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Revived Pickering airport plan: threat to Hamilton?

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Plans for an airport at Pickering have resurfaced, raising worries it will be a threat to Hamilton's economy.

Richard Koroscil, president of Hamilton airport, told the Stoney Creek Chamber of Commerce yesterday a plan for a major international airport in farm fields north of Oshawa is being revived by the company which operates Toronto's Pearson airport.

The Greater Toronto Airport Authority, which has been pushing the Pickering idea for years, has been given a contract by the federal government to study the need for a second major field.

"The Pickering idea has come back again and the GTAA is busy working to make it happen," Koroscil said. "Having GTAA study the need for Pickering is what we call letting the fox mind the hen house."

The idea of a second major Toronto airport at Pickering has been on hold since 1972. That's when Ottawa expropriated 7,500 hectares of farm land to build the facility, but shelved the plan in the face of public opposition. Last May, however, Transport Canada gave GTAA the needs assessment contract under terms of reference, which have not been made public. Although the needs study isn't expected until later this year, GTAA officials told Toronto city council's planning committee in September the Pickering airport is vital to the city's economic viability.

That sentiment sends a chill through Hamilton officials, who see John C. Munro Hamilton International Airport as crucial to the future economic viability of this city.

"I'm not saying it shouldn't be built, but why don't we maximize what we already have first?" Koroscil said.

Backers of Hamilton's airport, who have managed the city-owned facility under a long-term contract since 1996, have argued the once-neglected airfield can be a centre for jobs in the future. It employs about 3,600 people in passenger and courier-cargo operations and there is potential for more jobs when land around the airport is developed. Cashing in on that potential, though, is going to require municipal water and sewer services and strict planning controls.

Neil Everson, executive director of Hamilton's economic development department, said in an interview the renewed Pickering threat is a challenge to Hamilton airport to grow.

"It means we have to accelerate our plans and maximize the use of Hamilton airport so we have a real head start on them. If we're not established by then, then shame on us."

If the GTAA does recommend building the Pickering airport, the findings of its study will be made public and the federal government will decide whether to take the next step: a full environmental assessment with public participation.

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