

Tory MP against national park plan for Rouge

Large federal park will put valuable agricultural land out of commission, MP says

By Mike Adler, Dec 09/2010

The campaign to make Rouge Park a national responsibility may be running out of time. Toronto and other municipalities with pieces of the park - which has grown to 12,000 acres since 1994 - all supported a plan to convince Ottawa it should be first in a new class of near-urban federal parks.

After a study confirming its own structure was unique but cumbersome and lacking legal authority, the park's governing body, the Rouge Alliance, put its hopes in the hands of Michael Chong, a Conservative MP.

Alliance members said the sympathetic Chong, along with boosters such as former MP David Crombie and letters from area residents, could twist arms in Ottawa and get the Tory government to agree.

The Alliance, however, also agreed that if there was no progress on a new "founding deal" for the park by year's end, it would ask the province to re-constitute it as an arms-length, non-profit agency.

And it is not clear any significant progress has been made, particularly with another Tory MP, Paul Calandra, openly objecting to the federal park plan. Calls to Chong for comment were met with responses he is "not available" to speak about the park campaign.

Alliance Chairperson Alan Wells, however, said the proposal is "still alive" though a federal response is taking much longer than he thought.

"We haven't had any negative comments from the government," he said. "Michael's still quite encouraged things will happen."

The Alliance is not scheduled to meet until February, when Wells expects Chong to report on the campaign.

Meanwhile, Pauline Browes, a former Scarborough MP who is among the park's founders, said she remains optimistic about a dream she has been working towards for more than 20 years.

"There's always hurdles to climb over," said Browes, noting she and Wells met Jim Flaherty, the influential federal minister for Greater Toronto, to discuss the proposal this fall. "He seemed responsive."

But Calandra, whose Oak Ridges-Markham riding contains thousands of federal acres the Alliance wants the new park to include, said this week he would "do whatever I have to do" to fight the proposal.

Though he agrees with preserving the Rouge Valley in Scarborough as "a national treasure," Calandra said creating an larger federal park could cost \$100 million and put thousands of acres of top-quality farmland out of production. Much land in the park and in federal holdings across Pickering, Markham and Uxbridge was expropriated for a Pickering airport and a new city in the 1970s, a plan that displaced thousands. Federal lands are now rented to farmers - few of the original owners remain - on short-term leases.

Studies for a smaller Pickering airport appear stalled. Calandra argues if certain federal lands aren't needed, farmers should get long-term leases or chances to own the parcels they farm, rather than see them become part of an expanded Rouge Park.

Before expanding the park, the TRCA, its nominal owner, could take responsibility for it and fix its "ridiculous" management structure, the MP suggested.

The Alliance has faced recurring complaints about dumping, illegal hunting and lack of funds in the park, which is run from Aurora.

Supporters of the campaign say they don't want to force farmers off the land, arguing long-term leases for agriculture would be possible in the new federal park.

Calandra's objection is an obstacle, said Scarborough East Councillor Ron Moeser, an Alliance member who said the federal park campaign is worth

continuing nonetheless.

"I was hoping by now we'd be further down the road, obviously," he said.