

# Environmentalists question wisdom of locating Pickering airport near park

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First a national park, then an international airport; residents near the junction of Markham, Pickering and Scarborough have been hearing a lot about the federal government's plans for the area lately – and it has left some wondering if the two proposals are a good fit for each other.

Transport Canada released a study Monday that suggested an airport would be needed on federally owned land in northwest Pickering some time in the next 16 to 26 years.

Many area environmentalists are still revelling in the June Throne Speech announcement that Rouge Park, just seven kilometres to the west, is slated to become a national park. Tuesday's announcement of a "plan to make a plan" for a Pickering airport now raises questions about the effect of road infrastructure beside – and busy flight paths above – the park, and also concerns about what will happen to the airport lands that have been so well preserved for 40 years since being expropriated for just such a development.

Andy McKinnon is affiliated with about half a dozen groups dedicated to preserving green space in the Rouge Valley and Duffins Creek areas. He sees a contradiction in the two proposals.

"Airports want to keep birds to a minimum, which is really at odds with the idea behind a park that celebrates them," said the Pickering resident who claims he visits Rouge Park almost every day. In fact,

Transport Canada commissioned a study in 2002 to identify which neighbouring land uses would be acceptable for keeping airplanes safe from bird collisions. Their consultants identified wildlife refuges as a “high risk” use.

Though the airport would be in the Duffins Creek drainage basin, just east of the Rouge watershed, Mr. McKinnon points out that the rivers are connected by underground aquifers.

Duffins Creek remains a relatively pristine watershed, according to Chris Robinson of the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters. His group has been part of a rehabilitation effort that has stocked the river with close to a million Atlantic salmon since 2006. Duffins Creek was one of three waterways chosen from more than 60 across Lake Ontario based on its chances for a successful salmon reintroduction.

Though salmon are a sensitive species, Mr. Robinson said he is confident that airport planning has come a long way in the 40 years since the government expropriated the airport lands. He said Transport Canada has been great to work with on habitat regeneration and is hopeful that any development could do a good job of mitigating the detrimental effects of runoff containing road salt and de-icing fluid.

Mike Bender is also trying to be optimistic. As general manager of Rouge Park, he has a good working relationship with Transport Canada and said he expects the ministry to be diligent in studying how any airport would reduce impacts on wildlife through measures like runway alignment and runoff treatment.

Bonnie Littley is not so hopeful. The former Pickering regional councillor helped found the Rouge-Duffins Greenspace Coalition in 2001. The land in question, she said, is some of the best farmland in the country and losing any of it is not justified.

“They say an airport would create jobs. What if we get stuck with

cargo like Mirabel in Montreal? We'll be left with nothing but warehouses, with one night watchman in each one," she said

Brian Buckles has been concerning himself with the fate of that prime farmland since 1972 when he had his 20-acre property expropriated. His former Georgian brick farmhouse was soon vandalized and eventually bulldozed. He is now a director of the Green Durham Association, a group that tries to involve itself in land-use issues. He'd like to see the area preserved as farmland and natural areas, with some limited public use such as a trail network that connects to the adjacent Oak Ridges Moraine.

Mr. Buckles said the land needed for an airport would only occupy about a quarter of the 18,000 acres the government owns. But he is hopeful that the economic case for another airport serving Toronto will not be made.

"I'm not a seer. I don't know what will happen in 20 years," said Mr. Buckles. "But I remember going to Ottawa in the 1970s and hearing [then federal transport] Minister Don Jamieson tell me that by the end of the 1970s there would be trouble in Toronto's skies if the airport wasn't built."

While he waits to see if the airport idea gets off the ground, he'll continue to watch over 18,000 acres of farmland and natural areas that, absent the threat of an airport, might have been developed long ago.

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