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A fox minding the henhouse

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The key to figuring out why the Greater Toronto Airport Authority would rather build a new airport in Pickering, northeast of Toronto, than help Hamilton International airport grow, is seeing the authority for what it is.

That's important because the GTAA has a lot of clout, political and economic. Hamilton needs to recognize that the GTAA's plans could cripple a key part of this city's economic strategy.

The GTAA is not some sort of arm's-length quasi-government agency. It's a corporation (albeit not-for-profit) that runs Pearson International Airport. As such, it is not particularly interested in helping the competition -- and that's Hamilton's airport -- make money.

The authority has been pushing hard to revive the Pickering airport proposal, mostly dormant since public opposition shot it down in 1972. If the authority can persuade Transport Canada to approve a new airport in Pickering, it would be part of the GTAA empire.

Ottawa has commissioned the GTAA to assess the need for an airport in Pickering, which Hamilton airport president Richard Koroscil correctly likens to "letting the fox mind the henhouse." Land Over Landings, a Pickering anti-airport group, has complained that the GTAA has a blatant conflict in assessing need, since it has already campaigned -- and completed a draft plan -- for a Pickering airport. The GTAA told Toronto councillors in September that a Pickering airport is needed to keep Toronto economically viable.

What the GTAA won't say is that John C. Munro Hamilton International Airport is ready to handle -- short term and long term -- the air traffic that Pearson airport cannot. Runways, terminal and all the infrastructure are there, with lands and plans in place for expansion. Highway connections from 403 to Hamilton International's front door are there.

Hamilton International, despite some perceptions elsewhere, is not a little airport out in the sticks, and hasn't been for a long time. In 2003, before WestJet shifted much of its operations to Pearson, Hamilton airport handled more than one million passengers.

There's not only room for airport expansion but plentiful employment lands for related businesses or uses. It simply makes no sense for the federal government to approve building a new airport from scratch in Pickering when Hamilton is available, ready and willing.

Growth of Hamilton airport and its employment lands is a key part of this city's economic development strategy. Ottawa can't bring new steel plants or major manufacturers to Ontario, let alone this city. But Transport Canada does get to decide where airports go or grow.

Hamilton deserves Ottawa's support not only because it needs it, but because it makes sense. The business case, the demographics and regional transportation links are there for Hamilton airport.

The city needs to continue, even accelerate, its emphasis on airport development as the GTAA ramps up the competition.

At the same time, Members of Parliament David Sweet and Dean Allison (whose riding includes the airport) can put Hamilton's case to caucus, Transport Minister Lawrence Cannon and Parliament's standing committee on transport, infrastructure and communities.

The story of Hamilton's airport has too often been two steps forward, one step back. That's not discouraging -- just a challenging reality. But Hamilton airport is ready for prime time, regardless of GTAA ambitions.

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