

PROGRESS – AND THE COMING YEAR

**You shake and shake the ketchup bottle,
First none'll come and then a lot'll.**

In the past few weeks this little rhyme has been much in our minds! For years we've been movers and shakers but, until recently, there's been a whole lot more shaking than moving.

After People or Planes' success in 1975 – they were hugely instrumental in stopping the Pickering Airport in its tracks – not much headway was made for 37 years. Amid airport needs studies, new airport draft plans, and ongoing demolitions on the Lands, the only bright spot was the granting of a Federal Green Space designation on that part of the site furthest from the footprint of a future airport. The designation was never formalized. A grassroots presence was always monitoring the Lands and keeping the issue in the political and public eye. But it wasn't easy work, with the enemy mostly missing in action.

Then came June 11, 2013. Ottawa announced that a quarter of the site would be transferred from Transport Canada to Parks Canada to be part of the new Rouge National Urban Park. We reacted warily, concerned that this might mean the gradual phasing-out of farming on those lands, or unwonted or inexperienced interference in how farmers farmed. Our fears were baseless. Nature, culture, and agriculture will be the three shining pillars of the RNUP, and Park planning is taking place in an atmosphere of cooperation with farmers, and of mutual respect. By all accounts, farming in the Park has a bright future ahead.

We narrowed our focus to the lands still at risk. A Pickering airport had been revived in the June 11 announcement, and more than 5,000 acres of farmland and natural areas between the Park and the airport site had been earmarked for economic development. No details were given but farming was categorically ruled out.

And then came July 11, 2015. Ottawa announced that this economic development land would also go to the Park. And for the first time, we heard a Prime Minister publicly state that no proposal – for an airport or anything else – would be considered without a “sound business plan.” **Two days later**, we learned from the Transport Minister that two studies were to be launched: one by Transport Canada, to look yet again into need for a Pickering airport, and one by an independent advisor, who would conduct market soundings and try to determine best uses for those remaining lands.

AT LAST, SOMETHING NEW AND GOOD!

We've sometimes joked (black humour) that the only new thing on the Federal Lands in over 40 years was this sign. Its purpose? To warn of a temporary road closure that has stayed a road closure for 5 years now. In fact, the “NEW” sign is now old. Like everything else on the Lands.



So what a breath of fresh air it was for us to see brightly coloured “Welcome! Bienvenue!” signs at a Parks Canada event on the Lands in July. Our chair, Mary Delaney, delightedly told a Parks Canada staffer: “This is so wonderful! For decades, the only signs we've seen here have been Transport Canada's “No trespassing / Passage Interdit.”

Another sign was unveiled at the same event: the first official road sign for the Park. This western part of the Lands has been given a new lease on life.



On July 31, Dr Gary Polonsky, past-president of Durham College and founding president of the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT), was announced as the independent advisor. His opening comments at the event were heartening: “I had no idea that our Park is 15 times larger than Central Park. You can imagine the kind of opportunity that provides.” He went on to mention the “enormous” amount of agricultural land here, and “that’s very important. You know, we all eat. We all know it’s better to eat fresh, it’s better to eat local,” so anything we can do to improve that is “good.” He also voiced his concern about the number of young people today without jobs. The aviation contingent in the audience was probably a little less excited by some of these comments than we were!

But we don’t want to read too much into Dr Polonsky’s first words. He said he is going to be a listener, and his mandate in the 10-month period of the study will be to record and report on what people and organizations across the spectrum will be suggesting as the best use for the remaining Lands.

WHAT’S NEXT?

The independent study can’t formally start until the day after the election. We don’t know if the same thing holds true for the study by Transport Canada. A new elected government might decide to cancel the independent study or might allow it to proceed. The final report might be shelved by the government, as have so many reports before it, or it might be a catalyst for major change here – whether for the better or the opposite we can’t begin to guess. Although we believe our arguments to be the right ones, and highly persuasive, too, we daren’t risk complacency. Our organization of passionate and dedicated volunteers is already hard at work on what we see as our next and most important tasks:

- complete a request for proposal and seek funding for an expert study on the economic potential of agriculture on these Lands;
- arrange meetings with local federal candidates to brief them, take soundings, conduct tours, and do whatever is needed to get our message across;
- gather the data on which to base our submission to the independent advisor;
- overhaul our website to:
 - a) bring all areas up to date in light of recent developments
 - b) allow faster posting of breaking news
 - c) provide our visitors with more details, photos, and maps
 - d) make data searches far easier.

We’ll keep you posted.

GARLIC TIME !!

While we were waiting for political rumours to come true, we were also busy in our gardens, and we’re happy to report that the garlic harvest is in!

Just one family’s garden in this Class 1 soil has produced 275 of the most beautiful, creamy, health-giving, mouth-watering garlic you’ve ever seen!



Garlic wasn’t grown on the Lands at the time of expropriation. So our thanks to immigrants from all over the world who came to the GTA and introduced us to it. Most of us can’t imagine life without it now! Eschew those dried-up little things imported from thousands of miles away and chew on some Ontario garlic today.

Now, excuse us – it’s August and the beans, zucchini, and tomatoes are calling. *Enjoy the rest of the summer!*

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