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# Region refused publicity

From page 1.

was forwarded to York Region Newspaper Group. "Thank you for the offer to promote York Region on your radio broadcast. Unfortunately, we are not in a position to participate at this time... we are operating at less than 50-per-cent capacity, with all our non-essential systems shut down."

Mr. Kemp denied it was his decision to reject the radio request, but sent a response regional officials requested.

York Region spokesperson Patrick Casey said an invitation to boost tourism in Canada's fastest growing region came at a bad time for staff.

"This guy wants us to do everything, including operating a radio station out of our building. We just don't have the capacity to do that," Mr. Casey said.

"It's not feasible," Mr. Pickford said all he needed was some people to spend an hour between 10 and 11 a.m. Saturday to talk about the region's attractions.

"All we needed was a regular phone line," he said. "They didn't have to schlep to Anchorage, Alaska to be on the show."

"All I needed from them was to have one or two or three people to promote the region."

The region's rationale for rejecting the opportunity rings hollow with Dan Girard, who, as president of the Georgina Chamber of Commerce, has worked to promote the area's tourism industry.

"That's not acceptable," he said. "Here we are, busting our keesters trying to get people to come and visit the area."

Mr. Girard suggested, if the region's seven communications department employees, plus its tourism bureau, couldn't make a commitment, the opportunity should have been passed to one of the region's chambers of commerce.

*'Here we are, busting our keesters trying to get people to come and visit the area.'*

After all, many businesses need the boost, having suffered financial hardships due to SARS, West Nile virus and the blackout, he said.

"There are a lot of dedicated people," he said. "If they needed some volunteers to jump in, at least let us know about it," he said.

Richmond Hill Mayor Bill Bell agreed. Although Mr. Bell said he did not know all the factors that led to the decision, the radio opportunity sounds like one that should have been taken.

"We should be out there promoting the region," he said.

"Tourism suffered from SARS and it's just starting to recover."

In fact, this spring, when the SARS crisis was at its peak and the tourism trade had slowed to a trickle, the region gave \$250,000 for an emergency marketing and recovery plan.

Brenda McGowan, the region's tourism director, was on vacation last week and couldn't be reached for comment. But in a report to a regional committee last spring, she said research showed three-quarters of tourism-related visits to the region are day trips, a trend she hoped to change.

"If we can get them to stay longer, they obviously spend more, that's our goal," Ms McGowan said at the time.

In fact, the report said more should be done to promote attractions and events in the region, which flies in the face of this week's decision to deny such promotion.

Mr. Pickford said that's exactly what his program aims to do and couldn't understand why the region would deny a chance to attract millions of tourism dollars to York.

He said his audience is largely "within two or three hours' flight or one day's drive" of the region.

That's why he expected York officials to jump at the chance to appear on the show.

"The response I got was 'The power was out, so we can't do it,'" he said.

Late Thursday, after several calls from a reporter to various York officials, Mr. Pickford called to say the region had a change of heart.

"We do the show live from regional headquarters (in Newmarket) 10 to 11 a.m. (Saturday)," he said.

Mr. Casey, citing "miscommunication on both ends," confirmed the broadcast will occur.

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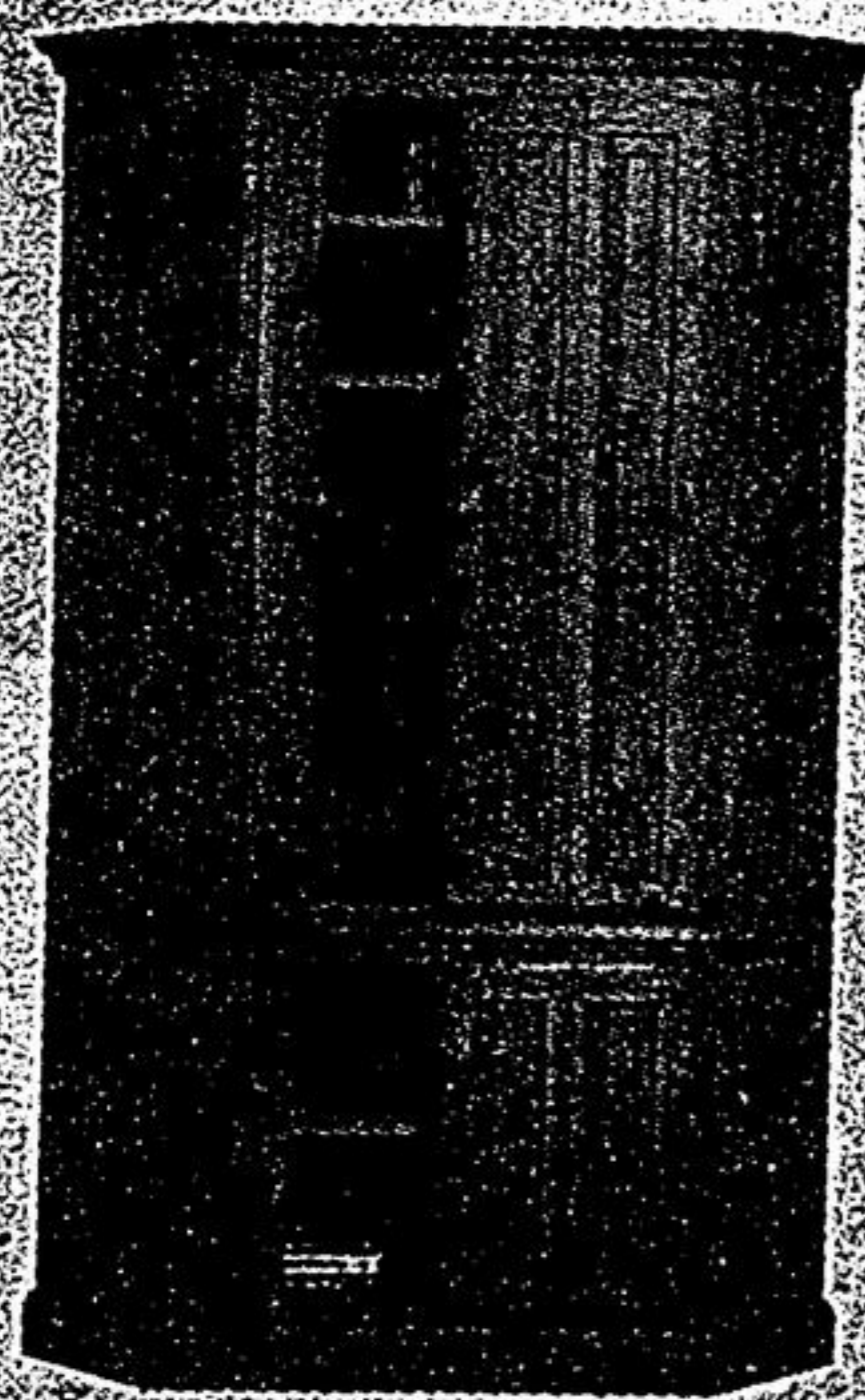
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