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How will Buttonville airport closing affect Pickering, Oshawa?

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October 31, 2010

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PICKERING -- The planned closing of Markham's Buttonville airport oughtn't impact the decision on moving ahead with the long-discussed Pickering airport, but should have been part of the debate leading up to Monday's municipal election, say people opposed to development of the Pickering facility.

Sale of the Buttonville land to make way for commercial development was announced Wednesday, though the sale actually took place almost three weeks before.

Wednesday, Derek Sifton, president of Toronto Airways, which owns Buttonville, said it wasn't the end of his family business, and alluded to the possibility of relocating to the as-yet-undeveloped Pickering airport.

But that could just be Mr. Sifton's "own personal way of talking," said Mary Delaney, of Land Over Landings, a group that has long opposed development of the Pickering land for any purpose, much less an airport.

"I don't think Mr. Sifton's dreams and schemes have anything to do with" how the federal government handles the Pickering airport issue, Ms. Delaney said.

Mr. Sifton did not return calls Thursday.



Jason Liebrechts / Metroland file photo

PICKERING -- Mary Delaney is a long-time member of Land Over Landings, a group that is opposed to a possible Pickering airport. Mrs. Delaney checked out old newspaper stories about the issues on Jan. 20. January 20, 2010

Thousands of acres in north Pickering were expropriated nearly four decades ago for a future airport, but as yet, no decision on whether to proceed has been announced. The federal government completed a needs assessment months ago, but has thus far, despite extensive lobbying by a number of different groups, not released it publicly.

There is room at other airports, including Oshawa, to handle what will leave Buttonville, Ms. Delaney said.

Ajax-Pickering MP Mark Holland agreed, noting Buttonville mostly deals with "very small aircraft.

"Building a \$2-billion airport for a few Cessna planes would be crazy," he said. But, he does "worry this (federal) government could try to use this as cover to push an airport we don't need."

He also questions the timing of the announcement, coming weeks after the sale took place Oct. 7, and after Monday's municipal election. "It's suspicious that it's coming immediately after the municipal election," he said, noting during the campaign would have been a perfect time to debate the matter.

That could have impacted Monday's results, Ms. Delaney contended.

"I believe if this had come out prior to the municipal election, we might see a different council, and we certainly might have seen a different mayor," she said.

Council hasn't changed its position on the proposed Pickering airport, said David Pickles, the councillor for the area.

"I want to re-affirm that Pickering council is on record of not supporting an airport in Pickering; I have been clear and consistent on this matter," he said in an e-mail.

Still, it ought to have been part of the discussion, Mr. Holland said.

That's "the way this debate is being handled, is to avoid public debate at every turn," Mr. Holland said.

The MP and Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff co-signed a letter last summer, calling on the federal government to release the needs assessment study.

"I'm concerned it will never see the light of day," Mr. Holland said, speculating the assessment wouldn't support the need for the airport. "I feel that document is something the public deserves to see."

-- With files from *Torstar News Service* and *Kristen Callis*