



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Newmarket councillor Larry Blight has lived in the community pejoratively referred to as 'Dog patch' for years and says the term is unjustified.

COMMUNITY PATCHING UP REPUTATION

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PART 3 OF 6

CULTIVATING NEIGHBOURHOODS

A six-part in-depth series on the changing communities of York Region, highlighting success and opportunities, examining challenges and celebrating diversity.

The dog days of summer in Newmarket Heights: children play, a couple wash their front porch, a senior citizen strolls, gardeners turn the earth, men sit on lawn chairs, drinking beer and smoking, waving to passersby. The small, post-war houses, most neat and tidy, an occasional eyesore wedged in, tightly line the warren of curved roads pressed hard against the northeast corner of Yonge Street and Davis Drive.

Though its beginning half a century ago was shiny and historic, today it's an enigmatic neighbourhood with a down trodden reputation residents say it doesn't deserve.

As East Gwillimbury's inaugural subdivision and York Region's first planned community north of Steeles Avenue, the 776 homes completed in 1958 comprised what was then known as East Gwillimbury Heights. Following annexation in 1964, it was renamed Newmarket Heights.

Relative to the times, jobs were to be had, land north of Toronto was inexpensive and deals were expedited to cobble a community for the mass of workers recruited by the burgeoning aviation sector, Heritage Newmarket committee member Paul Millard says.

Avro Aircraft Limited and the Rolls Royce jet engine firm, building the infamous Avro Canada CF-150 Arrow jet fighter in Malton and Downsview, needed engineers and mechanics. Specialists arrived from around the world,

many from the United Kingdom, lured by the promise of good wages and affordable housing at less than \$12,000 a home.

It was a harbinger, perhaps, when the contract to build the RCAF all-weather long-range interceptor was abruptly cancelled in 1959 by the new federal Conservative government. More than 50,000 employees and supplier staff were out of work.

A good portion of the newcomers were living in East Gwillimbury Heights; as quickly as they had arrived, many families moved on.

With the economic shift in the late 1950s and early '60s, change came to the neighbourhood. Many homes were abandoned and new owners began renting them out, Mr. Millard, a longtime Newmarket resident, said.

John Dowson, 72, longtime homeowner and co-founder of the Newmarket Heights Community Association, and his neighbour,

Ward 4 Councillor Larry Blight, 59, are the unofficial Newmarket Heights historians and staunch supporters of the oft-maligned community that has undergone various transformations over the years.

Only one in 10 of the original residents remains, estimates Mr. Dowson.

When developers broke ground in the 1950s, Newmarket's population was 10,000. Today, it's nearly 12 times that number.

In essence, the town grew around the Heights' small, semi-detached bungalows and handful of larger detached homes, he adds.

After many walked away from the new community, it recovered in the late 1960s as an affordable enclave of family homes, close to schools, transportation, fledgling shopping plazas and a young hospital.

"The '80s also brought change," Mr Blight says. "Subdivisions were built. People starting investing here. There were a lot of absentee landlords and illegal rooming houses. The municipality had no control. There was no pride of ownership."

The community was a magnet for transients, a place where one could hide effectively and inexpensively.

The association, established in 1991 remains active, Mr. Dowson said.

It conducts government and community relations, advocates on behalf of residents, works with police and fire departments and created an array of neighbourhood programs. These include the street captain, safe and



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clean street and clean park programs.

Last year, the community's environmental day collected and disposed of 17 tonnes of garbage. "It's all about keeping the street clean and safe," he said.

But the men cringe when asked about the origins of their neighbourhood's colloquial epithet: the Dog Patch.

"I'm offended by the term," Mr. Dowson says. "It's derogatory. We got a reputation as

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