

DEVELOPMENT VERSUS HISTORY

## A hamlet on the verge of extinction



**STEVE LADURANTAYE**

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The tiny Hamlet of Brougham first made it onto a map in 1791, as surveyors noted the lightly forested area would be an ideal place for settlers to build homes and farms.

More than 200 years later, the once bustling hamlet is on the verge of being wiped off the map altogether, as the federal government looks to flatten two dozen houses that stand in the way of an airport that may or may not be built decades from today.

The houses are on the so-called Pickering Lands, which the government expropriated in 1972 as a potential site for a new airport to service Toronto. And while there have been handfuls of demolitions over the years, Transport Canada's plan to tear down 26 houses in

Brougham has shocked the city's council and the 250 residents who still live in the area.

"It's all such a shame," says Gabrielle Untermann, who lives nearby and has watched a steady stream of neighbours move out of the area rather than deal with the uncertainty surrounding the 18,600-acre plot of land northeast of Toronto. "We used to have so many people around us, and now security trucks patrol all night long to make sure nothing happens to empty houses."

All of the houses on the Pickering Lands are owned by the federal government and leased to tenants. But as tenants have moved out over the years, the government has boarded them up rather than put them back on the market. Where there were about 750 occupied homes in 1972, there are now just over 100.

The condemned houses in Brougham – which is within the City of Pickering – represent almost 40 per cent of the structures in the hamlet. Eight of them are designated as heritage properties. The hamlet was the seat of government for the municipality for more than a century, and is considered one of the city's most important historical sites.

Transport Canada has offered to lease the heritage properties to the city, but only if it has an answer by Sept. 15. The city would be responsible for any upkeep, and could only lease the buildings to commercial tenants. It would also consider moving some houses.

Those all seem like plausible options – but with limited funds until the next city budget and the deadline fast approaching, the outlook doesn't look good for Brougham. Transport Canada has already issued tenders for their demolition.

"This whole thing is either a case of mismanagement or planned depopulation of the area," said Councillor Peter Rodrigues. "Yes, some

of the houses have fallen into disrepair and need to come down. But to just rush ahead and tear down some beautiful houses for an airport that may never exist doesn't make any sense at all."

It's not that the city is against knocking down properties – it has issued permits for 32 demolitions in the last year. But when Transport Canada told it last year that it would target Brougham, the city asked for more time and also requested that Ottawa provide about \$400,000 to help it determine the heritage value of all the houses left on the Pickering Lands.

Transport Canada wasn't impressed. It replied that "local heritage is strictly a local matter," although it did offer to redirect money it would have spent destroying houses toward any attempt to move them off federal land. It warned that people were breaking into the houses and filming YouTube videos of their explorations, and that they were fire hazards.

"Transport Canada is continuing with its demolition program, which began in 2010, based on the need to remove vacant structures that pose a health and safety risk to the public and to first responders," it said in a statement yesterday.

"Transport Canada is demolishing vacant, dilapidated structures because despite taking extensive and costly measures to secure the structures, including security patrols, people continue to break into these buildings. Transport Canada has made the decision to demolish the structures to eliminate the very real threat to public safety."

A land-use survey is expected from the federal government within the next year, which may give some clues about how the land will be developed. But in the meantime, tenants on the Pickering Lands, such as Ms. Untermann, just hope to be left alone.

"We've taken good care of this place over the last 30 years, and it's our home," she said Tuesday. "I've always said that they'll carry me out of here feet first – I hope that will be true, or that we just decide on our own when it's time to go."