

# Cemetery could damage Rouge River, environmentalists charge

BY MIKE ADLER  
Staff Writer

Conservationists are preparing for what could be a final stand this month against a new cemetery near the Rouge River in Markham.

In a deal that frees land elsewhere in the town for commercial development, provincial land north and east of Reesor Road and Steeles Avenue was handed in late March to Toronto's Catholic cemetery board.

In 1996, the province promised the tenants who live on or farm the 160 acres a chance to buy the land. It broke its promise three years later, when the board agreed to exchange property in Box Grove for the Steeles parcels.

The new cemetery may bring economic benefits for some but it will do "grossly significant ecological damage" to a vital area of Rouge Park North, warned Murray Johnston, president of the Rouge Valley Foundation.

In a letter to the partnership which manages the park, the Rouge Alliance, Mr. Johnston argued the cemetery will "cause severe damage to the environmental integrity of the watershed to which we are all committed to preserve".

The Scarborough man and other environmentalists say they fear a cemetery will ruin the park's main wildlife corridor from Lake Ontario to the Oak

Ridges Moraine by making it too narrow, and that formaldehyde or other impurities will leach into the river.

There is also concern the cemetery will disturb an aboriginal village and possibly, aboriginal dead who may be buried nearby.

*"We should not be digging up their ancestors to bury our ancestors."*

"We should not be digging up their ancestors to bury our ancestors," said Glenn De Baeremaeker, president of Save the Rouge Valley System.

At a meeting in Markham, Mr. De Baeremaeker, who is an Alliance member, advanced resolutions to change the body's stance that it "does not object" to the cemetery location.

Alliance chairperson Ron Christie ruled the resolutions weren't in order and deferred them to a May 31 meeting so the Alliance can research the issues.

"Nobody wants to rock the boat," Mr. De Baeremaeker later charged.

But Mr. Christie said he expects a full discussion at this month's meeting.

Small areas of the site were excavated during the 1950s and 1970s, said Martin Cooper, an archeologist at Archeological Services Inc. who assessed the property recently for the Ontario Realty Corporation, its former provincial landowner.

In an interview, Mr. Cooper said no excavation was done for the assessment but — judging from artifacts found on the surface — the firm told ORC a substantial village site from 1300-1350 AD exists on eight acres within the site and extends further into private lands to the north.

"If we excavated the site, we certainly would come up with longhouses," said Mr. Cooper, adding that no other sites significant enough to require protection or evidence of burials were found. "Not all the villages we excavate have burials, but some do, so there could be burials."

The ORC has been accused by Save The Rouge and another group, Environmental Defence Canada, of insufficiently studying environmental and heritage features of the cemetery site before transferring ownership. A provincial environment ministry investigation into the process remains open.

The cemetery board, however, has included easements on the property to protect the village site and environmentally-sensitive areas.

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