Land Over Landings

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The Case Against an Airport in Pickering

A response to the *Needs Assessment Study:Pickering Lands, 2010*

The *Needs Assessment Study*, the most recent of such studies since plans for a Pickering airport were shelved in 1975, was commissioned in 2007 from the Greater Toronto Airports Authority (GTAA) by Transport Canada. The GTAA submitted its final report in March 2010. The report's findings were released to the public in July 2011.

The GTAA had been asked to:

- review previous studies on the need for an airport,
- examine airport capacity in the Greater Golden Horseshoe to the year 2032, and
- assess the future need for an airport in Pickering.

Transport Canada released the final report after having "checked and verified assumptions, methodology and findings to ensure completeness and adequacy," and announced that, based on the report's findings, the Pickering Lands would be retained for a "potential" future airport.

But:

- **Conflict of interest abounded. The GTAA would be Pickering's likely developer and operator. And the GTAA had worked with data supplied by Transport Canada, a department that has pushed for this airport for decades.**

The report stated that a commercial airport in Pickering would be required to supplement Pearson "at some point in the future ... most likely in the 2027-2037 time period." Transport Canada's executive summary reported these dates as if they were conclusive.

But:

- **The report actually waffled on dates, suggesting later ones as well, before concluding merely that it would be "prudent planning to retain and protect the site, thereby preserving the option of building an airport, if and when required." Maybe never?**
- **The report warned that need predictions depend on the accuracy of passenger-forecasts. Transport Canada did not include this caution in the executive summary – which was all most people read.**
- **Finance Minister Jim Flaherty seemed unaware of the uncertainties when he announced, in June 2013, that Pickering airport had been found to be needed and would be operational in 2027.**
- **Five years after the study, Pearson is barely at 60% of stated capacity. Hamilton and Waterloo airports, functioning at only 2- 3% of ultimate capacity, are having trouble attracting and keeping air carriers.**

The study urged retention of the Pickering site because of its size, "a stronger potential demand base than Hamilton," accessibility via highways 401 and 407, and "a relatively low population ... in the immediate vicinity of the lands."

But:

- **In 2013 and 2015, in developments the study's authors could not have foreseen, more than half the land was given to Parks Canada for the Rouge National Urban Park, leaving an "airport site" about double the size of Pearson – still far larger than needed for a reliever airport but now cheek by jowl with a national park whose mandate would seem to conflict with that of any airport.**
- **A significant number of people refuse to use Hwy 407, finding the tolls extortionate. So the 407 isn't quite the advantage it was touted to be.**
- **The Province's population projections for the GTA over the next 10 years anticipate the same rate of growth in all areas. The population will remain far larger to the west. If Hamilton and Waterloo airports must struggle, even with that greater population base, how would a Pickering airport survive?**

- **The site is next to Seaton, a new model live/work community planned for 60,000 people. How many will want to come and live/work beside an airport?**
- **How Pickering airport would survive, let alone thrive, remains a mystery. The study found that no airlines want to split their services between a hub and a secondary airport; there is enough cargo capacity at Pearson and Hamilton to accommodate all needs for the foreseeable future; cargo operators want to be near the big-bellied planes at hub airports; there are too few low-cost carriers in Canada to make Pickering viable; and corporate jet/general aviation traffic can be handily absorbed by existing CJ/GA airports when Buttonville closes.**

According to the report, it is "inconceivable that a large parcel of land comparable in size to the Pickering Lands could be amassed again [for an airport] in the future."

But:
- **The powerful federal Expropriations Act allows the government to take over any land it wants or needs, whenever the need arises.**
- **A new site need be no larger than Pearson's; i.e., less than a quarter of the original land grab, less than half the size of the current site.**

The report claimed that "the potential establishment of a high speed rail line in the Ontario-Quebec corridor is not expected to have a major effect on the region's overall air traffic demand."

But:
- **The GTAA is in the business of developing and running airports. As such, it *cannot* be objective when reviewing options that would compete with its current and future operations.**
- **The GTAA's conclusions on high speed rail traffic were based on an "air-to-rail diversion rate" from a study by then 15 years old.**

The report showed Pearson's passenger traffic climbing, year after year. Its conclusions were based on this straight-line growth and on Pearson's stated capacity limits.

But:
- **The GTAA study used inflated passenger forecasts provided by Transport Canada. Even those for the very first years of the study were too high by millions. If forecasts for the nearest dates were so wrong, how valid will those for 17 or 27 years out prove to be?**
- **Atlanta Airport, only 10% larger than Pearson, processes more than twice the number of passengers (97 million in 2014-15, to Pearson's 39 million) and can handle more. So is Pearson efficiently run? What are its real passenger-capacity limits?**
- **Should landings/take-offs be measured instead? Pearson's have climbed by only 1.5% since 2000.**

The world has changed in many ways since the GTAA study was undertaken and its report released.

There has been the creation of the Rouge National Urban Park. While Transport Canada's policy is to regard all wildlife in or near airports as potential hazards to airport and aircraft safety (so wildlife are scared off, trapped, even killed), just across the fence and within the airport wildlife hazard zone is the Park – a wildlife sanctuary. How can this circle be squared? Airports and national parks just don't mix!

Local food security and the need for farmland preservation are growing concerns everywhere. A Pickering airport would be built on (and would permanently destroy) some of Canada's most productive foodland.

There is also the critical issue of aviation's near-total reliance on fossil fuels, which make jet aircraft a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions. Some 5 million barrels a day are burnt by aircraft worldwide. With no viable biofuel alternatives in sight at a time of increasing urgency to curb fossil-fuel use, aviation's future is unlikely to be one of untrammelled, problem-free growth.

Putting an airport on the Pickering Lands
was a bad idea in 1972. It is still a bad idea.
There is no case for an airport.
Food production is a *far* better use for prime farmland !