

Thoughts on the June 11, 2013 announcement and effect on the GDA video

The June 11th airport news release confirmed Transport Canada's plans to transfer nearly 5,000 acres to Parks Canada towards the creation of a Rouge National Urban Park. In addition they identified an 8,700-acre future airport site in the southeastern portion of the 18,600-acre Federal Land holding.

The GDA airport video assumes the airport site would fall within the 6,000 'white belt' acres outside the Provincial Greenbelt and calls for the protection of the 7,600 acres falling between these 6,000 acres and the Park. The 8,700-acre site identified on June 11th includes about 5,400 acres of 'white belt' lands, excluding some 600 acres east of the Brock Road and adding 3,300 acres within the Provincial green belt, shrinking the area between the 8,700 acres and the Park to about 4,300 acres.

It is important to remember that after the Provincial Conservative Government passed Moraine protection legislation in 2001, a past Federal Government agreed to permanently protect some 7,200 acres of the 18,600-acre site, including 5,500 acres on the Moraine. The perception then was that as airport plans were clarified, these protected Federal Greenspace lands would likely be further expanded.

The creation then, not only of an 8,700 acre airport site, but Minister Flaherty's statements that the acreage between this site and the Park, the majority of it Moraine land which the public had previously been informed would permanently be protected, would be used for economic development, contributes to a growing groundswell of opposition that is likely to far overshadow the positive Rouge Park announcement. This approach would protect less land in total than in the past and negate previous Federal commitments to protect some of the most sensitive land.

After the press conference, on talk radio 1010 the Minister justified opening the Pickering airport in 2027 by stating incorrectly that "a very thorough study said we'd need it by 2027". Building would therefore begin 10 years in advance. This was a major surprise since the 2011 GTAA study the Minister refers to concluded that an airport would not be needed until sometime between 2027 and 2037 and perhaps beyond that. This Report also underestimated the recession and projected 2012 traffic levels at Pearson would be more than 10% higher than they actually turned out to be, thus further delaying their projected timetable for Pickering

There was absolutely no real rationale given to support opening Pickering in 2027. Given the GTAA's disinterest in doing so, it appears likely that Transport Canada will turn to a consortium to build a larger version of Buttonville, notwithstanding the fact the GTAA study had concluded Pickering was not required to handle this smaller business jet/general aviation traffic even if Buttonville and other airports were closed.

The Provincial Policy Statement stresses the importance of protecting prime agricultural areas and using them only when there are no reasonable alternative locations, which avoid such areas. As it has done in the past, the Province itself needs to continue to toughen this standard. Granted the airport itself falls under Federal jurisdiction, any provincial standard may not apply to an airport. However, should the Federal Government apply a weaker standard to the protection of prime agricultural land than the Province?

In his June 11th talk radio 1010 interview Minister Flaherty admitted the 18,600-acre land holding was “four times the amount of land we need”. A quarter of the 18,600-acre site is 4,650 acres, almost exactly the size of Pearson. The announcement identified an 8,700-acre site for the airport.

The plan then is to use significant lands within the airport site itself, as well as the adjoining 4,300 acres for economic development. Using thousands of acres of Class 1 food lands that fall within the Provincial Greenbelt for industrial development rides roughshod over provincial jurisdiction. Not only that, there was no mention of the importance and economic benefit of maintaining them as food lands.

The Minister’s strategy going forward then isn’t to work with the Province to identify transportation priorities or consider whether there are reasonable alternatives to accommodating traffic at existing airports or whether development should first be directed to the Province’s adjacent employment lands in Seaton. Instead, Minister Flaherty states in the radio interview that since the Federal land ‘is so valuable’ there should be no cost to taxpayers in proceeding if creative public private partnerships are pursued. Presumably this would involve giving a consortium cheap access to Federal land to incent them to proceed with a development that might otherwise have made much more sense elsewhere.

We have one final concern. Before recent changes to the Federal Environmental Assessment Act an extensive arms length review would have been required with intervener funding provided. We need to clarify what the process is now.

To conclude, the insulting handling of the announcement, herding those most affected in a field far from it, the backing off from previous government promises to permanently protect land, and most importantly announcing with absolutely no rationale there will be an airport in 2027 is creating fast growing opposition.

In summary the GDA video still clearly expresses our views:

- To commit to permanently protect and better manage as food lands and natural area the lands never needed for a possible future airport beginning with the 4,300 acres between the Rouge Park and the newly described airport site;
- To proceed to consider building an airport on this class 1 land **only** when/if there is a clear need and justification for doing so; and
- To use the possible airport site as food lands unless/until a decision is made to begin to build an airport.