

Group wants feds to choose agriculture over airport

A volunteer group hopes to turn 9,000 acres into a food hub supported by agricultural lands

BY LILIAN SCHAER
Ontario Farmer

Claremont – A volunteer organization promoting an alternative vision focused on agriculture for the proposed Pickering airport lands is currently raising money to fund an economic impact study.

Land Over Landings has been working for over a decade to stop plans for an airport or other development on the federal lands of north Pickering.

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 focused on saving the remaining approximately 9,000 acres for a future based on farming and a permanent regional food hub.

“The time has come for another study, one that looks at what to us is the most obvious solution – the economic benefit and possibility for agriculture and agribusiness on the federal lands,” explains Mary Delaney, Chair of Land Over Landings.

The expropriated land has been in limbo since the mid-1970s when the airport project was put on hold.

Transport Canada has undertaken various studies into the

need for an airport east of Toronto over the years, and although some of the land continues to be farmed, it’s only on one-year leases.

“If the farm land was protected with long-term leases and if the threat of an airport is removed, you have the potential for an agricultural renaissance on the land,” Delaney says, adding this will bring jobs, tourism and economic development to the region’s rural communities which have suffered significant decline due to the ongoing uncertainty.

The group has contracted with JRG Consulting Group of Guelph, a well-known agri-food sector research firm, and Econometric Research Ltd. based in Burlington to conduct the study, estimated to cost approximately \$85,000.

“This study will give us the numbers to back up the vision that we have for the land,” says Alexis Whalen, responsible for outreach with Land Over Landings. “If you’re a municipal leader, for example, we are providing an alternative conversation with the dollars and cents and jobs associated with agriculture and tourism rebirth in the region.”

The group’s fundraising efforts were launched December 21 and they’ve already raised more than 50 per cent of their goal amount. All money raised for the study will go directly towards its costs, according to Whalen.

Funds are being raised in partnership with the Green Durham Association, an organization that has charitable status meaning



The Land Over Landings group is trying to stop development of Class One GTA farmland expropriated in the 1970s. Its vision for the land is based on agriculture and a permanent regional food hub.

donors will be able to receive tax receipts for any donations over \$50.

According to Delaney, Transport Canada announced another study of its own last year into the need for a second GTA airport. It’s expected to take another two years to complete, so Land Over Landings wants to ensure its own study is finished by the end of 2017 as an alternative solution to the current government vision of airport construction, says Delaney.

In addition to a slew of politicians, citizens and organizations from the region, growing numbers of farm groups are also in support of the study.

“We are particularly encouraged and proud of the support we now have from the ag commu-

nity,” adds Whalen. “That has buoyed us over the last few months and speaks volumes about the reach of this particular initiative.”

Agricultural organizations on the study’s supporter list include Ontario Federation of Agriculture, Christian Farmers’ Federation of Ontario, National Farmers’ Union – Ontario, Ecological Farmers’ Association of Ontario, FarmStart, Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance, and the Greater

Toronto Area Agricultural Action Committee.

“This is a landmark study. We are the largest chunk of publicly owned class one farmland in Canada and there’s nothing like this anywhere else,” Delaney says. “It’s a classic battle between developers and farmers but we just can’t be paving any more farmland in southern Ontario.”

To make a donation or for more information about the study or Land Over Landings, visit www.landoverlandings.com.

Perdue to be U.S. Agr. Secretary

Former Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue, 70, will be Secretary of Agriculture. He is the last cabinet nominee by

President-elect Donald Trump.

He is a veterinarian and air force veteran.

THERE ARE SOME THINGS IN LIFE YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO MISS.



-BILLY'S FIRST RIDE-

THE FARMLAND HEALTH INCENTIVE PROGRAM IS ONE OF THEM.

Opportunities like this don't come around every day. With up to \$50,000 cost-share funding available through the Farmland Health Incentive Program, there's never been a better time to invest in your soil health.

The Farmland Health Incentive Program — you'll be glad you did.

To get started, email: GLASI@ontariosoilcrop.org

Limited to farm businesses in the Great Lakes Agricultural Stewardship Initiative eligible area.

