

Welcome Speech by Mary Delaney

Land Over Landings Inaugural General Meeting, June 11, 2015

So. Here we are. 43 years, 3 months, and 9 days since the Pickering Airport was first announced and People or Planes was born. Ten years and 4 months since Land Over Landings came into being. And 2 years to the day since Jim Flaherty came to North Pickering, planted a tree, and announced a runway on the same spot.

So. Here WE are. And what's still NOT here? [Crowd: AN AIRPORT!!!]

This past year saw a quarter of the land that was expropriated in 1972 – the land in York Region – permanently protected as farmland, under the Rouge National Urban Park Act.

Should we all claim some credit for that success? You're damn'd right we should! If POP hadn't stopped the airport in 1975, that land and the thousands of acres to the east of it would now be one vast stretch of concrete, asphalt, and sprawl. POP led the way, and VOCAL and Land Over Landings, each in turn, kept the pressure on.

Together, we've stopped an airport for 43 years. We *made possible* this year's protection of nearly 5,000 acres of Class 1 farmland. We're now working on protection of the rest. So why are we having a *founding* meeting now??

Good question. I'll get to that.

Many groups like ours are born in response to a "clear and present danger." Their overwhelming drivers are anger, fear, and mistrust. People or Planes was no exception and neither was Land Over Landings. But as we near a half-century of activism on this issue, we are increasingly asked: how do we keep going? How do we maintain that drive when the danger seems to fade, or when a partial victory has been achieved? Partly, it's thanks to a great – no, a terrific – team, partly to our unswerving belief in the importance of our cause. These strengths keep us focussed and hard at work. Even when things *seem* quiet, they aren't. So much of what we're doing takes place, by necessity, behind closed doors. And there's a precedent for this. Our political team learned from the masters.

Four decades ago, everybody heard the radio reports, saw the TV coverage, the headlines and photos of POP's stunts – Mike Robertson flying a hang-glider around the Peace Tower and landing on the lawn of Parliament Hill (try *that* today!!); a Bergmanesque march on Queen's Park with coffins and hooded cloaks; the prime minister and premier being hanged in effigy; and three women in an historic farmhouse slated for demolition, making the Last Stand. Pretty dramatic

stuff – and highly useful. It kept the issue in the news and attracted Canada-wide interest and support. That was the public face of the movement. Nobody saw pictures of Lorne Almack, Brian Buckles, and the Technical Committee of People or Planes, doing their research and meeting privately with senior cabinet ministers around boardroom tables.... But they were doing just that. And they got results.

This past year, we've met with 6 federal government MPs, including 3 cabinet ministers, as well as members of the Opposition and candidates seeking election. We do our homework before these meetings, and go prepared. We don't exaggerate or misrepresent the facts. We correct misconceptions, provide evidence to back up our statements. We've earned trust by respecting confidences but, at the same time, we don't mince words when we say it's long past time to kill this airport threat stone dead. We believe these meetings have been productive. We've seen opinions gradually change – from rigidly pro-airport to a willingness to listen and an openness to explore options. There's a growing concession that preserving farmland is important!

We've also worked closely with many of the most highly regarded environmental and food advocacy groups in the province, including Food and Water First, the David Suzuki Foundation, Ontario Nature, the Greenbelt Alliance, the Ontario Farmland Trust, STORM, Friends of the Rouge Watershed, and Environmental Defence.

The past president of Environmental Defence and leading environmental lawyer, David Donnelly, said in Brougham Hall in January that Land Over Landings is "fighting one of the great campaigns in Ontario land-protection history and I wish you every success in stopping this mindless, unnecessary, and costly airport." His words spurred us on even more.

Besides all those meetings, we've been enlisting volunteers, actively growing our supporter base, giving school presentations, attending and participating in conferences, maintaining contact with the media, keeping a watchful eye on developments in the aviation industry, on the situation at Toronto's and indeed the world's airports, and on the grassroots protests (some successful) against proposed new airports; we're monitoring climate change reports and those related to food security. And we're conducting in-depth research into a number of critical issues that support our argument for protecting the Federal Lands. We've produced, for example:

- ~ a report on the many government efforts over the last 30 years to protect green space on the Lands

- ~ a report on a real incompatibility: how can an international or even regional airport, which *must* "control" wildlife – and that means scaring, trapping, even killing, not just on its property but for vast areas around it – be located right next door to a national park, which has a mandate to *protect* wildlife?!

~ a report on why the idea of putting a private, for-profit Buttonville replacement on this expropriated land – the suggestion does keep cropping up – is stupid, wasteful, irresponsible, and deeply unethical, if not downright illegal.

Meanwhile, the community of people living on the Lands grows smaller and smaller under Transport Canada's "landlordship." Its obsolescence is no doubt proceeding to plan. Original owners and long-term tenants are getting older, retiring elsewhere, dying... There's no need to evict anymore.

But we **will** outlive Transport Canada's tenure. How do we know this? Because our fight isn't just *against* something; it's *for* something. And we have the supreme weapon. The future! Our movement is not about the past, important as that is. It's about youth, about food, about feeding future generations!

Yes, we'll outlive Transport Canada and the Sixties mindset that keeps our area economically depressed and in perpetual limbo. Because the future is about *new* ideas for a daunting *new* century. And – not surprisingly – the next generation gets this: young people like... Jayden Rae of Whitby, Nicole Norris of Toronto, and Reid Williamson of Whitevale, all featured in recent issues of our newsletter and all here and helping us tonight. At every Land Over Landings public meeting we have called for a salute to the original members of People or Planes in the audience. Tonight we salute the future. Please stand up, ladies! Thank you!

The next generation will keep this torch alight and held high. For our part, we plan to ensure that a solid organization is in place when the time comes – and we believe it will be soon! – to work with governments to find the best way to permanently preserve and protect the last, biggest tract of Class 1 farmland between Toronto and the Atlantic coast.

Which is why we are incorporating. So that we can build a strong Business Case for AGRICULTURE on the Federal lands – because lord knows, there's never been and never will be a Business Case for an Airport.

We need to be Land Over Landings *Inc.* to seek serious funding – in the tens of thousands of dollars – for a serious economic study into this land's full agricultural potential. We've been informally advised by experts that the potential is even greater than we thought.

Such a study would look at the most productive agricultural uses and the downstream economic activity triggered by that farm output, including food processing of all kinds and a range of business opportunities, from equipment sales and service to the hospitality industry. Think... [and here, Mary riffed on all the possibilities, from local-food bistros to craft breweries and beyond, getting downright poetic about it; yes, Pickering could become a destination!!]

Similar studies have been done for the Holland Marsh and the Greater Golden Horseshoe, but the Federal Lands, locked in their dance of death with Transport Canada for nearly half a century, have always been ignored – or tiptoed around, even by Durham Region. Here we are, sitting on an incredible natural asset with huge economic potential yet unable to take advantage of it. It's an area frozen in time, deemed an untouchable artefact, branded forever as the site of a never-never airport. This has to end!

We're convinced that the kind of in-depth study we envision will make an overwhelming case for protecting these lands, and capitalizing on the agricultural potential of this irreplaceable asset in our midst. With food prices rising as a direct consequence of extreme, prolonged drought in the southern and western U.S. and elsewhere, we should be positioning the Federal Lands *right now* to help meet future food needs.

The potential here is enormous. We know this already. But we need the study to convince the last skeptics – and to form the basis of a blueprint for the future. We'll be taking a first step in that direction in two weeks' time when we meet as a corporation with the Greenbelt Foundation, to put our plan before them.

Over and over, we've heard politicians and candidates of every stripe claim, in this very room, to be against a Pickering airport. We've heard them vow to end the destructive limbo here. We've heard them champion local food and the importance of protecting farmland. The result? Mostly just more limbo. But with increased public pressure to stop sprawl, save the Greenbelt, protect foodland and source water; with the planet packed to bursting and Climate Change changing everything; and with a federal election around the corner and six ridings – all up for grabs – linked in various ways to the fate of the Federal Lands, the time has come to raise the profile of this issue and get it resolved once and for all. *The right way.*

So our collective task, in this election year, is to make AIRPORT NEVER, FARMLAND FOREVER a rallying cry – and THE election issue – in our area. It can happen if all of us get involved. Numbers really do count, so let's make them count, make our voices heard, drive our message home to every candidate. We'll provide e-mail addresses, phone numbers, talking points, sample letters. Whatever it takes. Together we can do this! Let's get on with it!

AIRPORT NEVER, FARMLAND FOREVER!