

Second proposal sent to OMB includes Stouffville-area funeral home

'Shortage of cemetery lands' will hit home

BY SANDRA BOLAN
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There are few certainties in life but death and taxes are two sure-fire things you cannot avoid. That includes paying taxes even once you're gone.

Finding suitable land for cemeteries is getting harder and harder.

"There is going to be a shortage of cemetery land in the future," said Gary Carmichael, vice-president of government and corporate affairs for Arbor Memorial Inc.

Arbor Memorial owns Main Street's O'Neill Funeral Homes.

Three years ago, the company applied to have roughly 54 acres of land on 19th Avenue near Dickson Hill Road turned into a new cemetery, complete with on-site funeral home. The land is across the street from Whitchurch-Stouffville's southern border.

The application was denied by both the City of Markham and the region, but for different reasons.

The application is now with the Ontario Municipal Board. There is no hearing date scheduled.

This is not the first time representatives for Arbor Memorial have taken a council's decision to the OMB.

Prior to the opening of Gormley's Highland Hills Memorial Gardens Cemetery and Cremation Centre in 1999, Whitchurch-Stouffville council of the day opposed the application because it thought the land was more suited to industrial business due to its proximity to Hwy. 404. Mayor Wayne Emmerson told The Sun-Tribune.

GORMLEY FACILITY BUILT

Highland Hills is also owned by Arbor Memorial.

"Cemeteries have to go somewhere," Mr. Carmichael said.

O'Neill's downtown location provides for very little parking and because it is an older facility, there is no room to hold large funeral services or receptions. Many people are requesting funeral homes provide all of these in one place, according to Mr. Carmichael.

If the OMB were to overturn the decisions of the region and

Markham, O'Neill's fate is unknown.

"That's a premature question. We haven't made a final determination yet," Mr. Carmichael said.

Markham council denied Arbor Memorial's application because the John Ramer house and barn sits on that land.

The 1853, two-and-a-half storey fieldstone and brick farmhouse was built by Mr. Ramer and is one of the oldest houses left in Dickson Hill, according to Markham Councillor Carolina Moretti.

'HAVE TO GO SOMEWHERE'

The barn is of the classic Pennsylvania German bank style. Mr. Ramer constructed it in 1869. He even carved his initials into its siding.

"Everybody Tweets nowadays but back in the day, you carved your name in a tree or on the stairs. Having your own house was a big deal," Ms Moretti said.

The house and barn received heritage designation status by the city in 2007.

"It's a rare survivor of its style," she said.

"We take our heritage very seriously here in Markham. ... Without a past you can't have a future," according to Ms Moretti.

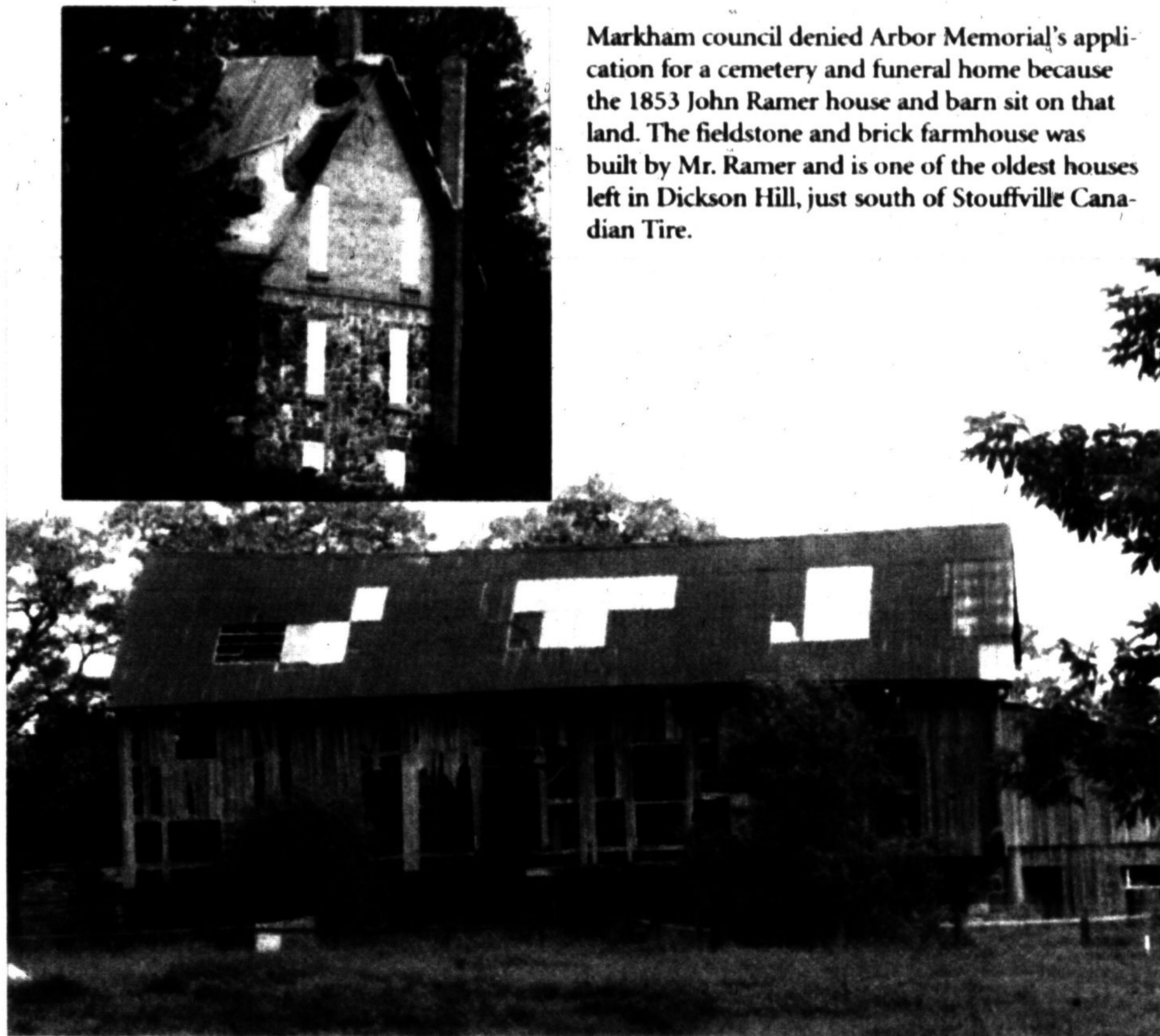
The home has not been lived in for a number of years and Arbor Memorial wants to tear it down.

The city wants the exterior returned to its original look. What becomes of the interior is out of the city's control, according to the Markham councillor.

"It's pretty dilapidated. We don't believe there is anything that can be done," Mr. Carmichael said.

Admitting he is not a heritage expert, he added: "It would just be my opinion (but) you couldn't make it up to code and keep the heritage component. I think they'd be in conflict with each other."

As far as the region is concerned, the proposed use is in contravention to the Oak Ridges Moraine Act, Greenbelt Plan and the region's own official plan. It also does not pass the compliance tests set out by the province's policy statement, according to Paul Belton, the region's manager of development review and transpor-



STAFF PHOTOS/SANDRA BOLAN

tation and community planning department.

The land is designated prime agricultural.

"We have provincial legislation and plans and we have an industry and consultants that support each other that are not in sync with each other. It's a GTA issue. Where are these cemeteries going to go?" Mr. Belton said.

Roughly 600 to 700 burial plots can be accommodated on one acre of land, according to Mr. Carmichael.

The Stouffville Cemetery has about 15 to 20 years left before it is full, according to Mr. Emmerson.

MOST GTA RESIDENTS CREMATED

In Toronto, a grave costs between \$5,000 and \$10,000. That does not include a marker or funeral, according to Mr. Carmichael. Within the 905, plots cost about half that, he said.

The one plot per person for ever and ever causes two problems. One: you will eventually run out of space. Two: a cemetery's only source of income is the newly deceased.

Elsewhere, such as in Queensland, Australia, term burials are utilized.

A family purchases a plot for a specified number of years, which can be renewed.

If the plot is not renewed, the remains are retrieved and buried further below ground or placed in an ossuary to make room for another cadaver.

In Canada, this is not allowed.

"I don't know if the public objects or the government just objects," Mr. Carmichael said.

Perhaps what is helping prolong the life of some cemeteries is that 65 per cent of people within the GTA opt for cremation, according to Mr. Carmichael.

Not only do those remains require less burial space, but some family members do not bury them in a cemetery.

— Sandra Bolan

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