

Study supports agriculture vision for airport lands

The Land over Landings concept received a welcome boost from an economic impact study



BY LILIAN SCHAEER
The writer is a freelance journalist based in Arkell

Community activists who have been fighting against construction of an airport on land expropriated north east of Toronto by the federal government more than 40 years ago received a boost last week.

Results of an economic impact study conducted by Atif Kubursi of Econometrics Research Ltd. and John Groenewegen of JRG Consulting Group came out in support of Land Over Landings' vision to transform the remaining lands into a permanent regional food hub based on agriculture.

The two consultants presented their findings to a capacity crowd of politicians, farmers and other local residents, and Land Over Landings members in the historic community hall of Brougham, a small north Pickering community, last week.

Most of the 18,600 acres originally expropriated by the federal government in 1972 to build a new Greater Toronto Area

airport that has never materialized are Class One farmland. The group was successful in 2013 and 2015 in having a portion of the land transferred to the Rouge National Urban Park, and is now focused on saving the remaining approximately 9,000 acres for a future based on agriculture.

Since airport plans were shelved in 1975, about 6,700 acres of the expropriated land has been leased back to about 35 local tenant farmers who have been growing mostly cash crops on one-year leases.

According to Groenewegen, the estimated farm gate receipts of these lands today are about \$3.7 million annually; the lands were producing more than double that (in today's dollars) in 1972 before expropriation.

"One year leases and expropriations have shackled the economic well-being of this area, and allowed for continued deterioration of communities," said former Toronto mayor David Crombie who hosted the event. "Now we have a report that shows the way forward and turn these lands into a productive future."

Land Over Landings

tasked Kubursi and Groenewegen with creating a practical and viable economic vision for the local rural community if the land was used to its maximum potential in agriculture with 30-year renewable leases. This longer tenancy allows for larger, longer-term investments in the land, buildings and related agricultural infrastructure to support higher value agriculture, Groenewegen said.

"You would never put in an orchard with only a 10-year lease, for example; you need a longer time horizon for payback," he added. "We're emphasizing that the nature of the lease affects the economic opportunity of these lands."

"If the lands remain in public hands, you don't have high start-up costs to buy land, so money can go into equipment etc.," he said. "That's an interesting feature of this land remaining in the public domain."

Under the permanent agriculture with 30-year renewable leases scenario, the study suggests an increase in annual agricultural output from the current \$3.7 million to \$25.1 million annually. That results in economic activity increasing from \$4.4 million to \$33.3 million in York-Durham, and rising to \$48 million from the current \$7 million across Ontario.

The number of jobs related to farm output would increase from 32 in the region to 450, and from 55 to 612 province-wide. Value-added GDP and tax revenue to all levels of government would also increase both regionally and across the province.

That's the beginning point.

"If you look only at this area as generating agricultural income and outputs, you would be underestimating in a very substantial way the total economic impact," said Kubursi. "Being so close to a large urban centre, you are likely to attract large masses of people who would come to escape the drudgery of urban life to green nature."

The combination of agriculture and tourism would result in economic activity of \$130.4 million in York-



Atif Kubursi (left) and John Groenewegen conducted the economic impact study that support a transformation of the land back to agriculture.

Durham and \$221.2 million across Ontario, creating 1,459 jobs regionally and 2,051 province-wide, jobs Kubursi noted were "meaningful, sustainable and continuous".

"The story that is crucial here is these results are vetted, truthful, and validated. Most of the models have been vetted by ministries of finance, so these numbers are not an exaggeration," Kubursi said. "These numbers are large, and economics is not the only benefit these lands will put out."

The plan also includes a farming incubation centre and a research and innovation centre that could focus on farm management practices, carbon sequestration and climate change adaptation, in addition to natural capital worth preserving.

Groenewegen and Kubursi also looked at other scenarios, including extending the concept to a larger portion of the federal lands, making some land available on 30-year leases and the rest on 20-year leases, having all land on 10-year leases with or without early termination rights for the federal government, and using none of the land for agriculture at all.

"Different leases will have different impacts on the lands due to the investment decisions people would make and the type of agriculture they would pursue," Groenewegen said. "Economic activity keeps shrinking with shorter lease

periods, which is linked to economic uncertainty for the entrepreneurs."

He called for an implementation strategy led by a designated change agent or custodian for the lands that involves local organizations as well as local government and federations of agriculture. Parks Canada was mentioned as a possible option, due to its management of the Rouge National Urban Park nearby.

The plan also noted the need for more than \$50 million of infrastructure improvements, including upgrading roads and bridges, as the lands and the surrounding region have suffered from lack of investment since expropriation.

"We didn't talk about who should pay (for the improvements), that was not our mandate, but it's all about the master plan and more importantly, requires a custodian to go through a process to find the right entrepreneurs," Groenewegen said in answer to a question from the audience.

"We need some entrepreneurs willing to support the vision along with the custodian and local community engagement."

Other areas in Ontario have successfully leveraged agritourism onto a successful agricultural base, he noted, citing Niagara Region and Prince Edward County as examples.

According to Kubursi,

the lands could play an important role in stronger food security for Ontario, as there are many commodities that could be grown locally but are currently imported.

A key challenge to anyone wanting to grow fruit and vegetable crops on the lands, though, will be labour, according to Mike Whittamore, whose family ended the pick your own, farm market and agri-tourism part of their farming business in the region last year after more than 50 years.

"The single biggest problem in fruit and vegetables is labour and that's why the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program is so important, but there are problems here, like that there are no houses for those workers," he commented at the end of the question and answer session. "If we want to make this work, we need to streamline how we give approvals to workers."

Land Over Landings chair Mary Delaney said her group will be sharing the report's findings widely and working hard to make the future of the lands an issue in the upcoming provincial, municipal and federal elections.



Community activists started fighting the Pickering airport project 40 years ago.