

Teachers stunned by size of 'airport lands'

Durham teachers get a look at Pickering federal land for possible airport

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PICKERING -- On a professional development day, when kids were enjoying a day off school in November, a busload of teachers took a field trip to Brougham and got their own lesson on the large area in north Pickering rich with history.

The 18,600 acres of federal lands designated for a possible airport were expropriated by the government in 1972, and no decision has yet been made on the fate of the area. The land is mostly within Pickering, but also includes areas of Markham and Uxbridge.



As education is part of its mandate, Land Over Landings, the anti-airport group that hopes for a farming future for the lands, visits schools to speak to teachers and students about the situation. This time the teachers got to see the land for themselves.

"These are profound and deeply important parts of our heritage," said LOL member and tour guide Mary Delaney.

The day began with a gathering at the Brougham Hall in the geographical centre of Pickering. Original members of People or Planes (the original LOL), including Bill Lishman and Michael Robertson, were on hand to tell their tales of stopping the airport from going through in the early 1970s.

The group then began the tour of the land, which was a thriving farming community before expropriation. It included a stop at the historical Bentley-Carruthers house, the 1850's home where in 1975, when residents were being forced from their homes, Brenda Davies, Anne Howes and Frances Moore from POP stayed without heat, hydro and water for two weeks to keep the house from being bulldozed. They remained there until they learned plans to build the airport were put on hold.

"This is the 'Last Stand house,'" Ms. Delaney said to the Durham District School Board teachers on the tour. "There were people living here until last December when they were told to get out."

Ms. Delaney noted when she speaks to children about the land, they're amazed by the sheer size, and said it became obvious to the teachers as well when they couldn't cover the entire area on the trip.

"We didn't even go into York," she said. "I just pointed at it and said 'It just keeps going.'"

She said children often show anger and question why the situation can't be stopped when she speaks with them. She said with the teachers, she felt a strong sense of a willingness to help, and even noticed they tried to fix the eavestrough at the Bentley-Carruthers home. They also showed shock when they saw evidence of recent demolitions of century homes.

"We hope as much as they were shell-shocked and stunned, like us, they also see the possibility of a future," Ms. Delaney said.

Donald A. Wilson Secondary School geography teacher and chairman of the Durham Geography Teachers Association, Cameron Scott, helped organize the outing. He said he includes the history and geography of the Pickering land in lessons for his urban geography and environmental geography classes.

"I grew up in Pickering and watched friends be expropriated," said the former Pickering High School teacher.

He said while the school boards seem to favour math and sciences, the trip allowed the teachers to get a good sense of geographical issues happening right in the region.

"We need to know what's going on around us," Mr. Scott said.

Ms. Delaney hoped the importance of being involved in the community and commitment to a cause will be relayed back to the students.

"We do not do this for ourselves ... This is for the next generation," she said. "This is for them."

As well as noting the importance of current LOL members, she said if it weren't for the original members of POP and because the demolitions were stopped in 1975, the area is an agricultural gem.

"None of us would have been able to do this if they hadn't done it then," she said. "This would have been suburbia."

The teachers were also treated to a homemade lunch prepared by LOL members, featuring soups, homemade bread, pies, sandwiches and freshly-picked apples. Ajax-Pickering MP Mark Holland was also on hand to answer questions.

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