



Back to New 'town' to replace Buttonville Airport

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Jayne Poisson and Brendan Kennedy

Buttonville airport, which began as a grassy strip in 1963 and morphed into the largest privately owned airport in the country, will be replaced with a vast development billed as a town unto itself.

Condos, retail shops and office space built by real estate giant Cadillac Fairview will replace the floundering airport within the next five years. Officially announced Wednesday, the 170-acre piece of land it occupies in Markham was sold to developers Oct. 7 in a joint real estate venture.

“We are working together to maximize the property for the future,” said Derek Sifton, president of Toronto Airway Ltd., which owns the airport, adding that his company envisions an “innovative, mixed-use development” on the current airport lands.

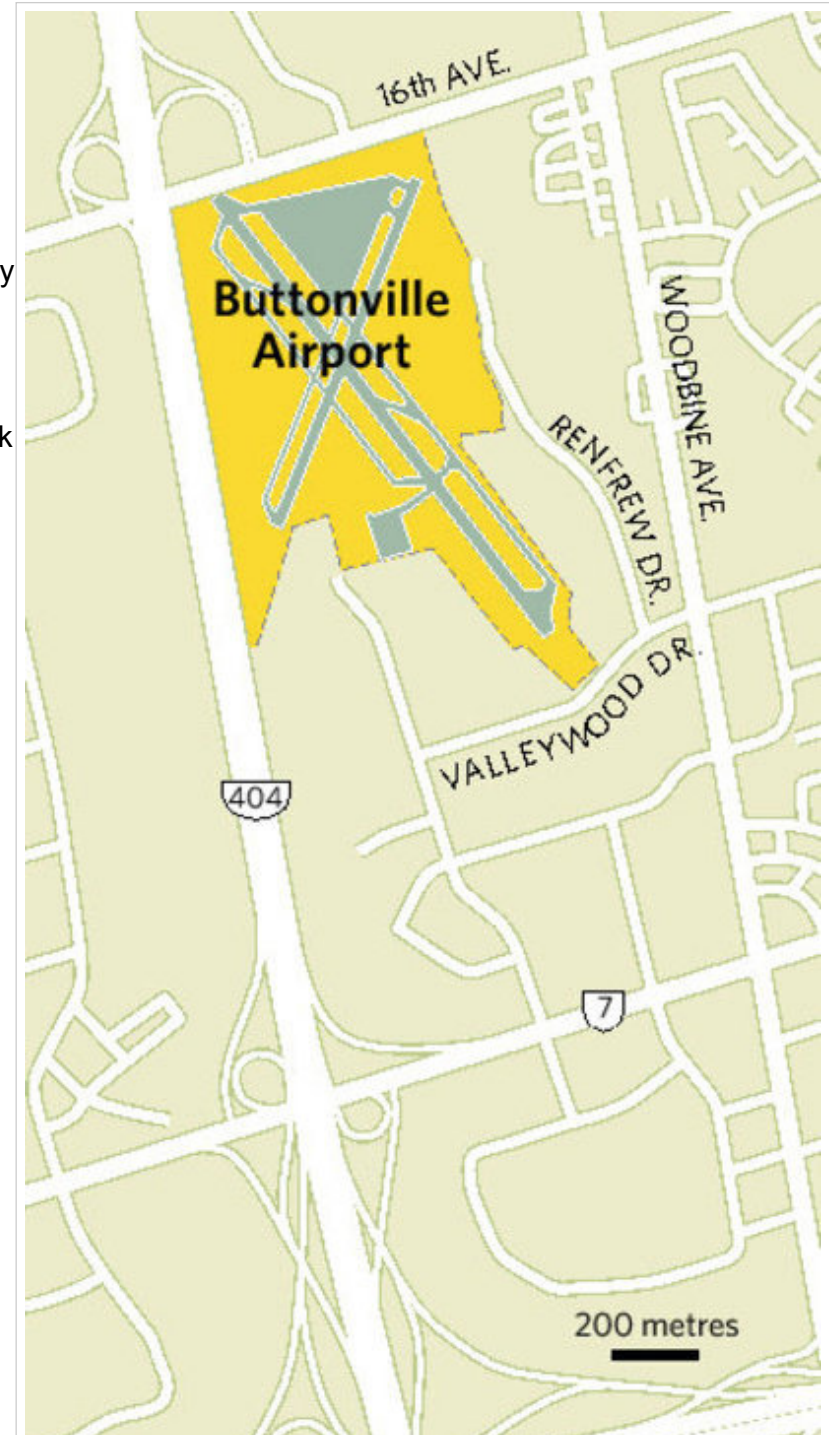
For some, the deal is a huge opportunity, if done properly, to build up one of the largest tracts of undeveloped land in the GTA. For others, the news raises concerns about where 170,000 flights a year will go — especially corporate jets.

About a half-hour drive from the downtown core, and just east of Hwy 404, Buttonville is on prime land.

“In the area right now there are basically industrial parks and subdivisions,” said Robert Wright, a professor of urban design and planning with the University of Toronto.

Wright added the smart way forward should not be more big-box concept stores and subdivisions, but a development that is pedestrian friendly, incorporating green spaces, education opportunities, and with the latest environmentally friendly building technologies.

“We get one shot at these things and then they last for 50 to 75 years,” he said.



Heath Applebaum, a spokesman for Cadillac Fairview, said the vision for the land, which still has to be rezoned for commercial and residential purposes, is preliminary. "It will be several years before a shovel hits the ground," he said.

The developer touted buzzwords like "high density," "mixed use," and "highest industry standards."

Cadillac Fairview has \$17 billion in assets and is wholly owned by the Ontario Teachers Pension Plan. The company owns 86 properties across North America; in Toronto, its holdings include the Toronto Eaton Centre and Maple Leaf Square.

Neither side would divulge the cost of the deal, but a year ago the undeveloped acreage was believed to be worth between \$100 and \$150 million.

"We believe this development will revitalize the neighborhood, attracting new business that will generate many new jobs in the community," Applebaum said.

What springs up on the coveted land remains to be seen.

So does Buttonville's next move.

Wednesday's announcement comes 14 months after Sifton spoke of "the eventual demise and close of Buttonville." An agreement with the Greater Toronto Airport Association that gave the airport \$1.5 million a year to cover overflow from Pearson International was cancelled in April 2009.

Requests for financial support from both the federal and provincial governments did not come through.

"There is no secret the last couple years has been tough on all airports, but even more so when you are set up as we were and receive no additional support or incentive from the government" Sifton wrote in a letter to employees.

But, in an interview Wednesday, Sifton said this is not the end of his family business, which has operated Buttonville airport for almost half a century.

The company wants to relocate to the as-yet undeveloped — and highly contentious — Pickering airport lands.

Use of the Pickering Lands as a proposed second international airport in the GTA is an idea that's been tossed around since the 70s but never materialized. It is still being reviewed by the federal government, which is studying whether existing airports can handle current air

traffic capacity.

“Pearson is already too busy. You can only fly smaller planes into the island airport. There’s nowhere else for corporate jets to go,” said one charter pilot at Buttonville, Canada’s 10th busiest airport. The tiny strip also provides emergency services for nearby communities.

“It affects me quite a bit because I run this flight school at this airport and I don’t know where I will run it when the airport closes,” said Gabor Revesz, who runs the DancAir Flight School out of Buttonville. The airport, home to three flight schools, has also become important for recreational flyers as well.

Outside the Pickering opportunity, management has been in discussions with airport management teams at Peterborough and Barrie.

Any decisions are up in the air, so to speak.

With files from Patty Winsa

Buttonville facts

170,000 flights a year

30

Flying clubs that call Buttonville home

300

People the airport employs

300

Local aircrafts housed at Buttonville airport

170

Acres of land slated for development

1963

The year the airport opened