

Seaton plan draws fire from Pickering residents

Degradation of farmland, traffic are top concerns

By Moya Dillon

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Ontario farmland facts

- In the GTA more than 2,000 farms, and 150,000 acres of farmland, were lost to production between 1976 and 1996
- Between 1996 and 2001 the amount of farmland in the GTA decreased by at least 50,000 acres
- In Ontario the amount of farmland decreased by 600,000 acres between 1996 and 2001, including 18 per cent of the province's Class 1 farmland
- It can take thousands of years to produce one centimetre of the topsoil needed for agricultural productions

Source: Ontario Farmland Trust

PICKERING -- Traffic issues in rural hamlets and the loss of valuable farmland in Pickering dominated discussion surrounding a proposal for Seaton's employment lands.

Plans for the lands were presented as part of a zoning amendment application during a public information meeting on Jan. 9 in Pickering council chambers. The proposal covered only a small portion of the future Seaton community, detailing plans for 61.6 hectares of developable land for "prestige employment" uses, including office and retail, and another 14.6 hectares for "prestige employment node uses," including non-office and retail. The lands surround Hwy. 407 on the north and south between Sidelines 26 and 22, and plans include areas for natural heritage buffer zones. View the plans [here](#).

"Not all employment lands are being considered here tonight," said Ross Pym, principal planner, development review, for the City of Pickering.

"These are just the very first phase of planned employment lands. Seaton lands are all designated as prestige employment lands, the vision is for high quality employment lands that reflect the needs of the community and are sufficient to generate jobs for the area."

Seaton is a planned satellite city north of Pickering, to be serviced by the Hwy.

407 toll road, where residents can live, work and play. The community would be home to 70,000 people and offer 35,000 jobs. The development, which the Province initially proposed in the 1970s, is projected to be fully built out by 2031. In September 2011, council approved plans for three Seaton neighbourhoods, including the employment lands area, which has been labelled the Pickering Innovation Corridor.

Whitevale resident Marion Thomas questioned the assumption that businesses will locate in the area, and that employees would travel to the area via Hwy. 407. "There seems to be an unusual reliance on Hwy. 407 to provide the main transportation corridor," she said during a delegation to council.

"I believe it's unrealistic to anticipate employees who work here will be able to afford the added expense of a toll road. I'm also concerned that there's nothing in the area to entice businesses to actually locate here. If I was a business looking to locate in Pickering, I would be looking for facilities and places to hold meetings but there's nothing there, all I see are potential warehouses."

Another main concern of residents was the fact that much of the area is currently classified as agricultural and consists of prime farmland.

"Humans are the most invasive species and based on that I think it's time to tell the Province not only does the buck stop here but the bulldozers and the cement trucks stop here," said Michael Fearon, a Greenwood resident.

"We have to feed ourselves from these lands. A lot of prime farmland has already been paved but there's still a lot on the books and we have the power to make sure these things don't happen."

The abundance of available commercial space was also pointed out by Whitby resident Ed Vikari, who pointed to available industrial space in Oshawa, Whitby and Pickering as an example of what might happen to Seaton's development.

"I'm surprised at the timing of this transfer of farmland to employment lands when there's such an abundance in the city already," Mr. Vikari said.

"It makes no sense to me to convert open land and farmland when there's no need for it right now. Empty lands should be a priority to get used first because the infrastructure is already in place, whereas here to put all that infrastructure in it's going to cost taxpayers."

Councillor Jennifer O'Connell agreed that assuming the majority of workers would use Hwy. 407 may be unrealistic. She asked staff to address the issue in an upcoming report by asking the applicant, which in this case is the Province, to provide traffic studies for alternate routes. She also requested an inventory of unused commercial and industrial lands in existing urban Pickering, specifically along Bayly Street.

A report on the zoning application will come before councillors at a future planning and development committee meeting.