



Owners consider redeveloping Buttonville airport lands

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Published on Aug 19, 2009

The owners of Buttonville airport are considering moving the airport from its prominent Hwy. 404 location to keep it running.

Derek Sifton, president of Toronto Airways Ltd., which owns the airport, announced at a news conference today his family is looking at development opportunities for the airport lands.

"We basically have no choice but to protect our investments," Mr. Sifton said, adding the family "basically cannot sit here in a status quo and do nothing".

The future of Buttonville airport has long been in question, but never so much as recently, after the Greater Toronto Airports Authority cancelled a much-needed \$1.6-million annual funding agreement with the airport.

Mr. Sifton emphasized he's looking at all his options and is not committed one way or another.

He also said the airport won't be shut down tomorrow, adding he believes his family has "a very valuable commodity that can be relocated, down the road."

Where that may be isn't decided yet and Mr. Sifton said they are looking at alternatives, including examining opportunities at other airports.

Asked if that includes Markham Airport, the manager of which says he's preparing the land there for expansion to eventually replace Buttonville, Mr. Sifton said, "I'm not saying one particular airport."

The land could potentially be outside of Markham, he said.

The long-in-the-works but still-unconfirmed Pickering Airport could be a potential, he said. "We've always believed that Buttonville fills a void until Pickering comes onsite."

A decision on whether or not the controversial large airport, land for which is set aside in Pickering and Markham, will go ahead is reportedly due this year.

Mr. Sifton wouldn't say whether his family would choose to sell or redevelop the current airport lands themselves.

He said it's estimated that the 158 acre parcel is worth between \$100 and \$150 million.

But should the airport move, the land would undergo rezoning, a process that Mr. Sifton said could take years.

"Those values can only go up," he said.

"What we're sitting on here is probably some of the most valuable land in the Greater Toronto Area," Newmarket-Aurora MPP Frank Klees said at the announcement.

He said the Siftons would have done better to shut the airport down, but chose to continue its operations the best they could.

But, he noted, "we're now at a crisis point".

Mr. Klees, Thornhill MPP Peter Shurman and York-Simcoe MPP Julia Munro, all Progressive Conservatives, were on hand at the airport announcement.

They are calling on provincial Transport Minister Jim Bradley to step in to help Buttonville continue.

Mr. Sifton said he spent months speaking with the federal government, only to be told that the privately-owned airport doesn't fit infrastructure funding criteria.

However, he said he understands other airports have had federal help.

"That's all been very puzzling to us," he said.

So the three members of provincial Opposition are asking Ontario to step in. When put into context of the billions of dollars of infrastructure funding the federal and provincial governments grant, Buttonville's needs seem, Mr. Klees said, to be a "no-brainer".

The requested funding wouldn't necessarily continue indefinitely. Mr. Sifton indicated he believes the airport would be viable in another location.

Mr. Shurman said he's asking that the provincial government supplement the airport at least until other arrangements can be made.

"You can't let this airport simply go away without alternative arrangements," he said. "We want to ensure there is a reasonable transition," Mr. Klees said.

He added he doesn't care if the money comes from the ministry of transportation or public infrastructure renewal.

Mr. Shurman has previously brought up Buttonville's woes at Queen's Park, where he said Mr. Bradley expressed support of Buttonville.

"I would hope Mr. Bradley would step up," he said.

Mr. Sifton, Mr. Shurman, Mr. Klees and Ms Munro all emphasized the important role Buttonville plays in York Region.

A new study on Buttonville, prepared for Toronto Airways, says Buttonville is the fourth busiest airport in Ontario. It houses 29 private businesses and four government and service agencies.

There are 550 direct and indirect jobs here because of Buttonville and it contributes \$96 million to gross domestic product, according to the report.

"The call is clear. The ball is in the provincial government's court," Mr. Klees said.