

Board forced to reveal pop company contracts

BY MITCHELL BROWN
Staff Writer

It's Friday afternoon in the school cafeteria and Nicholas Dodds is presenting the contents of his lunch bag.

"I'm a milk man, myself," he says, jokingly holding up a recycled juice bottle filled with the white stuff.

Granted, a 15-year-old's beverage of choice is not the usual sort of thing one expects the media to report, but this Aurora High School student has dragged cafeteria beverages on to front pages across the country.

"We thought, what are we dealing with here, department of defence budgets?"

Last week, Nicholas and his father, Jack, won a two-year legal battle to force Pepsi and Coke to reveal details of their exclusive contracts with the York and Peel public school boards.

It started back in Grade 8, when Nicholas, an aspiring journalist and writer for an underground newspaper, started asking why Pepsi was the only cola available in machines at Aurora Senior Public School.

After a bit of poking and prodding, he said board officials offered up an edited version of the contract between Pepsi and the board, which

has vending machines in all its secondary schools and roughly half of the region's elementary schools.

Citing the need to keep proprietary marketing information out of the hands of Pepsi's competitors, the board did not include such information as how much money it has made from the contract, which expires in 2005.

"We thought, what are we dealing with here, department of defence budgets?" Nicholas said. "This directly affects me."

Last week's ruling by the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario gives the public boards in York and Peel until Dec. 1 to make the deals public or seek a judicial review.

Spokespeople for both boards say they will not appeal and Pepsi-Cola Canada Ltd. issued a statement Wednesday saying it doesn't intend to appeal the decision, either.

"From the beginning, this was not about keeping information from students; it was about keeping information from our competitors," the statement said.

Nicholas is keen to get a look at the contract because he believes it will confirm what he already suspects: soft drink makers make deals with school boards more for the access to young consumers than because of any potential profits.

"I don't think they're making the money back, so

someone has to ask, what are they getting out of it?" Nicholas said, adding students had no say if they wanted only one choice of soft drink in their schools.

The subject of exclusive contracts between school boards and soft drink makers has long been a sensitive one, especially when cash-strapped boards are open to alternate sources of revenue to keep programs running.

York public schools, for instance, receive 30 per cent of net sales of soft drinks, bottled water and sports

drinks, which they use to fund field trips and extra-curricular programs.

Earlier this summer, before the provincial election that swept the Liberals to power, then health critic Sandra Pupatello said her party would ban the sale of junk food in the province's elementary schools.

Education Minister Gerard Kennedy promised during the campaign his party's plan for school funding would make up for the lost revenue from soda sales.

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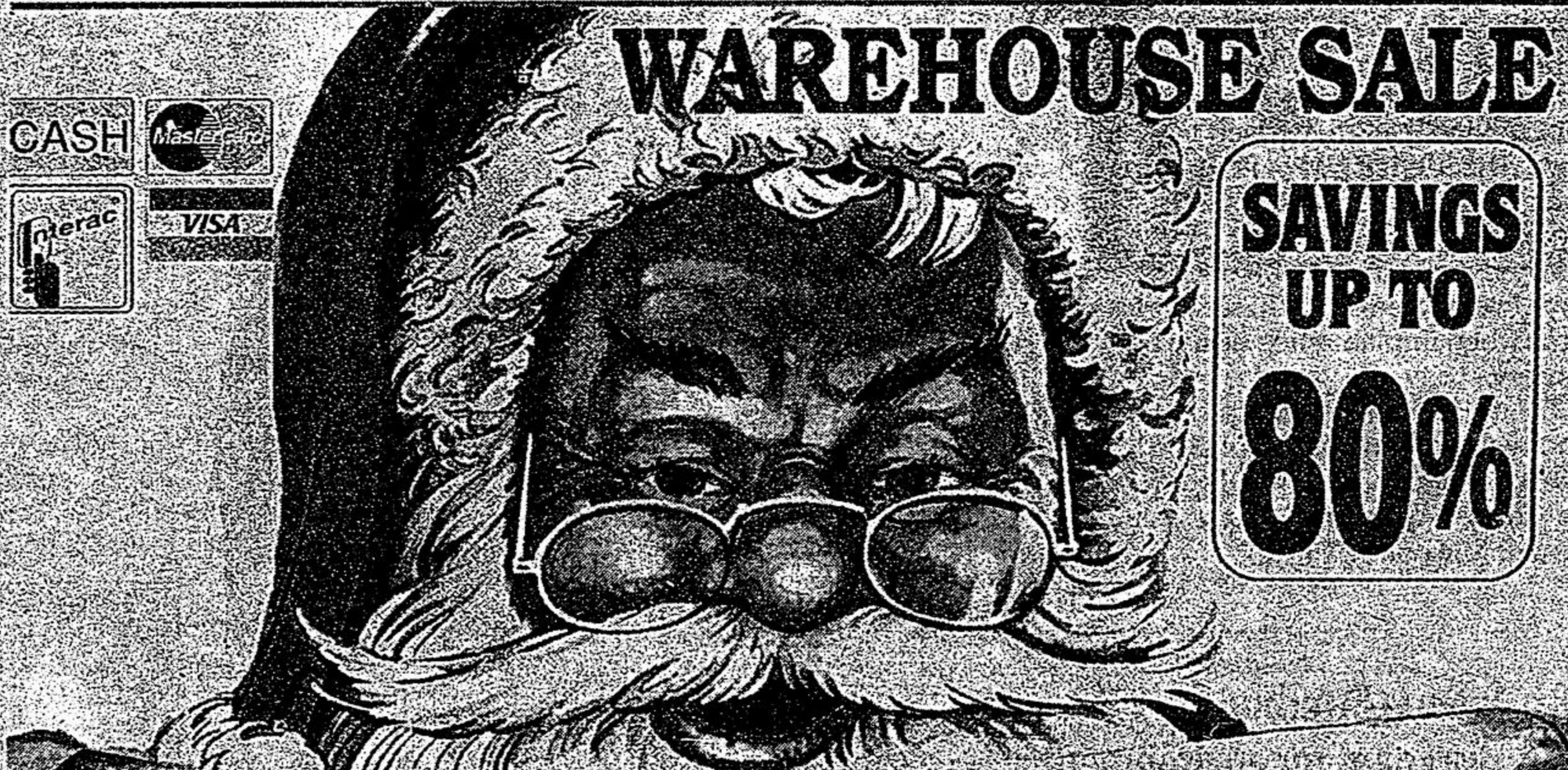
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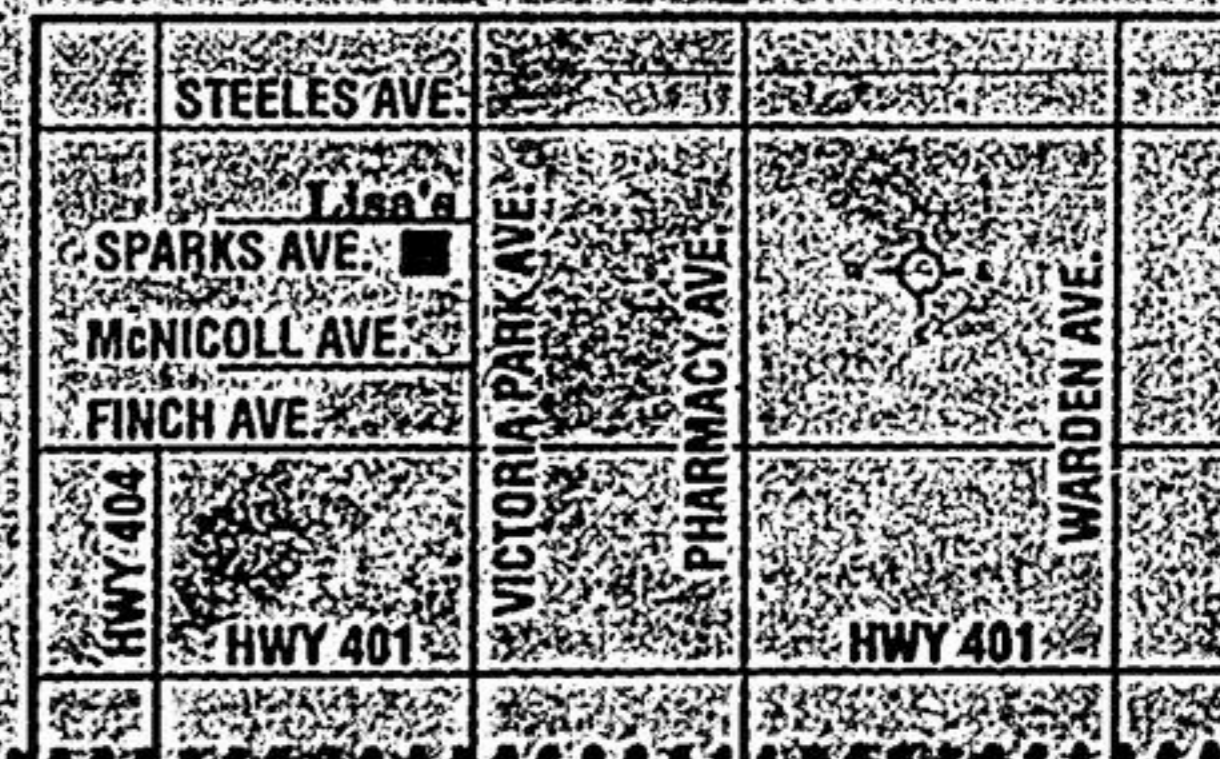
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