

Pickering a 'prime location' for new airport: Transport Canada

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Nearly four decades after it acquired the land to build it, the Government of Canada is one step closer to developing an airport in Pickering, reviving a heated land-use dispute within the community.

A study released by Monday by Transport Canada has concluded that an airport will be required in the Greater Golden Horseshoe area as early as 2027, and that "Pickering Lands would be a prime location."

The findings, which considered passenger, cargo and recreational traffic needs, conclude the federal government should retain the site for the future development of an airport.

The potential airport has been a fear within the community since 1972, when the federal government acquired the 7,530 hectares of land.

Gabrielle Untermann, spokesperson for Land over Landings, a conservation group dedicated to halting the airport, said the findings were a "blow to the stomach," but don't come as a surprise.

Untermann said her group knew the assessment was being conducted by the Greater Toronto Airports Authority, "who are in

the business of making airports.”

Indeed, prior to the May 2 federal election, opponents accused the Conservative government of sitting on plans to make the airport a reality once the election was over.

Chris Alexander, the Conservative MP for Pickering-Ajax, was unavailable for comment Monday night. But in an email to the *Star* in April, the then-candidate said he was “absolutely opposed to the construction of an airport.”

“If elected, I would work with area residents and communities to determine how best to move toward resolution of this issue,” Alexander wrote.

Those comments came after he told *CPAC* in an interview that “if we get a stronger government I think you will see a government that will take action on this issue.”

In Monday’s release, Jim Flaherty, minister of finance and responsible for the Greater Toronto Area, said the Pickering Lands provide an “economic and environmental opportunity” through “job creation, economic activity and environmental stewardship.”

But Untermann questions his comments, particularly when it concerns farm land being paved over.

“To think that transporting things and people around the world is more important than people eating is just a travesty. It was

wrong 40 years ago and it's still wrong," she said.

Bonnie Littley, a former Pickering councillor and member of the Rouge-Duffin Greenspace Coalition, said the Transport Canada study is going to hurt property values in nearby Seaton.

The area next to the federal land was expropriated by the provincial government some 40 years ago to create a town to serve a future federal airport in Pickering. But in the past decade, as the prospect of a new airport seemed unlikely, the province has been working with developers and Pickering Council to build an environmentally sustainable community in the area.

"When people hear that the airport is back on, property values are going to plummet," Littley predicted. "How can you sell environmental sustainability with airplanes flying overhead?"

In the release, Denis Lebel, minister of transport, infrastructure and communities, said the government will prepare "a plan for the short- and long-term development and use of these lands, including the potential for a future airport."

Transport Canada said the Government of Canada will prepare a plan for the lands in the coming months.

With files from Laurie Monsebraaten