

Timeline: 1976-2012

Entering Limbo / V.O.C.A.L. / Land Over Landings

Entering Limbo

1976

- The shelving of the airport plan leads to the decades-long strangulation of the remaining farming community and the relentless neglect and demolition of structures on the Federal Lands, punctuated by repeated attempts to get the airport plan revived.
- **January** – Public Works Canada calls for tenders for the sale and removal of 18 homes and 57 other buildings deemed unsafe and unfit for rental.
- The Pickering Fire Department complains that half the fires in Pickering in the previous year were on the airport and north Pickering sites and blames government neglect.
- **May** – Transport Minister Otto Lang announces that, without Pickering to relieve Malton, air traffic will be diverted to Mirabel, overflying Toronto. Says Malton will not be allowed new air carriers for at least 5 years. Malton accuses MOT (formerly DOT) of stalling improvements to Malton to create a need for Pickering. An MOT sub-group claims that Malton expansion would cost more than building a whole new airport. Minister Lang supports the statement and insists on a new airport.
- **July** – A survey sent out to all Ontario travel agents by the Metropolitan Toronto Airport Review Committee (MTARC, secretly People or Planes) reveals that a very high percentage of agents disagree with Lang's claims about Malton's difficulties and the urgent need to divert traffic to Mirabel.
- Ontario's Ombudsman reports that Pickering area residents were cheated and misled by government land agents.

1977

- Transport Canada (TC, formerly MOT) releases a Contingency Plan, warning that Malton (soon to be renamed Pearson) faces fierce congestion and that urgent action is needed.

1978

- Transport Minister Lang tells House of Commons that Malton will not be allowed to expand; halts study into 4th runway.

1979

- **October** – Ottawa releases the *Southern Ontario Multimodal Passenger Studies* report, which finds that Malton would have adequate capacity until at least the late 1980s, with a few airport modifications and more terminal capacity provided. And here, for the first time, a report states that the Pickering Lands and protective zoning around them "should be maintained to protect the long range option for the development of a major airport at Pickering." So despite later claims, the idea

of “landbanking” was never the intention until 1979. The report also cautions that there are “limitations implicit in any long range forecasts of travel demand” and that new forecasts show that passenger volumes “will be lower than previously estimated.” The Pickering airport issue fades (or is allowed to fade) into silence.

1983

- **February** – Transport Canada officials are quoted as saying that new forecasts show no need for a third terminal at Malton until the 1990s.

1985

- Ottawa’s Central Ontario Area Aviation Master Plan for 1985 calls for a third reliever airport, at Pickering, to handle Malton’s general aviation traffic up to 2000, after which the airport would be expanded to become a major international airport by 2020.
- Ottawa’s Airport Authority Group, treating a Pickering airport as a given, recommends selling half the total site acreage. Local MP Scott Fennell (PC) persuades Transport Minister Donald Mazankowski to appoint a committee to study Pickering and to have Guelph University’s Ontario Agricultural College inventory the lands. Three members of People or Planes are appointed to the Pickering Airport Lands Revitalization Committee (PARC).
- In Ste-Scholastique, meanwhile, where Mirabel has never been completed and is struggling, the federal government deeds or sells back to farmers over 80,000 acres of expropriated land.

1986

- **June** – PARC reports, recommending that half the land be sold, 90% for an agricultural preserve and 10% (the Duffins Creek watershed) as a conservation and ecological reserve.

1987

- **June** – MP Scott Fennell announces that half the land will be sold.
- **August** – There is an outcry when Public Works offers 9,600 acres to Ontario and area municipalities instead of to former owners or existing tenants. as was done at Mirabel. Durham Regional Council then weighs in with a majority vote to proceed with airport construction. The ensuing uproar carries on for 18 months.

1989

- **Mar. 15** – The new federal MP for the area, Rene Soetens, announces that the surplus land should be available for sale by late 1990. Nothing happens.

1991

- Transport Canada releases an Environmental Impact Statement, declaring that the best medium-term alternative for dealing with air-traffic increases in Toronto is to add three new runways at Pearson. However, TC immediately follows the Statement with an “Alternatives” document in which Pickering again figures.

1992

- The fine Bentley House in Brougham is granted federal heritage designation.
- **Aug. 28** – TC draws up a “Plan Showing Pickering Lands 1992 Disposal.” A total of 243 units of land (lots) on the airport site are to be sold. They include lots all around the periphery, notably, those right across the northern part of the site, including all of Altona, and those along the north side of Hwy 7, including all of Brougham. It is a tacit admission that the 1972 land grab was far larger than needed.

1994

- **Aug. 3** – TC produces a revised “Plan Showing Pickering Lands Disposal.” Now, just 238 lots are to be sold. There is no evidence that this plan is ever acted on.
- **Oct. 18** – Former Ontario Premier William Davis states in an interview that People or Planes’ influence on his government’s decision to withdraw co-operation on the matter of Pickering airport was “substantial.”
- In Ottawa, the Southern Ontario Area Airports Study (SOAAS) is under way, so it’s possible that lot-disposal plans [see Aug. 3] got shelved pending the results of the review.
- Responsibility for developing and operating Pearson is transferred from Transport Canada to the Greater Toronto Airports Authority (GTAA), which for some time will be headed by ex-Transport Canada officials.

V.O.C.A.L.

1995

- Ottawa releases the SOAAS report, which has concluded that Pickering airport will be needed between 2012 and 2025. Transport Canada views the report’s conclusions as a green light for building a future airport, and gears up.
- **V.O.C.A.L. (Voters Organized to Cancel the Airport Lands)** is formed, under the leadership of Claremont resident and businessman Stephen Frederick. A new wave of protests begins.

1998

- Transport Canada initiates regulatory action to protect the option of developing a Pickering airport.

2001

- The Pickering land is classified as an airport site under the Aeronautics Act.
- Transport Canada asks the GTAA to undertake “interim planning work” to help Ottawa decide whether to proceed with a “regional/reliever airport.”
- Transport Canada issues many orders of “eviction for the purposes of demolition.” For the second time (the first was in 1973), the Barclay family is ordered to leave Tullis Cottage, its ancestral home, built in 1840. Demolition is scheduled. The Barclays fight back with a media campaign and assistance from local politicians and historians, and win. They are allowed to stay as long as they promise not to talk to the media for two years.

- Ottawa announces that 7,200 acres on the north and west sides of the airport site have been designated as Green Space in perpetuity – no great concession, as no airport construction was ever planned for those buffer areas. The plan is never formalized by Ottawa.

2002

- After undertaking renovations totalling \$500,000, the GTAA opens its Pickering Airport Site Office in the historic Bentley House in Brougham.

2004

- Zoning regulations are passed for an airport at Pickering, even though Pearson has been expanded after all and can expand again.
- The GTAA submits its *Pickering Airport Draft Plan* to Transport Canada. The plan is for a large 3-runway “regional/reliever” airport on the site.
- Transport Canada, clearly anticipating a go-ahead to build the airport, stops re-renting vacated properties on the site, foregoes revenue, and boards houses up.
- Passenger flights cease at Mirabel. Only cargo flights are left. Mirabel is dubbed one of the costliest white elephants in Canadian history.

Land Over Landings

2005

- Zoning regulations for Pickering airport go into effect.
- **February – Land Over Landings (LOL)** is formed as Transport Canada orders further evictions (including Tullis Cottage yet again). Demolitions begin but some tenants choose to fight eviction and refuse to leave. Local councillors object to the demolitions, and MP Mark Holland (Lib.) obtains a temporary halt while the community scrambles to protect heritage structures and family homes.
- **Mar. 10** – The moratorium ends and demolitions resume.
- **October** – The Federal Liberal caucus supports an immediate moratorium on further evictions and demolitions until the entire process can be reviewed. Pickering City Council approves a heritage designation for 5 buildings on the Lands. Tullis Cottage tops the list, followed by Brougham Hall and the old Brougham schoolhouse. Council asks Transport Canada to rescind the order to evict the Barclays and demolish their house.
- Land Over Landings stages the Brougham Uprising to prove “we’re not dead yet!”

2006

- Transport Canada rescinds the demolition order on Tullis Cottage.
- Court tribunals study the tenants’ complaints and blast the federal landlords. Public Works loses the right to manage the Lands.
- TC hands over Public Works’ former responsibilities to a private land-management agency. Long-overdue property repairs are undertaken and properly handled at last.

- LOL concentrates on getting the Lands preserved as foodland, through the creation of a Land Trust.
- The newly elected federal Conservative government quashes Transport Canada's promise to the Liberals to implement a peer review of the GTAA's next proposal for a Pickering airport. Instead, it grants the GTAA the right to review itself. There is public outrage.

2007

- **February** – The Montreal Airport Authority announces that much of the Mirabel site is to become a giant amusement park. (The plan will die in 2010. Part of the site will be turned into an ICAR motosport racetrack.)
- **May 9** – Transport Canada announces it has given a 6-month contract to the GTAA to study need for a Pickering airport (the same airport the GTAA recently spent 3+ years planning). As the likely developer and operator of a Pickering airport, the GTAA has a huge conflict of interest, but the study proceeds.
- Land Over Landings and all concerned citizens in the area nervously await the GTAA report, expecting it to be strongly pro-airport, even though it would destroy prime farmland just when an international food crisis is looming, and airlines keep filing for bankruptcy.

2008

- Deadlines for release of the GTAA report come and go; there is no news from Ottawa.
- Lived-in properties on the Lands continue to be maintained by the federal landlord. For the first time in years, tenants are offered other homes on the Lands if their houses are deemed too costly to repair. But the population is declining. Houses of families that are moving away, or houses of elderly tenants who move out, or who die, are usually boarded up. Few new tenants are allowed to move in.
- A new business opens in Brougham in the old hardware store, but closes within months.
- Another takes its place, and a coffee shop opens next door, as the government allows new tenants in commercial buildings.

2009

- **October** – The needs assessment report still hasn't been made public but the GTAA quietly packs its bags and, one night, moves out of the Bentley House.

2010

- **May 10** – Ottawa finally confirms what has been widely suspected: the *Needs Assessment Study Report* has been in Transport Canada's hands since March. It will be released, the public is told, only after a "due diligence review" by TC. Pro-airport Regional Chair Roger Anderson, believing he knows the report's conclusions, vows to "market the hell out of it."
- **July** – Opposition Leader Michael Ignatieff visits Ajax-Pickering Board of Trade (APBOT) and publicly states that the Liberal Party of Canada is opposed to an airport on these agricultural lands. With MPs Mark Holland and Dan McTeague, he joins the APBOT in calling on the federal government to release the findings of the Needs Assessment Study.

- **August** – What Transport Canada releases instead is a list of 42 vacant structures, many of significant heritage value, but now slated for demolition. Before a formal attempt can be mounted to save the houses, two of them mysteriously burn down.
- **Oct. 27** – The owner of a busy general aviation airport in Markham, Buttonville Municipal Airport, announces its closure in five years' time. The news spurs immediate claims that Ottawa will now have to build Pickering to replace Buttonville.
- **December** – New Transport Minister Chuck Strahl responds to the July letter from Ignatieff, Holland, and McTeague, stating that the government's intent is to eventually clear all buildings from the Lands.

2011

- **January** – The City of Pickering asks Transport Canada not to demolish 7 potential heritage structures and asks Ottawa to fund the cost of heritage research and reinstate the heritage steering committee (involving Pickering, Markham, and Ottawa), which Ottawa had abandoned.
- Minister Strahl and Transport Canada give the houses a reprieve but refuse to fund research or upkeep, calling this a municipal responsibility – even though Ottawa has been owner and landlord for 39 years. The steering committee is not reconvened. Instead, TC issues a list of 60 more structures to be demolished.
- **Jul. 11** – Transport Canada finally releases the Needs Assessment Study's recommendations. The Report states that the Pickering Lands should be retained for a future new airport, now thought to be needed "most likely" between 2027 and 2037, but maybe as late as 2041 – or later. "If and when required" is the final word. A close reading reveals the report's pro-airport arguments to be weak, contradictory, and based on flawed data. No business case has been made.
- Land Over Landings prepares a Response to the Needs Assessment Study. Various local politicians make vague noises about how the report provides a resolution to the situation.
- Ottawa's new mantra is now this: the solution must combine "job creation, economic activity and environmental stewardship." Land Over Landings, Green Durham Association, and other groups argue that intensive food production under a Land Trust would meet those criteria perfectly. Transport Canada, according to Ottawa, will "work on a land use and management plan for the 7,530 hectares."
- The pride and joy of Brougham, the City, and the Region – Durham Sustain Ability, founded by Jack McGinnis, world-renowned father of Blue Box recycling – is forced to vacate Brougham's Commercial House after draconian changes to the rental agreement. Brougham's coffee shop closes. But the City of Pickering leases the showpiece Bentley House as Parks and Recreation offices – welcome news within the much-diminished community.
- **Sept. 12** – Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, addressing Ajax-Pickering's Board of Trade, says: "This is about economic development in Durham Region ... It's our turn to grow ... To do that we need highways ... we need to improve our airport facilities."
- **Nov. 20** – Ajax-Pickering MP Chris Alexander (PC) hosts a townhall meeting in Claremont: "Forty Years Later: How Should the Pickering Lands Be Used?" He says he is 100% against an airport. The large and passionate audience is virtually unanimous in demanding that the site be preserved for agricultural use and as a natural heritage area.

- **Dec. 23** – The *Toronto Star* reports: “Plans for the land remain vague, but a footprint for the airport is expected to be completed by next spring, according to Paula Fairfax, a Transport Canada spokesperson.” Meanwhile, the demolitions continue....