

# Timeline: 2020-

An “Aerotropolis” in a Time of Climate Change and COVID-19?!

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2020

- **January** – The year starts with a flurry of op-eds and articles by people suggesting (or claiming) that 2020 will be the year when Pickering airport gets the go-ahead. A little digging reveals that the claims are no more than wishful thinking on the part of a few. We cry foul and our complaints prompt some revisions to articles.
- **Jan. 9** – In an op-ed on the website of the Canadian Owners and Pilots Association (COPA), a member writes: “More opposition is coming from environmentalists, questioning the wisdom of building an airport when air transportation is a significant contributor of greenhouse gases.” And he also takes aim at Durham’s Regional Chair: “Perhaps [John] Henry needs a primer on the results of the last time the federal government built a major airport.” We couldn’t have said it better.
- **Jan. 15** – We discover that the City of Pickering and an entity called Toronto East Aerotropolis are both listed as clients of Melanie Greenwood, graphic designer, who apparently once hailed from this area but now lives and works in California. One of the items in her portfolio? A logo for the aerotropolis. Did taxpayer money go to the U.S. for a logo for a non-existent airport? As we’re looking into this, the logo disappears from the site and only the client list remains (unchanged)...
- **Jan. 17** – We make a preliminary delegation at the Durham Region Roundtable on Climate Change, pointing out that while we fully agree with Durham’s declaring a climate emergency, the Region’s emissions-reduction and climate-adaptation planning will be pointless if its political leadership simultaneously pushes for an aerotropolis in North Pickering, a facility that would add massive volumes of new emissions to the Region’s tally. Today, that prime farmland is a carbon sink. It should be protected and made a significant part of the Region’s climate action plans.
- **Jan. 22** – The Council of the Town of Newmarket declares a climate emergency. The text is short, to the point, and utterly unambiguous on the Town’s intention to do everything necessary to adapt to the difficult times ahead. The difference between this clear motion and Pickering’s denial is breathtaking.
- **Jan. 24** – The *Sudbury Star* runs a terrific – and unexpected – piece by columnist Steve May: “No new airport in Pickering in a time of climate crisis.” He asks: “Could 2020 be the year that the federal government decides, once and for all, that building a new airport northeast of Toronto is simply not compatible with achieving Canada’s climate targets?”
- **Jan. 25** – *Canadian Geographic* has confirmed that a photo-and-text submission of ours has been accepted for the March/April issue, for an article on Relocation, a new project highlighting the forced movement of Canadian communities. Our story will appear in the online version.
- **Jan. 29** – Sari Sarieedine, chair of our Youth Wing, delivers LOL’s presentation before Durham Regional Council before Council’s debate and vote on its own Climate Emergency Declaration. Once again, we point out that adding an aerotropolis is incompatible with the Region’s aim to

reduce its greenhouse gas emissions. There is some pushback to the motion by two councillors, an impassioned response by one mayor, and the motion carries, 23-2. The degree of overall commitment, however, remains unclear.

- Cadillac Fairview and Armadale Co. Ltd. (owned by the Sifton family) announce that the 170-acre Toronto Buttonville Municipal Airport site will be sold. Cadillac Fairview claims it wants to concentrate on developments in downtown Toronto. There is no word from Armadale, but the years of unproductive wrangling with the Town of Markham and the OMB over the new site plan surely played a role in the decision.
- **Feb. 3** – A letter is sent as a follow-up to the Jan. 29 Regional Council meeting, providing Ajax Mayor Shaun Collier with information he requested regarding constraints on successful vertical farming in North Pickering. The regional chair and all councillors are copied. (No one acknowledges or replies.)
- **Feb. 24** – We send letters to all federal ministers, explaining the situation on the Lands, showing (where pertinent) how the health of the Lands tallies with certain aspects of their mandate, and (in case of a pro-airport KPMG report) asking them, as Cabinet members, to vote to protect this farmland.
- **Mar. 5** – Transport Canada quietly releases the KPMG report, 400+ pages covering the period 2016-2036. The release takes place 48 years and 3 days after the original airport announcement...
- The Department does not issue a media release.
- Our Pickering-Uxbridge MP does put out a news release – and a powerful one: “The report states that no decision has been made to develop an airport on the Pickering Lands, and that there will be no immediate need for an airport until at least 2038 [sic] ... Transport Canada will retain the land for future consideration. ... Any decision on the future of the Pickering Lands will be made based on a sound business case and demonstrated aviation demand and capacity, as well as a thorough analysis of several regional and national factors, including environmental impact.”
- MP O’Connell, adds: “An airport in Pickering cannot, and should never have been, a substitute for a real job creation and economic growth strategy that would benefit our community now. Infrastructure projects of this scale can only be viable under the right conditions, and cannot be rushed or manipulated to fit local strategic planning. The KPMG Aviation Sector Analysis clearly articulates that there is no demand for the immediate development of an airport. ... The facts are evident and publically available. It’s time for all levels of government to work together to create real economic prosperity and opportunity for our community, while protecting our environment, fighting climate change and supporting our agricultural industry.”
- We go through the Report with a fine tooth comb. It is heavily redacted in parts, but not so heavily as to hide the overall conclusion: KPMG found that “a new airport is not expected to be required in southern Ontario prior to 2036 to meet the forecast demand.” And it states clearly that, with modifications and modest expansions to existing facilities in the Southern Ontario Airports Network, there will be a considerable gap in 2036 between the capacity available and the [smaller] demand that can be expected. The gap is so great that it becomes immediately clear that an airport at Pickering may *never* be needed, and that Transport Canada’s continued insistence on dangling the airport carrot has lost any justification.

- While the report refers to the potential for policy changes related to emissions, it does not engage with the potential effects and fall-out of the climate crisis. Had this aspect been given due consideration, the 64% gap between capacity and expected demand would have been even wider.
- Although Transport Canada's website claims that "the report was **not** intended to provide a recommendation on whether to build an airport on the Pickering Lands," we know that, had it identified a need for the airport, the pro-airport lobby's pressure on Transport Canada to act on this finding would have been considerable. Will the Supply and Demand Report's unequivocal conclusion put an end to the lobbying?
- Pickering's mayor, his solidly pro-airport CAO, and Durham Region's chair manage to spin the news 180 degrees. Mayor Ryan thinks the study has found that the airport *will* be needed in 2036 and he calls this "great news." The CAO professes to be "thrilled." Chair Henry finds the report's conclusion "exciting" and feels "encouraged."
- There is some local media uptake but, from a news point of view, the report's conclusion means that nothing has changed. So the limbo continues, as does the uncertainty – but there is much less than before.
- **Mar. 6** – All the news is suddenly about COVID-19. Twenty confirmed cases in Ontario now. Within days there will be little else in the news feeds.
- We learn from the results of a Pickering resident's Access to Information request that Pickering's CAO was busy seeking sizable contributions from other local governments in 2019 to help Pickering fund a study that would rebut our 2018 agricultural study – and some of those officials were delighted to offer financial help!
- **Mar. 8** – On our Facebook page, Pickering Councillor Maurice Brenner writes this: "While I can not speak for the Council, I have reviewed the KPMG Executive Summary and this is my position. The [Pickering] 2017 adopted Motion supported an Airport conditional on the outcome of a business case from the KPMG Report. I believe without a business case for today and for decades this condition has not been met which nullifies Pickering Support for an airport. I will be working to refocus City priorities [putting] an emphasis on addressing climate change and environmentally friendly new modes of transportation that will achieve the goal of 0 Carbon Footprint by 2050 – such as High Frequency Rail Service utilizing the Havelock line from Windsor to Montreal with a stop in Pickering."
- **Mar. 10** – The Durham Post reports on the KPMG study and blatantly mischaracterizes the study's conclusion, saying that "Last week, Transport Canada released its KPMG Aviation Sector Analysis, which confirmed that the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) needs a new airport in 2036." The report said no such thing. In the public commenting below all the current pro-airport articles, almost all of it is utterly opposed to an airport.
- **Mar. 11** – We hold our last in-person executive meeting for the foreseeable future; the country is shifting into shelter-in-place mode to try to slow the rate of COVID-19 transmission. Within days we will be obliged to postpone our AGM.
- **Mar. 18** – Councillor Brenner asks Pickering staff to shift priorities from advocating for an aerotropolis to advocating for a Pickering station on the future higher-speed Havelock line that is under consideration by Ottawa. There are no objections by other councillors.

- **Mar. 25** – Transport Minister Garneau writes to Durham Regional Chair John Henry responding to letters from November and December, 2019, requesting the release of the KPMG study. The Minister tells Henry that the report was released on March 5, that no decision has been made to develop an airport, and that “any decision must be based on a sound business case” and other criteria. He reaffirms the study’s finding that “there is no immediate need for additional airport capacity in the Greater Toronto Area before 2038 [sic]” and adds that “the Government of Canada will continue to engage directly with business, community and government stakeholders to determine the best path moving forward.” This communication predates the debilitating effect that COVID-19 will soon have on the aviation sector worldwide.
- **Apr. 2** – We send a letter to Pickering Council, demanding answers to a dozen questions raised by the Access to Information request (see Mar. 6). The CAO responds via e-mail (to short-circuit Council?), failing to answer most of the questions. His e-mail address does not accept replies...
- **Apr. 4** – The number of US air passengers has dropped 95% in a month, thanks to COVID-19. The situation is global.
- **Apr. 19** – We post our full “Response to the KMPG Study Report,” a compilation of important passages and revelations, heavily annotated, and the Report’s findings and conclusions clearly presented. Those conclusions are clear. No airport needed. Not even a hint of when it might be needed, if ever needed at all.
- **Apr. 21** – Articles on the importance of growing food locally are starting to crop up everywhere. The fragility and unreliability of global food supply chains are becoming evident.
- **Apr. 27** – Councillor Brenner fails to get Council’s backing to stop expenditure on the aerotropolis project even though all other major expenditures of the City have been paused for the duration of the general CV-19 shut-down. He quizzes the director of economic development (sitting in for the CAO during the day’s virtual council meeting) about his discovery that an Ottawa lobby group has been hired to press Transport Canada to proceed with a Pickering airport. He finally manages to uncover these details: the lobbyists (a firm called Counsel) have been hired by Durham Region, and the Region will be expecting Pickering to help cover the costs. Who knew about this? Just staff? Or were Pickering’s mayor and just some councillors in the loop?
- **May 29** – Invest Durham releases the results of Durham Region Business Survey #3, on the business community’s evolving needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some 400 businesses responded. Although the survey had offered as an option the building a Pickering airport to help boost Durham Region’s economic recovery, almost 70% of businesses indicated that, for an economic recovery to happen, they wanted to see programs or strategies that would “bring the local food & agriculture sector into the Region’s downtowns.” The top three strategies they selected as being best to help the recovery: “expanding high speed internet, supporting local programs and incorporating agri-business into urban downtown areas.”
- We receive an undated response from Transport Canada to our request for (a) the full cost of the KPMG analysis study and (b) a cost breakdown by individual report. The full cost: \$799,710.61, of which the Supply and Demand report made up \$281,189.09; the Contextual Bridge report, \$27,000.00; the Type and Role report, \$99,787.91; and the Revenue Generation and Economic Impact Report, \$391,733.61. In other words, almost three quarters of the cost of this study went on a “what if”

exercise to do with a potential airport “that could support economic growth.” This effort appears to have been founded, at least in part, by “anecdotal evidence” (Type and Role report, p. 2). It’s worth noting here that “anecdotal” generally means “unreliable,” something based on personal accounts rather than scientific evidence.

- Deputy mayor, Councillor Kevin Ashe, announces that Pickering’s “dedicated, innovative, and inspirational CAO, Tony Prevedel, will be retiring effective June 12, 2020.”