

# West Nile health care success story

BY LISA QUEEN  
Staff Writer

It's not often an issue tops the news because it fails to make much of an impact.

But that's what happened last year with West Nile virus, a potentially fatal disease passed on to people by mosquitoes after they feed on dead birds infected with the illness.

Symptoms range from headaches and fever to swelling of the brain and death in rare cases.

More than anything else, this became a story about what might have been.

What might have been if not for aggressive public education and a pesticide program that kept a lid on a potentially explosive health crisis.

"West Nile was a success story," said York's associate medical officer of health, Dr. Hanif Kassam, who spearheads the region's West Nile strategy.

"I think it has a lot to do with planning and working together with our municipalities.

"We did a lot of proactive planning. We did three or four cycles of larviciding (to kill mosquito eggs)."

That's not to say the virus didn't take its toll in York Region. In fact, two residents were diagnosed with the illness. Both patients recovered.

Meanwhile, dead crows and colonies of mosquitoes infected with the illness were discovered across the region.

But its impact was minimal, compared to other jurisdictions without strategies to contain the disease.

According to e-CMAJ, the website for the Canadian Medical Association Journal, West Nile moved to western Canada "with a vengeance" in 2003.

Almost half of the country's 232 confirmed and probable cases were in Saskatchewan and

another 86 were in Alberta.

At the same time, Dr. Kassam criticized Ottawa for failing to implement a national program to fight West Nile.

Despite the region's ultimate success story, last spring it appeared as if York was in danger of falling victim to West Nile.

In April, Canada's first infected dead crow of 2003 was discovered in Newmarket.

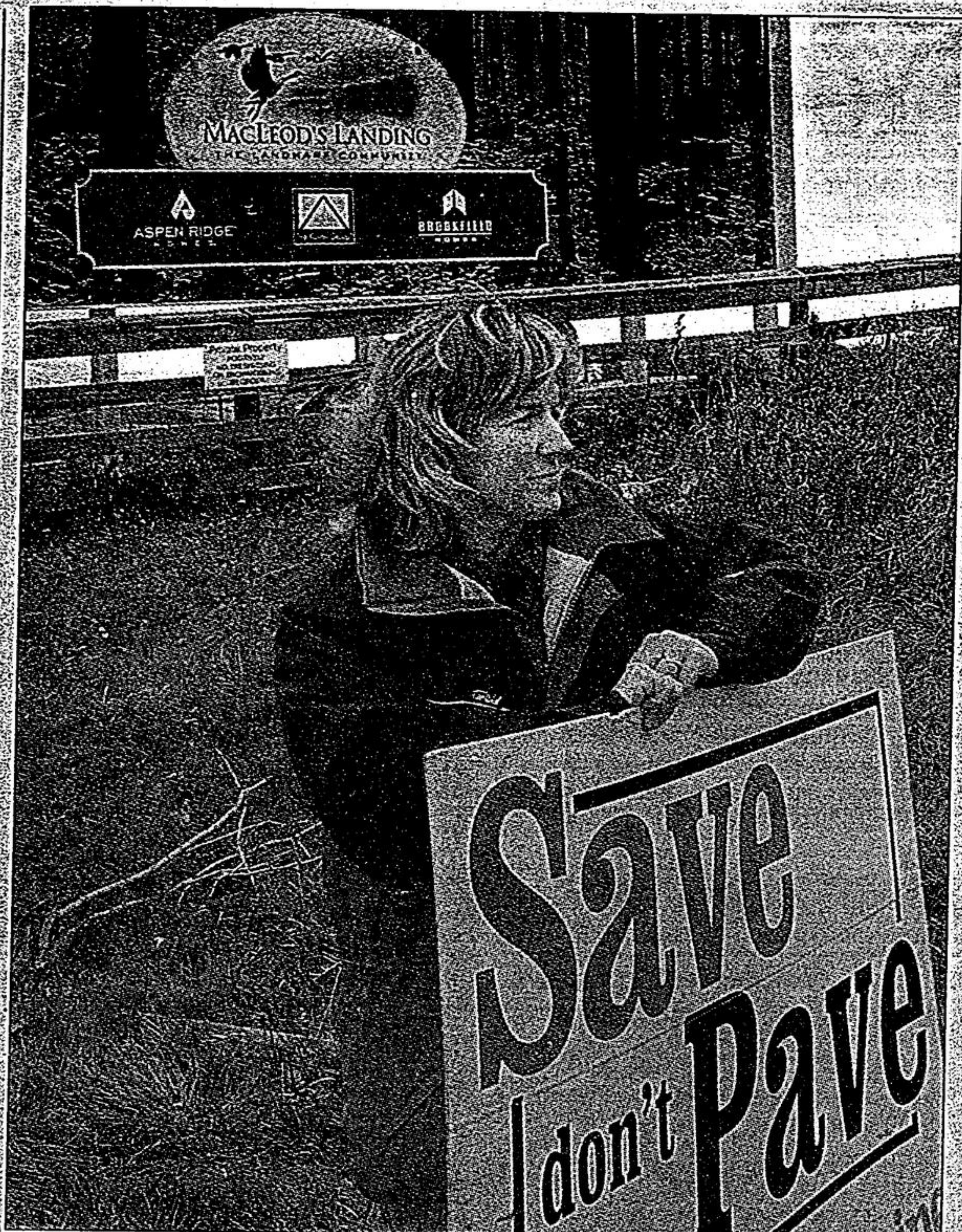
The fact the crow was found months earlier in the year than expected threw a scare into medical experts.

They feared human cases would show up earlier and be more severe than in 2002.

Dr. Kassam said the region will have to maintain its vigilance again this year to ensure West Nile remains under control.

"I think we'll probably have a similar year next year to this year," he said.

"If we let our guard down, that's when it will be an issue."



FILE PHOTO  
Carrie Hoffelner protests near a sales office for a development planned on the Oak Ridges Moraine.

## Moraine battle moves to big picture

BY MIKE ADLER  
Staff Writer

Four years ago, the Oak Ridges Moraine was the big picture few people could see.

Things back then looked bleak for the landform, source of all Greater Toronto Area rivers.

Desperate defenders were building support for a 2,700-acre kettle lakes park in Richmond Hill, where the local council was ready to urbanize the moraine at the point where it crosses Yonge Street.

The town's planning commissioner told activists they should settle for a 1,500-acre park. It turns out, after one lengthy roller-coaster ride of expectations and disappointments, they will get 1,100 acres.

But the province's proposed golden horseshoe greenbelt makes the big picture so much bigger than the moraine.

It also makes the stakes higher.

Environmentalists hope the Liberals will use what scientists know about natural areas to protect and connect the most important of these on the moraine with others beyond it.

Some hope this protection extends along river watersheds north to Lake Simcoe and eastward from the moraine to another natural ridge running from Algonquin Park across the St. Lawrence River to the Adirondack Mountains.

The latter idea was born during the Ontario Municipal Board hearing on the moraine in Richmond Hill and popularized by local biologist Natalie

Helferty as the NOAH project.

"Obviously, the moraine was the genesis of what we're seeing now," says Josh Matlow, of the environmental group Earthroots.

But Mr. Matlow says if urban development, supported by extended highways, continues to leap across the moraine, the greenbelt will fail.

In 2001, then municipal affairs minister Chris Hodgson declared a 1,000-acre park in Richmond Hill and pledged legislation would protect water flowing from the moraine south to Lake Ontario and north to Lake Simcoe.

But delight at hearing the province would restrict almost all moraine development to a designated 8 per cent of its lands turned to disgust for some when it became clear 6,600 homes would be approved at the Richmond Hill flashpoint for the conflict.

Dalton McGuinty's Liberals campaigned on the promise of stopping their construction but backtracked blocking only 900.

"It's incredibly disappointing," Mr. Matlow says. "I just hope that something good can come from this."

The Liberals, for their part, point out the 949 acres ready for development in Richmond Hill represent about two-tenths of 1 per cent of the moraine.

Save The Oak Ridges Moraine and the Canadian Environmental Law Association are hosting a workshop in King Township Jan. 17 called Hidden Threats to Our Water. Exploring Loose Threads of the Oak Ridges Moraine Plan. Go to [www.stormco.org](http://www.stormco.org) or call 905-880-3465.

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