

## New Economic Life for the Pickering Federal Lands

Good morning. My name is Susan Reesor. I was born and raised on a farm in Markham, not far from the Pickering Lands. The extended Reesor family has been growing food on this land since 1804. My colleague, Jim Miller, is co-owner of Thistle Ha' farm, adjacent to the Pickering Lands. His grandfather settled the farm in 1839. Jim and I are executive members of Land Over Landings, a citizens' organization whose mission is to convince the federal government that a large tract of Crown land in Pickering, almost all of it prime farmland, should no longer be held for a potential airport but instead be developed as a food source for the Greater Toronto Area and beyond.

The land was expropriated in 1972. Forty-six years later, half of it has been turned into a national park. The rest still sits in limbo. As far back as 1985, the Auditor General was calling the land-banked site a non-productive asset. The part left in limbo still is.

Land Over Landings recently commissioned a first-ever Agricultural Economics Study to ascertain the site's current economic output, and to determine its potential if dedicated to food production and agricultural research. The Study, which we have provided to the Clerk, found that economic output had dropped by half under Transport Canada's ownership, while job numbers had plummeted by two-thirds. On the other hand, the report described a possible future for the Lands that showed a viable path to new prosperity.

If the government agreed to put the Lands back into diversified farming; if it made them a training ground for the next generation of farmers; if it provided affordable farmland to new farmers, who could capitalize on their proximity to Canada's largest food market and take advantage of the tourism spill-over from Rouge National Urban Park; if it opened the door to the establishment of research facilities on the Lands for agricultural innovation and climate-change adaptation – these combined farming and agri-tourism activities could create more than 2,100 new jobs and revitalize an area that has become an economic wasteland, dragging surrounding communities down with it. The Study's consultants calculated that these 9,600 acres *on their own* could generate \$238 million in overall economic activity annually.

From another perspective, the status quo constitutes a *lost opportunity* to our economy of *\$4.4 million per week*.

Today, the 11 airports of the Southern Ontario Airport Network are collaborating to meet the region's projected aviation needs *for the next 30 years*. Many of them, including Pearson, can expand should the need arise. In fact, Pearson's latest Master Plan, for 2017-2037, makes clear that the airport has a number of options for expanding its operations, meaning that the Pickering site will remain land-banked for another three decades *at least*. Maybe *forever*, given that we need to drastically cut or even eliminate our carbon emissions in the course of this century. The Pickering site is at risk of becoming a *stranded* asset – a fate that could be averted if the farmland were permanently committed to helping meet the future's biggest challenges: feeding the world's growing population and mitigating climate

change. The Lands are capable of reliably producing safe, fresh food for Canadians and the world for generations to come. It's hard to imagine anything more crucial to our future wellbeing than protecting our most valuable food sources *while we still can*.

So today – and we can provide you with details during the Question & Answer part of the Hearing – we ask the Committee to allocate funding to help transition this Crown land from languishing site to prosperous farming and research community, whose output could start paying dividends quickly, under the overall management of a public custodian. The essential elements are already in place to turn these Lands into one of the new food hubs, serving Canada and the world, that were recommended in the 2017 Barton Report on Agriculture.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

### **2019 Funding Allocation Requested**

We are fully cognizant of the fact that the decision on the future of the Lands is the responsibility of the Minister of Transport, whose recommendation requires approval by federal cabinet. But if a decision were made in the near future to declare the remaining Federal Lands a permanent agricultural preserve, it is possible that initial expenditures to implement the consultants' recommendations could occur within the fiscal year ending in March 2020.

Therefore, once the decision is made, public funds would be required to start implementing certain recommendations in sections 7.2 – 7.4 of the Agricultural Study, as follows:

- Creation of the position of Public Custodian to focus on developing the master plan, first by undertaking a detailed inventory of the Lands (i.e., which parcels are most suited to which types of farming). The inventory would involve a granular assessment of current use and terms of lease for each property/field; soil type; fertility and slope; usable/adaptable infrastructure; availability of sufficient water supplies; needed infrastructure, such as new barns, farm outbuildings, fencing, wells; proximity to roads and other municipal and utility services; the surrounding natural habitat; environmental hotspots; location of Indigenous archaeological sites; and so on. Next would come the determination of the most appropriate balance of agricultural uses for each parcel, to add the greatest number of jobs and value to the economy.

The Public Custodian would need a team in place to accomplish this task, including: (a) a publicity/public engagement person (see below), who would feed information learned on the road into the process of developing the master plan; (b) three or more people to provide the Public Custodian with the expert knowledge necessary to develop a solid master plan: specifically, an experienced, savvy farmer familiar with the area and knowledgeable with respect to the future direction of the agri-food business; an agriculture graduate with expert knowledge of soils and agricultural infrastructure; and office support. Other experts, such as naturalists, would be consulted under contract as needed.

The publicity/public engagement person would promote North Pickering Farms to all local stakeholder groups – farm, community, business, tourism, municipal – and at as many public events as possible, seeking ideas and engaging public support for the permanent agricultural future of the Lands.

We assume the assignment of a career senior public servant to the position of Public Custodian, whereas the remaining jobs would be contract positions. We also assume that the Office of the Public Custodian would be in the Bentley House in Brougham, a federal heritage building on the Lands.

**We estimate the potential annual budget for this office, including the Custodian's and contract employees' salaries and benefits, and the costs of running this small office for five people in the Bentley House, plus consultation work subcontracted to experts, to be \$920,000, which we ask the Finance Committee to allocate for these purposes in the 2019 budget.**