

# Controversial Toronto-area airport plan may soon take flight

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The federal government is revisiting a contentious decades-old plan to build a new airport northeast of Toronto under a scenario that could also see explosive growth at airports in Hamilton and Waterloo.

A Transport Canada study released Monday found that the Greater Golden Horseshoe – a sprawling conurbation centred on Toronto – will likely require another airport in 16 to 26 years' time and determined a rural site 50 kilometres northeast of Toronto in Pickering, Ont., would be a good fit.

The government expropriated 7,530 hectares of land at the site in 1972 in anticipation of a new airport. However, the facility was never built and the government opted instead to expand and upgrade Lester B. Pearson International, the country's busiest air hub.

Under the scenarios envisioned by the study, Pearson will likely reach a maximum capacity of 54 million to 60 million passengers annually between 2027 and 2037, up from 32 million now. Meanwhile, John C. Munro International airport in Hamilton and Waterloo International Airport could see as many as 10.5 million and 6.9 million annual passengers, respectively – exponential increases, given that both airports currently serve a combined total of just 500,000 people every year.

When Pearson reaches its capacity will mostly depend on whether

Munro and Waterloo are expanded to take on extra traffic.

Regardless of what happens, the report recommended that the federal government hold on to its lands in Pickering so they can be available for a new airport when the time comes. The study found that the size of the site; its accessibility via Highway 401, the country's busiest; and relatively little population immediately nearby made it a good site. What's more, it would be "inconceivable" that the government could amass another piece of land the same size in the future.

The proposed airport has long been controversial among area residents and environmentalists, who have protested against it since the 1970s. Work on the proposed airport was halted in 1975 after the provincial government of the day refused to build necessary infrastructure – such as sewers – to service it.

Transport Canada said its next step would be to draw up a plan for the Pickering lands, after considering the needs of "stakeholders."

"We will develop a plan for the short- and long-term development and use of these lands, including the potential for a future airport, for the benefit and economic growth of the Greater Toronto Area," Transport Minister Denis Lebel said in a written statement.

If it were built, such a project would likely be the largest entirely new airport in the country since Mirabel International was built north of Montreal in 1975. That airport, once intended to be one of the largest in the world, is now primarily used by cargo flights.

In addition to Pearson, Toronto is also served by Billy Bishop airport, on an island near downtown. However, its runways are only long enough for small, turbo-prop planes serving domestic destinations and nearby American cities.