

Pickering Airport foes ready for an old fight

Megan O'Toole Jul 13, 2011 – 6:46 PM ET

In the weeks to come, Gabrielle Untermann will dust off the old protest signs, rally the local troops and resume a decades-old fight she admits is likely a lost cause.

But “you have to hope,” Ms. Untermann says from her Claremont home, one of a dwindling number that rests on 7,530 hectares of federally owned lands designated in the 1970s for a proposed Pickering airport.

Amid news this week that the long-discussed airport could become a reality within the next two decades, Ms. Untermann and her grassroots opposition group, Land Over Landings — who have not staged a formal protest in years — are ready to revive the battle.

“Here we’ve got such an opportunity for clean air, clean water, clean food, right on the doorstep of one of the largest cities in North America,” Ms. Untermann said, citing a plethora of premium farmland throughout the federally owned site. “Why not use it? We are running out of land for growing food.”

While Transport Canada has not officially decided whether to proceed with the airport, the department released a report this week suggesting the Greater Golden Horseshoe would

require a new airport between 2027 and 2037 to accommodate projected air traffic increases. The massive Pickering site, acquired by the government in 1972, would be ideally suited for such a hub, the report indicated.

“It is prudent planning to retain and protect the site, thereby preserving the option of building an airport, if and when required,” noted an executive summary of the study, based on research by the Greater Toronto Airports Authority.

Transport Canada spokeswoman Vanessa Schneider said the government will study potential land uses for the Pickering site — which is four times the size of Pearson International Airport in Mississauga — and issue a progress report in the coming months.

“Everybody’s just looking for some certainty on this file ... We’ll definitely be consulting with the existing tenants, looking at this with an eye to environmental stewardship,” Ms. Schneider said.

Finance Minister Jim Flaherty said the Pickering lands represent “a unique economic and environmental opportunity to help transform a key area of the GTA through job creation.”

Robert Seaman, a corporate aviation consultant based in Greater Toronto, concurred, noting an airport would draw new businesses to the region and create jobs in both construction and facility management.

“We’re going to need this airport,” Mr. Seaman said. “[The lands are] sitting there. It makes sense. It has all the right access... The time is probably right to sit down with a pad of

paper and sketch this thing out and start making the plans.”

The federal government acquired the Pickering lands, about 60 kilometres northeast of downtown Toronto, four decades ago, but the plan to build a new airport was soon placed on the back burner in favour of expanding existing airports. Today, only about 100 homes remain in the area.

The Pickering Lands Needs Assessment Study, the latest of a number of studies conducted over the years to examine future aviation requirements, was received by Transport Canada months ago, but the department only recently concluded its review of the findings.

Markham-Unionville MP John McCallum, the lone Grit left standing after a wave of Tory blue swept through the 905 region in the spring election, blasted the government for “sitting on” the study to avoid fallout at the polls.

“You have MPs in the Conservative Party saying contradictory things in order to get elected and then after the election, this report is plunked down, so I think the timing is very suspicious and appears to be politically motivated,” Mr. McCallum said. He called for thorough public consultations on the airport proposal.

Ajax-Pickering Conservative MP Chris Alexander, who said prior to the election he “absolutely opposed” the airport plan, has since appeared warmer to the concept.

“I have always said I’m against an airport if there’s no business case for it, and we know there’s no business case now, [but] circumstances change,” Mr. Alexander said in an interview Wednesday, pointing to the region’s evolving

infrastructure needs. “Let’s not lock ourselves into positions of being for or against each other. Let’s welcome the fact that there’s an opportunity to resolve the issue.... Everyone is welcome at the table.”

Mr. Alexander lamented that the issue has essentially been frozen for 40 years, creating a “cloud of uncertainty” for residents — something Ms. Untermann, 62, can attest to first-hand.

As the community’s population has dwindled over the years, she has watched empty houses fall victim to vandals and the ravages of time. She does not want to think about the possibility she, too, may one day be forced to leave.

“It’s impossible,” she said of her group’s David-versus-Goliath fight against the federal government. “But you know what Margaret Mead said ... that a small group of committed people can change things. So we live by that.”