

Politicians at odds on reviving Pickering airport plan

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While local politicians take sides in the Pickering airport debate, the area's federal representative maintains there's nothing to argue about — yet.

Chris Alexander, Conservative MP for Ajax-Pickering, said a Transport Canada report calling the Pickering Lands a “prime location” for an airport doesn't equal a decision to build one.

“Today there is no ... proposal to build an airport,” said Alexander, who “absolutely opposed” the airport during the spring election.

The report released Monday found that the Greater Golden Horseshoe will require another airport as early as 2027. It recommended that Ottawa retain the Pickering Lands, which it acquired in 1972, for future development of an airport. Transport Canada will now work on a land use and management plan for the 7,530 hectares.

Alexander told the *Star* he was happy the government was moving ahead after decades of “inaction and of limbo.”

He said that when he opposed the airport during the campaign, he was “essentially arguing that 40 years is too long for this

issue to go unresolved. Secondly, there wasn't a business plan for an airport, and thirdly, that the community wanted at least some of these lands to be considered for other purposes."

David Pickles, a Pickering city councillor staunchly opposed to the airport, said he hoped for support from Alexander.

He said he was "disappointed and angry" the federal government is considering building the airport, particularly adjacent to the Rouge Valley, the urban national park Stephen Harper vaunted in his throne speech.

Pickles said Pickering should receive federal funding for an independent review of the government report, saying he wasn't convinced that Pickering is the best choice when there are already airports in Hamilton and Waterloo.

"We've got communities with existing airports trying to attract more airport-related business and more flights and more airlines," he said. "Why build one on a greenfield site from scratch?"

Meanwhile, Durham Region chair Roger Anderson welcomed the report's findings, saying an airport would "substantially transform the region."

The standard of living in Durham and neighbouring York Region would rise, he said, along with the number of jobs created through construction, airport operations and in the hospitality industry.

Gerri Lynn O'Connor, the mayor of Uxbridge township, said she also considered the airport an economic boon.

“Yes, we’ll have planes flying overhead, but I’m trying to look at the positive things that can come out of this,” she said.

The Ajax-Pickering Board of Trade has been more reserved. It issued a statement supporting the report’s release but didn’t go so far as to support its recommendations.