

Possibility of Pickering airport revived

Transport Canada study says facility could be needed by 2027

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PICKERING -- An airport in Pickering could become a reality by 2027 after a new study by Transport Canada confirmed the need for greater aviation capacity in the area.

On Monday, July 11 Transport Canada released the results of its Needs Assessment Study on the Pickering lands, 18,600 acres acquired by the government in 1972 for the purpose of building an airport. Although the plan was put on hold, the government retained the lands for future aviation options.

The Needs Assessment Study, which was launched in 2007 and completed in March 2010, concludes that aviation constraints based on increasing commercial passenger traffic will necessitate additional aviation capacity in the GTA by 2027, with Pickering declared a "prime location" for a new airport. The study considered the possibility of increased capacity at Toronto Pearson International Airport, Hamilton and Waterloo airports. With increased or "enhanced" capacity at all airports and "pessimistic" commercial passenger growth, the need for a new airport could be pushed back as far as 2041.

"Even though an additional airport will not be needed within the Greater Golden Horseshoe before 2027 at the earliest, the study concludes that the Pickering lands should be kept and protected for future aviation needs," reads a summary of the study.

"This is based on a number of factors such as the site size, proximity to a large potential market, accessibility to Highways 401 and 407 and a relatively low population in the immediate vicinity of the lands. The study also notes that it is inconceivable that a large parcel of land comparable in size to the Pickering Lands could be amassed again in the future."

Gabrielle Untermann, secretary of Land Over Landings, a conservation group that promotes maintaining the Pickering lands for farming through the creation of a land trust, said she was disappointed with the results of the study.

"Whenever something like this happens you get a sock in the gut, but then you think 'well, has anything changed?'" She said. "They've been saying the same thing all this time, we knew they were never going to let those lands go. It's not a surprise."

Ms. Untermann emphasizes that there are more important things in the world than moving people and cargo, such as feeding people.

"We are in the middle of a global food crisis and no one seems to notice," she says, noting that at least the 2027 date gives the group more time to convince people of the need to retain the lands for farming.

"This gives us a longer time without an airport here and time to reach the peak of the global food and oil crisis, and hopefully then politicians will take notice. It's a travesty that this land is sitting here growing ethanol."

Pickering Mayor Dave Ryan welcomes the report as a means to end the uncertainty of local residents, who have been waiting more than 40 years for a final verdict on whether the government would pursue an airport.

"I think it's positive that the uncertainty has been removed, we've had 40 years of airport questions and I'm very pleased to have this study made public," Mayor Ryan said, noting Durham Region's Official Plan has allowed for an airport at that location since the lands were expropriated.

"The economic benefits of an airport are obvious. They drive development and attract jobs and industry. We've seen that in existing airports such as Oshawa, Buttonville and certainly Pearson. What we need to do is see the big picture here."

Mayor Ryan praised comments by Jim Flaherty, Minister of Finance, calling the airport a unique opportunity for the region.

"The Pickering lands represent a unique economic and environmental opportunity to help transform a key area of the GTA through job creation, economic activity and environmental stewardship," said Mr. Flaherty in a release announcing the study results on Monday. "This brings us one step closer to a resolution on this issue."

"The federal government now has a clear direction to pursue," Mayor Ryan continued.

"Our role is to provide comment to the government and ultimately to make the best of the opportunities provided to us by this process."

The government will be releasing a more detailed plan for the future of the lands in the coming months.

"With more certainty regarding timing for the need for an airport, our government's next step is to come up with a plan for the Pickering lands, taking into account the needs of the region and stakeholders," said Denis Lebel, Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

"We will develop a plan for the short- and long-term development and use of these lands, including the potential for a future airport."

Ajax-Pickering MP Chris Alexander called the report a positive development as it seemed to promise a resolution to the issue.

"The most exciting thing for all of us is that the government agreed to put together a plan to help bring us forward to a resolution of this issue that's been postponed for decades," he said.

"During the election I said 40 years was too long to have waited and that a business case hadn't been made; today's announcement responds to those concerns. We've never had this kind of commitment to determine the use of these lands before. There's been a long period of uncertainty and this is the beginning of the end."

He said many things would have to be considered during final planning, such as economic development, industrial development and environmental stewardship, specifically in regards to the adjacent Rouge Valley lands, which the government has committed to expanding and turning into a national park.

"The key word here is resolution," he said.

"It's too soon to tell exactly what the outcome will look like because there's a lot of stakeholders. This is an opportunity to draw on the best of all those visions and craft a plan for the future."

For members of Land Over Landings, the fight will continue.

"We'll continue doing what we're doing and keep lobbying," Ms. Untermann said. "We will be awaiting the release of the plan and ready to pounce."