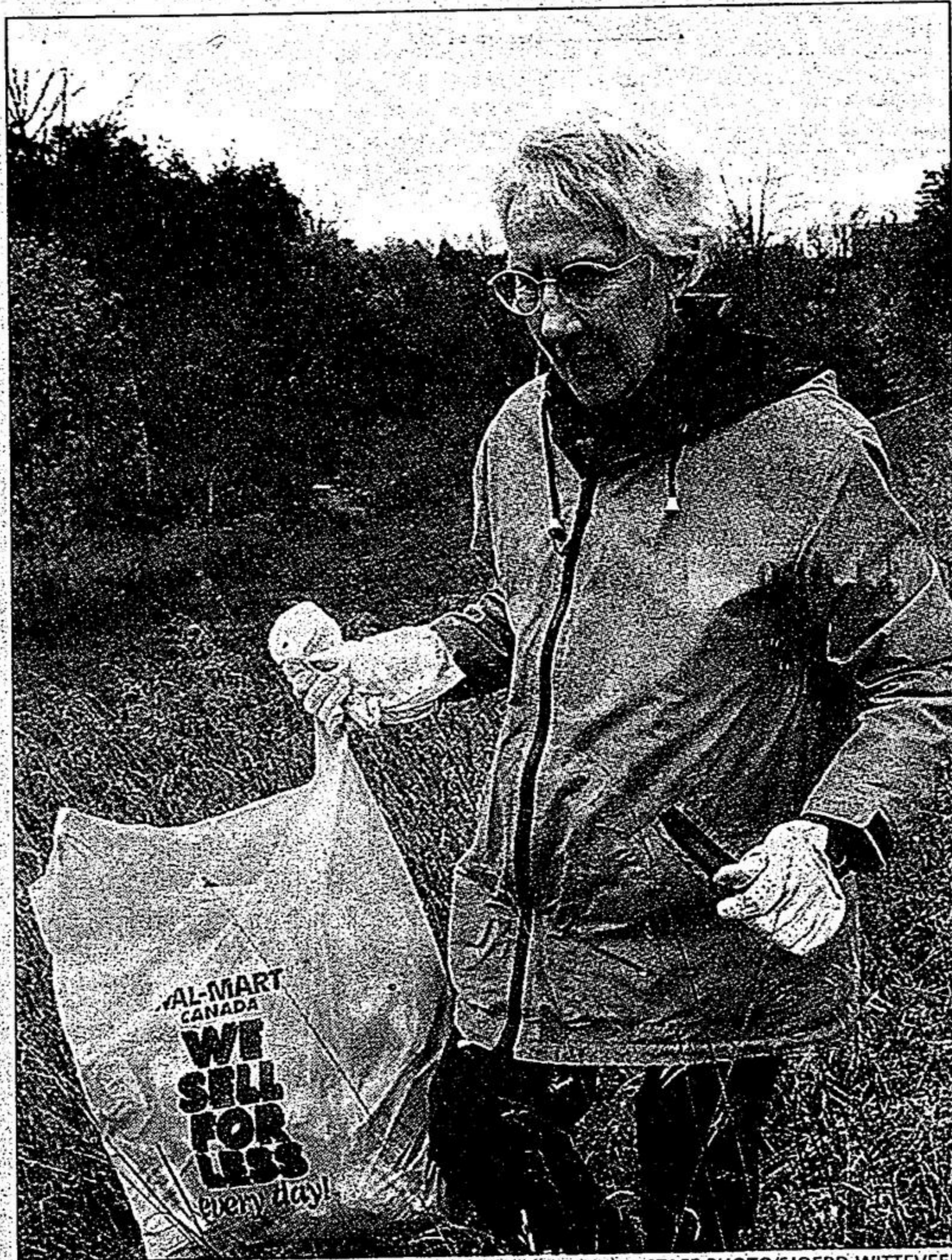


Protecting Rouge Park: a promise unfulfilled

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEN

Mary Brown of Rouge Street in Markham picks up garbage in the Vinegar Hill dip — that's Hwy. 48 south of Hwy. 7 — along the banks of a Rouge River watershed creek.

province was refusing to enshrine the park in law.

"Maybe we would have done better" by imposing a standard 30-metre buffer, he added reflectively. But at a meeting three years ago, the Alliance narrowly rejected 30-metre buffers in the Rouge watershed in favour of science-based buffers. Markham Mayor Don Cousens had argued would provide better protection and be defensible at the OMB.

Protection developers typically accept for rivers and streams is a 10-metre buffer.

But in Richmond Hill, landowners take requests for further encroachment into floodplain areas to the committee of adjustment, Ms Hogg said, and in planning subdivisions "all we do is hang on to our minimums." Meanwhile, frustration is building among many members of the Alliance.

"You shake your head and say, Why am I at this table?" said

Whitchurch-Stouffville Councillor Mark Carroll, the town's representative, who says applying science-based buffers now would prevent greater expenses in 20 or 30 years to repair damage to the river.

In an interview, Mayor Cousens argued the towns don't have the money to pay for 30-metre buffers and can't successfully defend them at the OMB.

But the mayor, who for years was chairperson of a steering committee on the plan, said he thinks it's "tragic that it's taken so long" and that further delays may cost politicians the ability "to plan the town the way we want."

Mr. Carroll said he will press his town to incorporate plans for Rouge Park and Duffins Creek into its Official Plan in 2003. But if Markham incorporates the Rouge Park North plan, he predicted, the other municipalities would quickly do the same.

Years ago, it had such promise. In 1995, Rouge Park opened in Scarborough with the understanding that "Canada's largest urban park" was only the beginning.

The Rouge River, the province declared, would be a living river through the middle of Greater Toronto. The entire watershed, up to its headwaters in Richmond Hill and Whitchurch-Stouffville, would be saved from the development everyone knew was coming.

All the municipalities needed was a plan for the park in York Region, and by the fall of 1997 they had one.

Five years later, as studies on that plan's application drag on, subdivisions are forming along the river and its tributaries in York.

"We're just getting the stuffing kicked out of us, the same as 12 years ago. In fact, it's getting worse," said environmentalist Glenn De Baeremaeker. His lobby group, Save The Rouge Valley System, began in 1975 to rally people for the river — a movement politicians by the late 1980s could not ignore.

But so toothless has the Rouge Park North plan become that last month the municipal partnership in charge, the Rouge Alliance, debated fighting one of its own members, the Town of Markham, at the Ontario Municipal Board.

At issue was Markham's refusal to place the plan's science-based environmental buffers in its 700-acre Box Grove development.

But the buffers will not be included either in the 1,400 acres of development planned around Leslie Street in Richmond Hill, much to the disgust of that town's deputy mayor, Brenda Hogg. "By the time it's all closed and the studies are all done," she said, of the Rouge in Richmond Hill, "the pavement will be down."

While some Alliance members were clearly angry, development lawyer Jeff Davies convinced most of them the RPN plan is impotent until it is incorporated into Official Plans of the towns and region.

He reminded them that on June 7 the municipal board ruled, in a case where Save The Rouge had appealed for science-based buffers of 30-40 metres along a creekbank in Markham, that the plan "is currently a strategy document" and "in its current form, is (not) an effective tool."

Regional Councillor Frank Scarpitti of Markham then added to the gloom by mentioning the

Housing, tech to buck employment trend in York

BY JEFF MITCHELL
Staff Writer

While winter is expected to bring its traditional hiring chill to York Region, some sectors are bucking that trend by bolstering their work forces.

For instance, a red hot housing market will continue to ward off the cold as residential construction in the GTA breaks records.

And one Markham tech company is deepening its talent pool with hirings.

Suzanna Cohen, a spokesperson for the Greater Toronto Home Builders Association, said construction layoffs predicted by one employment agency won't be happening here.

In fact, the torrid pace set by the housing market in York and the GTA means labour is in short supply, she said.

"We've already sold 48,400 homes this year," Ms Cohen said. "We're going to easily break 50,000."

Sales for 2002 so far mark a 42-per cent increase over 2001 statistics, she said.

A home sale now equates to more work for the construction industry months down the road, Ms. Cohen said.

"A house sale today means a housing start six months down the road," she said. "Those houses have to be built."

And many of them are being built in York Region. Two southern municipalities — Vaughan, with 308 and Markham with 282 — were among the top five GTA municipalities in home sales in October.

The tremendous amount of work is putting a strain on the available workforce.

The home builders association is working with the federal government to allow qualified workers from other countries to take up the slack.

"They're coming from all over the place," Ms Cohen said.

In the hi-tech sector, the opposite is true: too many workers seeking precious few jobs.

Many, out of full-time work since the tech bubble deflated, have been depending on short-term contract work to make ends meet.

Taking advantage of this ready and willing labour force is Markham ATI Technologies, manufacturers of games and 3-D technology. The locally-based company has a global presence.

ATI recently launched a recruitment drive aimed at filling some 80 positions in Markham, where the company maintains a workforce of 1,400.

Job fairs in Ottawa and Brampton were flooded with candidates, said Michel Cadieux, vice-president of human resources with the company.

"At ATI we're looking for the best and this economy affords us the opportunity to get the best people," Mr. Cadieux said.

"Now you can get people with five to 10 years experience."

ATI's current hiring effort is aimed primarily at software and hardware engineers.

'At ATI we're looking for the best and this economy affords us the opportunity to get the best people.'

The goal is to attract personnel to help the company maintain a leading edge, Mr. Cadieux said.

"I would call it strategic hiring," Mr. Cadieux said of the recruitment

campaign currently under way.

"As opposed to broad-based skill sets, we're really targeting specific skills."

Manpower Inc., an international staffing and employment service, released its predictions for the job market locally and nationally early this week.

It predicted a cyclical downturn in hiring in York Region and across the country as winter sets in.

Manpower spokesperson Lee Sitarz said just 10 per cent of firms interviewed anticipated hiring over the January-February-March period, while 23 per cent expected staff reductions and 67 per cent planned to maintain staffing at current levels.

The first quarter is typically the slowest for hiring for all sectors.

Commercopia
Markham's Destination Gift Shop

Open 7 days a week

106 Main St. N., Markham Village 905-471-7820