

The Case Against an Airport in Pickering

A response to the Pickering Lands *Needs Assessment Study* (2010)

The *Needs Assessment Study*, the latest of many such studies since plans for a Pickering airport were shelved in 1975, was commissioned from the Greater Toronto Airports Authority (GTAA) by Transport Canada, in 2007.

The GTAA was asked to:

- review previous studies on the need for an airport,
- examine airport capacity in the Greater Golden Horseshoe to the year 2032, and
- assess the future need for an airport in Pickering.

- **Before the land was expropriated, its 126 working farms produced millions of gallons of milk each year, and millions of pounds of beef, hundreds of thousands of eggs, and tens of thousands of chickens and bushels of wheat.**
- **Farmland in Canada is being lost at an alarming rate.**
- **The need for secure food supplies is becoming a major global issue.**
- **Once farmland is lost, it is lost forever.**

The GTAA study concluded that “a commercial airport in Pickering will be required at some point in the future” to supplement Pearson, “most likely in the 2027-2037 time period.”

But:

- **Putting an airport on the Pickering site would destroy some of Canada’s best food-producing land.**
- **A Pickering airport would cost billions of tax-payers’ dollars to build and provide services for.**
- **There isn’t the slightest guarantee that the new airport would not become another Mirabel.**

The GTAA study states that it would be “prudent planning to retain and protect the site, thereby preserving the option of building an airport, if and when required.”

But:

- **Close to 18,600 acres (7,530 hectares) of high-quality farmland will remain underutilized for another 17 to 27 years – or more.**

The GTAA study recommends the Pickering site for the new airport because of its size, “a stronger potential demand base than Hamilton,” accessibility via highways 401 and 407, and “a relatively low population ... in the immediate vicinity of the lands.”

But:

- **The airport would be just 12 km (1 minute of flying time) from the Pickering Nuclear Power Station.**
- **It would be just 30 km from the Darlington Nuclear Power Station.**
- **It would be right next door to Seaton, a new community of 60,000 people.**
- **It would be adjacent to the proposed Rouge National Park – a nature preserve as well as home to the Toronto Zoo and its precious inhabitants.**
- **Over the past four decades, the Lands have become a de facto nature preserve and an important stop for migratory birds.**
- **“Transport Canada’s policy is to regard all wildlife on airports as potential hazards to airport and aircraft safety” (Transport Canada – Wildlife Control, Aerodrome Safety Branch, 2003). In short, *airports and nature do not mix.***

The GTAA study claims that it is “inconceivable that a large parcel of land comparable in size to the Pickering Lands could be amassed again [for an airport] in the future.”

But:

- **The powerful federal Expropriations Act allows the government to take over any land it wants or needs, at any time.**
- **The Lands are over four times the size of Pearson Airport.**
- **What is inconceivable is that such a large parcel of *prime farmland*, comparable in size to the Pickering Lands, could ever be amassed again in the future. In fact, it would be impossible.**

The GTAA study claims that “the potential establishment of a high speed rail line in the Ontario-Quebec corridor is not expected to have a major effect on the region’s overall air traffic demand.” The report goes on to say that the potential loss of air traffic to rail has been “estimated as equivalent to about two years of air traffic growth.”

But:

- **The GTAA is in the business of developing and running airports. It has a built-in bias and *cannot* be objective when reviewing options that would compete with its own operations.**
- **The GTAA’s conclusions regarding high speed rail traffic were based on an “air-to-rail diversion rate” that came from a 15-year-old study.**
- **Aircraft are among the worst polluters and the greatest contributors to the greenhouse effect.**
- **The future of air travel is by no means certain.**

The GTAA study predicts a steady climb in air-traffic volumes at Pearson. Diagrams show ever-increasing passenger numbers, from 32 million in 2007 to over 50 million in 2022. On the basis of these numbers, the GTAA warns that another airport will be necessary.

But:

- **Atlanta Airport, only 10% larger than Pearson, handles roughly three times as many passengers as Pearson (89 million in 2010) and can handle more. So is Pearson run inefficiently?**
- **In its study, the GTAA used inflated forecasts provided by Transport Canada. Even the forecast numbers for 2007 were too high – by over half a million passengers.**
- **Air traffic does not increase in a straight line. For example, the GTAA’s own statistics show that traffic volume at Pearson was actually lower in 2009 than it was in 2006.**
- **The 2010 forecasts for Pearson were more than 4 million passengers higher than the actual number of travellers.**
- **If the forecasts for the closest dates are so wrong, how valid are the forecasts for 17 or 27 years from now?**

Transport Canada released the GTAA’s report on July 11, 2011, having “checked and verified assumptions, methodology and findings to ensure completeness and adequacy.” At the same time, the federal government confirmed that the Pickering Lands would be retained for a “potential” future airport.

But:

- **As the likely developer and operator of the airport, the GTAA has a flagrant conflict of interest in the matter. Its study cannot be seen as impartial and cannot be accepted as valid.**
- **The report does not reflect recent global developments and trends, many of which are having (and will have) a negative effect on air travel.**
- **The report is full of words like *possibly, might, could, perhaps, may, most likely, somewhat, would appear to, at some point in the future, if and when, not possible to predict... This vagueness and uncertainty hardly constitute an argument for committing billions of taxpayers’ dollars to the building of an airport!***

**Putting an airport on the Pickering Lands
was a bad idea in 1972. It is still a bad idea in 2011.**

There is no case for an airport.

There are *far* better uses for prime farmland!