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Comments on Durham Region's Climate Change and Sustainability Discussion Paper

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Land Over Landings^[1] is a non-profit organization based in Durham Region and dedicated to securing permanent protection of the farmland, woods, and wetlands of the Federal Lands in Pickering (9,600 acres, mostly prime farmland, owned by Transport Canada).

As stakeholders in the Region, we share the concerns expressed in the Discussion Paper on climate change, and we appreciate this opportunity to provide input into the Region's mitigation and adaptation policy planning. It is reassuring to know that the Region is preparing for what will, undeniably, be the greatest emergency of our times.

We have focussed here on matters that we believe must be acted on if the Region's goals of climate change mitigation and sustainability are to be achieved.

1. The Urgent Need to Finalize Land and Resources Policies

The Discussion Paper states (p. 1) that Envision Durham will be undertaking a review, *over the next few years*, of "how to use and protect our land and resources." Given the rapid heating of our planet and the dire consequences that we're only beginning to understand and experience, we believe that **protecting our land and resources is integral to the present discussion, and needs to be part of it**. Planning to protect our natural resources must start *now*, as these irreplaceable assets are increasingly vulnerable to permanent destruction by urban development.

2. The Urgent Need to Protect Farmland

The effort that will be required to mitigate climate-change impacts will be so great, and the need is already so urgent, that **planning changes are going to have to occur at a faster rate than the formal 5-year Official Plan revision cycle**. Every year brings an increase in the number of extreme weather calamities due to climate change. This year's unprecedented cold, wet spring, for example, resulted in significant direct and indirect economic costs to the Region: high lake levels damaged infrastructure along the waterfront, and flooding of other low-lying areas impeded their use. Farmers experienced a loss of income when the abnormal weather left them unable to complete in time (or at all) the spring seeding of significant acreages. Lower crop yields (whether here or elsewhere) are a strong warning that we must preserve every acre of workable farmland we have; we can no longer depend on the availability of imported fruit and vegetables. The United States, the source of so much of our fresh food, is suffering more extreme weather events, with even greater consequences. After years of prolonged drought, California's water shortage is now so dire that

1. <http://landoverlandings.com>.

the State plans to stop supplying irrigation water to over 500,000 acres in the San Joaquin Valley – the renowned “food basket to the world,” the food basket that Canadian consumers have come to rely on.^[2] In many instances, acreage once dedicated to food production is now being planted with solar panels.^[3] Our imported fruit and vegetable supplies will become even scarcer and more expensive if they must be sourced from more-distant countries, their transportation increasing their carbon footprint.

For these reasons, it is **critical to incorporate, as soon as possible, the mapping of Ontario’s Agricultural System and Natural Heritage System into the Regional Official Plan**, to protect our farmland and natural heritage in perpetuity. The ongoing loss of farmland and natural heritage to urban expansion means the loss of their vital contributions to the planet’s (and our own) health: for example, carbon sequestration, flood control, water filtering, fresh-air recreational benefits, habitat for wildlife (including pollinators), and increased food security. Furthermore, **protecting farmland ensures the viability of the future’s farm economy**, essential to our continued existence on this planet.

3. The Urgent Need to Protect the Pickering Federal Lands, a Natural Resource

The Discussion Paper states (pp. 14-15) that “the Growth Plan requires municipalities to include policies in their official plans to reduce GHG emissions by [...] protecting agricultural lands and promoting local food and food security.”

By supporting the protection of the Federal Lands, the Region would be complying with this Growth Plan requirement. The federal site is almost entirely prime agricultural land, and has been so designated on Ontario’s Agricultural System map. It is partly on the Greenbelt and Moraine. Its many watersheds are clean and some are stocked with Atlantic salmon and freshwater fish. The soil is a carbon sink, providing an estimated \$6.1 million in eco-services annually.^[4] The fields are lined with tens of thousands of trees. The cash-crop farming on the Lands today could be transitioned to diversified farming to provide greater food security for the Region and for Canada’s largest population centre, right next door. As the planet heats, the need to use these Lands for local food production will only increase.

In this context, certain recent actions by Regional Council and several municipal councils have been baffling and shocking. We refer to the passing of various motions identifying Durham Region as a “willing host” for a major international airport in north Pickering. The councils’ decisions deliberately act against the Region’s carbon-emissions-reduction targets, contradicting the positions and aims expressed in the Discussion Paper and rendering them unachievable if a Pickering airport is built.

The Discussion Paper reports (pp. 7-8) that, “in 2009, the Region commissioned an inventory of community GHG emissions” which showed that “if we did not implement any adaptation or mitigation measures and continue down a ‘business as usual’ path, both our energy use and GHG emissions will increase.” Today, building a large new airport (or any new airport) is the very definition of “business as usual.” In no respect could it be a mitigation measure, given all the greenhouse gases that would be emitted during the manufacture of the construction materials, the construction of the airport itself, and its subsequent ongoing operations, whatever they were. Airports are emissions hotspots. And they create urban heat islands where none existed before.

2. Sam Bloch, “California must abandon 535,000 acres of prized farmland to meet water conservation goals,” *The New Food Economy* (website), February 28, 2019. <https://newfoodeconomy.org/california-san-joaquin-valley-farmland-groundwater-aquifer-drought/>.

3. Sammy Roth, “California farmers are planting solar panels as water supplies dry up,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-agriculture-farmlands-solar-power-20190703-story.html>.

4. Econometric Research Ltd. and JRG Consulting Group, *A Future for the Lands: Economic Impact of Remaining Pickering Federal Lands if Returned to Permanent Agriculture*, January 2018: 53. <http://landoverlandings.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Final-Report-Mar-7-FINAL.pdf>.

Among the many drawbacks of putting an airport on these Lands, including the increased carbon emissions and other pollution, would be the Lands' vastly decreased ability to sequester carbon. Moreover, an airport's hard surfaces would result in more regional flood-control problems, including reduced stormwater management capacity: all stormwater containment ponds within the airport's broad Wildlife Hazard Zone area (throughout Pickering, Uxbridge, Ajax, and Whitby) would have to be emptied within 48 hours after a rain event, to minimize the potential for bird strikes and to maximize aviation safety.^[5]

Society no longer has the luxury of adding unneeded public infrastructure that significantly increases our carbon emissions. Any new airport infrastructure substantially adds to our carbon footprint.^[6,7] Need cannot be argued in Pickering's case. No existing southern Ontario airport is fully utilized; none is anywhere near its runway capacity limits. The latest Master Plan for Pearson (covering 2017-2037) shows the airport to have plenty of capacity within that planning horizon. Moreover, Pearson is working closely with 11 other airports, as part of the Southern Ontario Airport Network, to accommodate aviation growth over the next three decades (SOAN's planning horizon). In Durham Region, airport proponents are clamouring for a Pickering facility to ease the airport-capacity crisis even though the existing airports have capacity and are still busy pursuing untapped markets, actively seeking new business.^[8] There is a disconnect here. There is also a vast silence on climate change. Aviation simply cannot keep growing if the future of our planet depends on a rapid transition from fossil fuels. The sector is dependent on fossil fuels and has few and inadequate options for emissions-reduction. On its current growth trajectory, aviation will more than wipe out any reductions it achieves.

Durham Region must decide whether to promote an airport and thus abandon its climate-change mitigation plans, or reverse its pro-airport stance, encourage more sustainable modes of transportation, and support meaningful, positive, long-term actions that will build resilience and help ease the lives of its residents as the climate crisis deepens. It can't do both.

4. Our Vision for Climate-Change Mitigation and Adaption in Durham Region

As we indicated at the outset, Land Over Landings' mission is to ensure the protection of the Federal Lands in Pickering and this is where our focus lies. Our vision, then, is a vision for the Lands. If realized, it would help the Region meet its overall climate-change objectives.

Our vision dovetails perfectly with the surrounding landscape: Rouge National Urban Park to the west and north, farmland to the east, and, ideally, an *Agri-Innovation Corridor* to the south, serving the needs of an airport-site-become-agritourism-destination called **North Pickering Farms**,^[9] and serving as well the broader farming community in this largely agricultural Region. Our vision is aimed at job creation and economic growth within the context of climate-change mitigation and increased food security for the GTA.

5. Government of Canada: Transport Canada, "Pickering Airport Site Zoning Regulations: Mitigation of Bird Hazards Arising From Particular Land Uses," 2004. LGL Limited report no. TA2916-2. See also section 6.(2): <http://www.gazette.gc.ca/rp-pr/p1/2015/2015-07-18/html/reg2-eng.html>.
6. Caroline Lucas, "Heathrow's expansion plans make a mockery of the zero emissions strategy," *The Guardian*, June 18, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jun/18/heathrow-expansion-mockery-zero-emissions>.
7. Jefim Vogel, Joel Millward-Hopkins, and Yannick Oswald, "We can't expand airports after declaring a climate emergency – let's shift to low-carbon transport instead," *The Conversation* (website), July 29, 2019. <https://theconversation.com/we-cant-expand-airports-after-declaring-a-climate-emergency-lets-shift-to-low-carbon-transport-instead-120740>.
8. Southern Ontario Airport Network: Our Vision. Accessed July 31, 2019. <https://www.soairportnetwork.com/our-vision>.
9. Land Over Landings, "North Pickering Farms: The future of the Pickering Federal Lands is in your hands," (brochure and map), 2017. <https://landoverlandings.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/LOL-4-pager-public-pp4123-final.pdf>

North Pickering Farms could provide sustainable jobs *now* in a new agricultural community that trains new farmers, follows agricultural conservation practices, and protects the Lands' rich soil, clean streams, wetlands, woodlands, and wild areas. **Transitioning to our vision would develop a substantial agri-tourism business on a solid agricultural base, adding over 2,000 jobs and \$220 million annually to Ontario's overall economy.**^[10] The Lands would remain a carbon sink. They would be home to an agricultural research and innovation centre focussed on climate-change mitigation, and a farm incubation centre to teach best practices and sustainability. North Pickering Farms would grow fresh food and process fresh food for the GTA. The area, accessible by public transit and Toronto's Meadoway, would be a country destination for city-dwellers, whether for day trips or week-long getaways (instead of flying somewhere) – a place of trails, bistros, cheesemakers, bakeries, demonstration farms, farmers markets & gift shops, farm B&Bs... All low-carbon, all inviting, adding lots of local jobs and economic activity, all possible.

Any decision on the future use of these Federal Lands lies solely, of course, with Transport Canada and the federal Cabinet, and would involve the consideration of many complex factors. But the accelerating climate crisis and the need to stop emitting greenhouse gases may well become the factors that sway the decision in favour of food production and environmental protection. In our view, **Durham Region, in the best interests of its residents, should be pressing Ottawa for a decision that will help the Region to mitigate, to the best of its ability, the local effects of the growing climate emergency.**

Championing a green-energy economy and other progressive climate-change mitigation/adaptation initiatives would create *jobs with a future*, and place Durham Region in the vanguard of enlightened and innovative jurisdictions. Isn't this a goal we should be striving for? The Discussion Paper contains some very good ideas (not least the imperative to plant trees). We hope this consultation exercise results in many more good ideas, and we hope that all such forward-looking efforts will not be undone by a Pickering airport – which, in this world in crisis, would go down in history as a far greater mistake than Mirabel ever was.

Thank you again for this opportunity to comment.



Chair, Land Over Landings

**No one is going to look back 50 years from now and say,
“we protected too much green space and farm land.”**

– Jennifer Keesmaat, Chief Planner for the City of Toronto, April 7, 2015

10. Econometric Research Ltd. and JRG Consulting Group, *A Future for the Lands: Economic Impact of Remaining Pickering Federal Lands if Returned to Permanent Agriculture*, January 2018: 1.

<http://landoverlandings.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Final-Report-Mar-7-FINAL.pdf>.

The totals quoted in these Comments include only the agricultural and tourism elements, not the environmental benefits or those of the agricultural research centre and farm incubator centre.