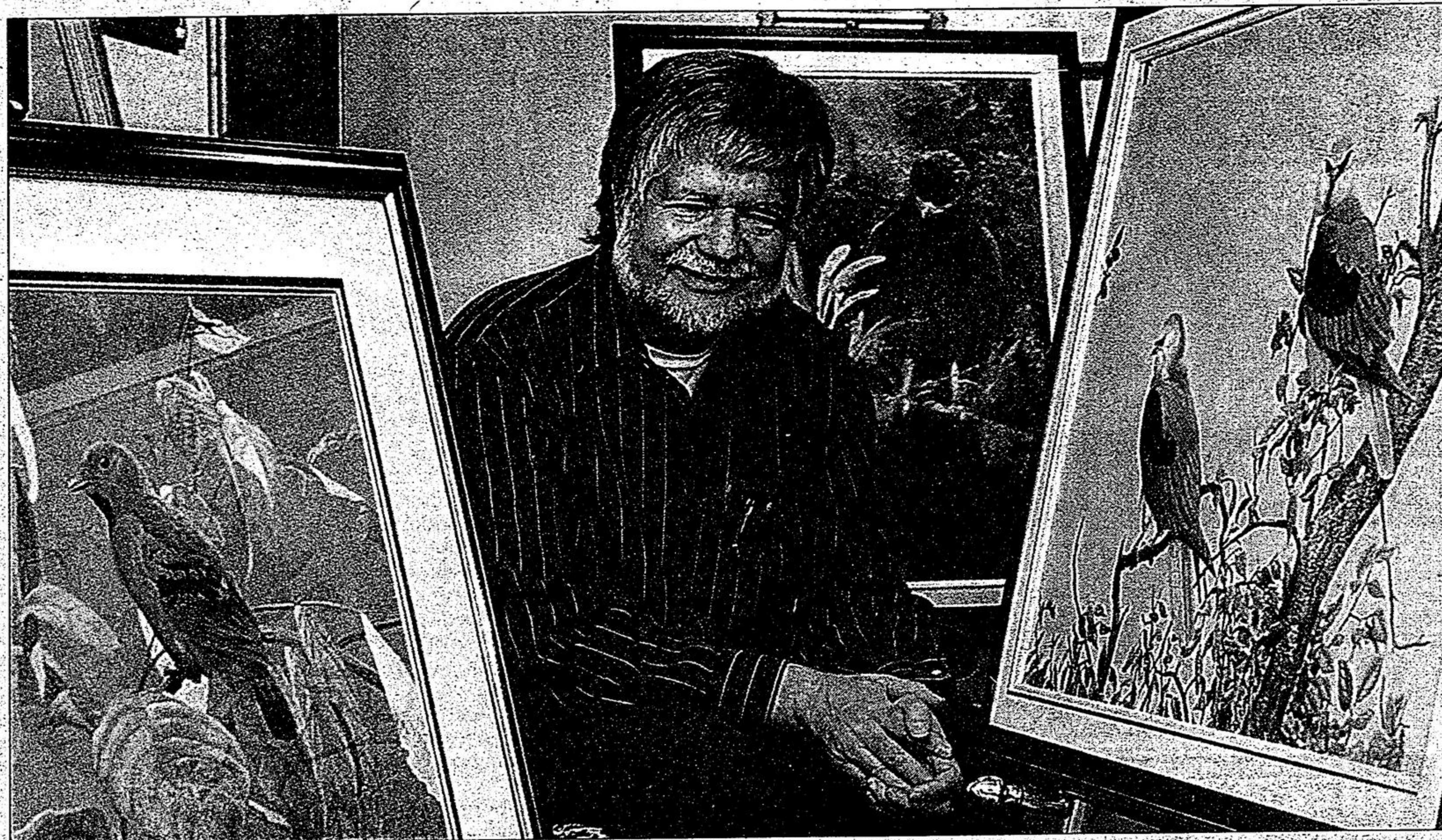
The family soon returned to Canada and Toronto, where Mr. MacKay held his first one-man show at the Toronto Central Library at the age of 13.

Wildlife populated his childhood home, including birds, squirrels, raccoons, woodchucks and weasels.

A kestrel, a type of falcon, lived with the family for 12 years and a Baltimore Oriole for 25 years — with permits, Mr. MacKay hastened to add.

After-effects of the encephalitis contracted at 16 cut short his dream of becoming an ornithologist. Instead, he spent the next 16 years sketching on the Uncle Bobby Show, a CTV children's show.

When that ended, he began writing Nature Trails 24 years ago, the weekly column for the Sunday



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

"I no more recall deciding to do it (drawing and painting) than I decided to walk or talk," says Markham artist and writer Barry Kent MacKay.

Toronto Star. He still writes the column, while continuing his painting.

Mr. MacKay calls himself an artist/illustrator. And there is a difference, he noted.

Illustration demands an exact rendering of a subject, he said.

*He could make a living painting full-time, but instead has decided to try and achieve a balance.*

Working in an artistic vein also requires careful attention to detail especially with natural history subjects, Mr. MacKay explained. "Even a little change can make a subject unrecognizable. You need to be precise."

However, he prefers art to illustration and the term "artist" applies more aptly to him, Mr. MacKay said. His artwork is commissioned and collected as well as sold from his basement gallery.

As an illustrator, he recently contributed 32 renderings to the book Wrens, Dippers and Thrashers and

wrote and illustrated Bird Sounds. Both books were published last year. And he's illustrating Birds of the Dominican Republic, due out in a few years.

When he paints in an artistic vein, Mr. MacKay prefers a realistic style with a fair amount of impressionism, he said.

In those pieces, birds from around the world sit, stand and soar in their natural surroundings.

Self-taught, except for a some time with a teacher, Mr. MacKay has developed his own style. He cites influences from wildlife painters Allan Brooks, Louis Agazziz Fuertes and T.M. Shortt, to schools of flat painting, Vermeer and impressionism.

Mr. MacKay works from slides or preserved specimens. Often he will look at a subject for a long time and then paint from memory, he said.

He has also worked from slides, a specimen, a sketch and his memory — simultaneously.

The specimens cause a few raised eyebrows among his friends. "It's an interesting juxtaposition," he said.

"You have this classic animal rights person, a vegetarian, who

doesn't wear leather, painting, with a dead bird in his hand. But I didn't kill it," he said.

Instead he has either collected the specimens or borrowed them from American museums.

*'We really are destroying the support capacity for many different species, including our own.'*

Mr. MacKay describes painting as a compulsion, but one that he easily combines with other activities.

He conducts business over the phone while painting — often for up to 90 minutes at a time, he said. "Each activity uses a different side of the brain."

He could make a living painting full-time, but instead has decided to try and achieve a balance.

"I realized that I could draw on my expertise as a naturalist to do something positive to help animals. I'm grateful that I have that opportunity," he said, referring to his Toronto Star column and his work

at the API.

Through his API involvement, Mr. MacKay brought awareness to international trade in wildlife. And he is about to write a critique of the U.S. government's position on the management of urban Canadian geese for the agency.

Speaking of his own environment — the Town of Markham — Mr. MacKay was blunt.

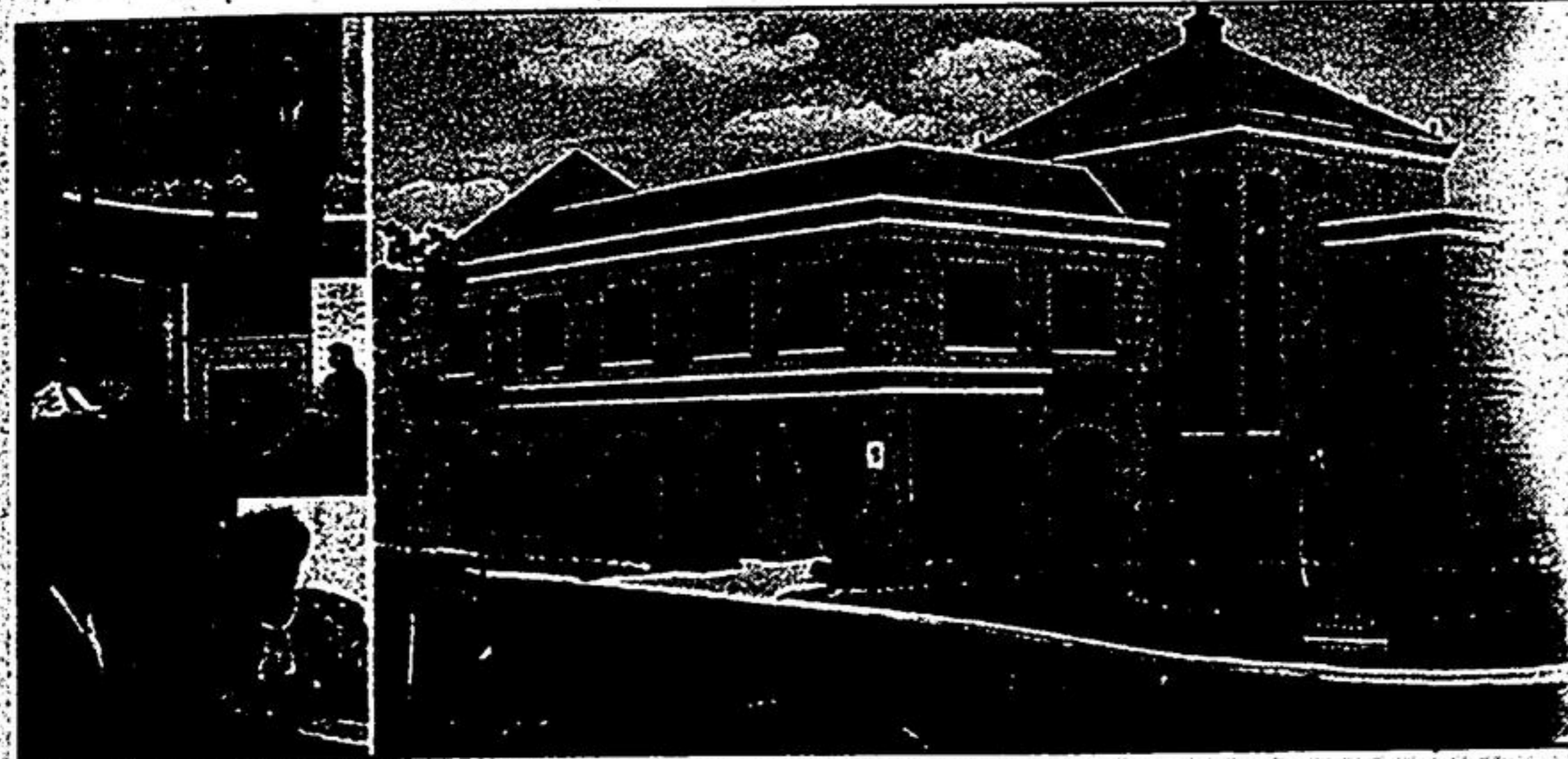
"Markham is a disaster zone. There is a sensitivity to environmental issues in Markham; but the town is being subjected to the same thing as so many places — urban sprawl."

The area first lost its forest to farmland and now is losing that top-grade land to development, he said.

He doesn't criticize the market forces that drive growth, but noted that because of development, natural waterways become channeled, pesticide use increases and water and soil quality decline.

With this deterioration comes increased illness and congenital diseases.

However, some positive things are happening in Markham, including the number of trees planted in town parks and the move to make some parks pesticide-free, he said.



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