

An Agricultural Future for the Pickering Federal Lands



Brief History

In 1972, Ottawa announced that nearly 19,000 acres of land in North Pickering and environs, most of it prime farmland, would be expropriated for a new international airport – Toronto’s own Mirabel. Ontario was to be a partner in the venture.

In 1975, the project was placed on indefinite hold when Ontario chose not to provide the infrastructure. Most of the expropriated land continued to be farmed in the decades that followed, but mixed farming was replaced by cash crops – the only crops offering a reasonably sure return on investment under the 1-year leases that were available.

Fast-forward to 2013. The federal government announced the transfer of 5,200 acres of the site to Parks Canada for the Rouge National Urban Park (RNUP). In 2015, another 5,000 acres were committed to the Park, whose mandate is to showcase nature, culture, and agriculture.

The Situation and the World Today

Forty-four years after the initial announcement, 10,200 acres of the expropriated site are permanently protected within the Park for farming. But some 9,000 acres are still earmarked for a “potential future airport,” for which a business case has never been made and for which the estimated date of need continues to recede into the unknowable future.

In the meantime, climate change is upon us, compelling us to take food security seriously, which means protecting local food and water sources and growing more of our own food while reducing our reliance on imports. We in Ontario are lucky to be able to do this: we are blessed with much (although a dwindling amount of) Class 1 soil, the only soil that can reliably grow our food crops every year into the future, a priceless natural asset that most of the rest of the world would sell its soul to possess.

Which brings us to the remaining Federal Lands, which are almost entirely Class 1 farmland. With climate change already threatening food security in many parts of the globe, we must never let our prime farmland be sacrificed to non-agricultural development. Instead, the land must be permanently protected as a food source for the GTA and beyond.

The political climate could hardly be more favourable for such a policy change:

- the new *Government in Ottawa* is placing renewed emphasis on meeting our climate-change responsibilities and conserving our natural resources;
- the *Ontario Government* has policies in place that favour the protection of prime farmland; and
- the *people of Ontario, including the residents of the GTA*, are increasingly interested in the availability of fresh local food and are concerned about the security of their food and water sources.

Thinking “Food Hub” – The Best Use of the Lands

As many Ontario localities already realize, food hubs are insurance for the future. With a food hub on the Federal Lands, whether within the RNUP or a land trust, farming would transition from cash cropping to much more value-added fruit, vegetable, and mixed farming, including livestock, with an assured (and growing) market right next door – Canada’s largest urban centre. Furthermore, the Lands are capable of growing over 200 food crops, many the kind of world foods that are in increasing demand in the GTA but must currently be imported.

An ideal neighbour for the RNUP and its unique agricultural mandate, a food hub would revive North Pickering, an economic wasteland for the past forty-four years. It would bring back farm services and food processing operations and open up a range of opportunities, including but not limited to organic farms, micro-farms, and incubator farms to train and help launch the careers of young and beginning farmers, those essential future food providers. New restaurants, pubs, cafés, bakeries, bistros, B&Bs, and farmers’ markets would spring up.

There would be no unwelcome injection of noise, pollution, or traffic congestion into a rural area. There *would* be agricultural stability, thanks to the RNUP’s farming mandate (a game changer), spawning new synergies and supporting a wide array of secondary businesses, all created by the “critical mass” of the remaining Lands, other nearby farmland, and the farmland within the Park itself.

Planning Now for the Future

Rising population numbers, the importance of near-urban food security, and the urgent need to help countries experiencing food shortages are now global concerns. Studies show that the world *lost a third* of its arable land to erosion or pollution in just the last 40 years – the same timeframe in which, according to the United Nations, the world’s population *grew by 81 per cent*. We ignore such facts at our peril.

So it is imperative that we save our best farmland. It is equally imperative that we nurture our next generation of farmers. In the Federal Lands, owned by Ottawa on behalf of all Canadians, we have a unique opportunity to do both. And to help the food hub vision become reality, partnerships could be developed with organizations such as FarmStart, Guelph University, and Durham College.

In the firm belief that the Lands must be kept agricultural for the health and wellbeing of future generations, we are about to commission an extensive professional study of the Lands’ economic potential if protected for agriculture and developed as an agri-food hub.

We are doing this because agriculture remains, as it has been for centuries, the best use of prime farmland, and because agriculture has a secure future wherever farmers have good land to farm on.

**No one is going to look back 50 years from now and say,
“we protected too much green space and farm land”.**

– Jennifer Keesmaat, Chief Planner for the City of Toronto

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