

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. Is this insider knowledge? A little digging reveals that the claims are simply 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 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.”
- **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 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, a facility that would add massive volumes of new emissions to the Region’s tally. That prime farmland is a carbon sink right now. 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 as to the Town’s intention to do everything necessary to adapt to the difficult times ahead. The difference between this clear motion and Pickering’s (all 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, as part of 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 by two councillors, an impassioned response of support 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 and its ramifications for the town surely played a role in the decision.
- **Feb. 3** – A letter is sent by LOL 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 the letter 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 KMPG report: 400+ pages covering the period 2016-2036. The release date is 48 years and 3 days after the original airport announcement...
- Transport Canada 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 enough to hide the overall conclusion: KPMG finds 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 (or threat) cannot be justified.

- 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 KPMG identified a need for the airport, the pro-airport lobby's pressure on Transport Canada to act on this finding would have been instant and 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 is quoted as saying that he 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: "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. The public comments beneath all the current pro-airport article are almost entirely 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. We will soon 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.

- **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 applies worldwide.
- **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 underlined. Those conclusions are clear. No airport needed. Not even a hint of when it might be needed. If ever.
- **Apr. 21** – Articles on the importance of growing food locally are starting to crop up everywhere. The fragility of global food supply chains is 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 obtain details: the lobbyists (Counsel) have been hired by Durham Region, and the Region will be expecting Pickering to help fund 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 building a Pickering airport was offered in the survey as one way to 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 to help the recovery: “expanding high speed internet, supporting local programs and incorporating agri-business into urban downtown areas.”
- We receive a response, dated May 28, from Transport Canada regarding 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 claimed \$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 “what if” exercises to do with a potential airport “that could support economic growth,” apparently supported 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.
- **Jun. 7** – We obtain a copy of a letter sent on March 25, 2020, to John Henry, Durham Regional Chair, by Transport Minister Marc Garneau, in reply to two earlier requests of Henry’s (Nov. 6 and Dec. 10, 2019) requesting public release of the KMPG study. The Minister writes that the study was released on March 5 and that “No decision has been made to develop an airport on the Pickering Lands. Any decision...must be based on a sound business case, updated data on aviation demand and capacity, and stakeholder engagement.” He also says that “the ASA (Aviation Sector Analysis) suggests there is no immediate need for additional airport capacity in the Greater Toronto Area before 2038 [sic]...” thereby refuting claims by local pro-airport voices that the study said the opposite.

- **Jun. 8** – The International Air Transport Association (IATA), the largest airline lobby group, produces a diagram (“Return to growth post-COVID but at a lower level”) showing expected aviation growth by 2025 to be a mere 10% lower than pre-pandemic forecasts.
- Pearson’s latest stats are posted: the airport has seen a 96.8% drop in overall passenger numbers compared with last year, and an 85.1% drop in total aircraft movements.
- **Jun. 12** – Pickering’s pro-airport CAO, Tony Prevedel, retires.
- **Jun. 14** – CBC News runs an excellent article: “Environmentalists, farmers renew push to shelve Pickering airport, save prime farmland.” Very timely, with the need for improving food security ever more evident as the pandemic persists. Despite the Transport Minister’s letter regarding no need (so no plans) for an airport, Regional Chair Henry promotes a Pickering airport in the article. Meanwhile, the media worldwide describe empty airports, grounded fleets, cancelled orders for new planes, a devastated tourist industry, widespread hesitation about flying again... The future is a complete unknown.
- **Jul. 9** – Pickering Council endorses a Ministerial Zoning Order (MZO) that would allow a 4,000-acre residential and commercial development called “Veraine” on prime farmland a few kilometres to the east of the Federal Lands. The promotional material touts the planned subdivision’s “green” credentials and boasts of its proximity to a Pickering airport. We team up with Environmental Defence and others in a campaign to stop this plan.
- **Jul. 13** – Aviation analysts are now saying they don’t expect airline traffic to fully recover until the mid- to late-2020s.
- **Jul. 14** – The Canadian Press reports: “Greater Toronto Airport Authority cutting 500 positions due to drop in traffic.” Apparently, passenger levels at Pearson have fallen to 1996 operating levels.
- **Jul. 17** – We learn that the developer (Dorsay) behind the Veraine proposal was also a sponsor of the 2018 APBOT “lunch and learn” pro-airport event. It has also been confirmed via an ATIP request that Dorsay was active in the lead-up to Pickering’s aerotropolis event in April 2019.
- **Jul. 23** – A Moody’s analysis: the commercial aviation industry will continue to be devastated by the coronavirus pandemic for years to come.
- **Jul. 27** – Cross-border air passenger numbers are down 99% compared with 2019.
- **Jul. 29** – Durham Regional Council votes unanimously (but for one Pickering councillor) to oppose the Veraine development, and asks that the MZO be withdrawn.
- **Aug. 13** – Bloomberg reports that early signs of tentative airline recovery have been stalled by new virus flare-ups. IATA, known for its rosy forecasts, now predicts that 2019 traffic won’t be seen again until 2024, not 2023. “The situation is deteriorating,” says IATA Chief Economist Brian Pearce.
- **Aug. 31** – Pickering announces its plans to launch a local food strategy. A motion to begin the process was introduced in June by councillors Maurice Brenner and David Pickles. The City currently has no economic development strategy re the potential of produce grown locally, within Pickering – rather startling, given all the farmland in the municipality. Will the Lands be counted?
- **Sep. 8** – Amazon announces it will be opening a new fulfillment centre in Ajax in 2021, creating 1,000 jobs. Which only goes to prove, Pickering, that a local airport (or promise of one) wasn’t a prerequisite for Amazon after all.

- **Sep. 8** – We lend our support to the Green Durham/Township of Uxbridge proposal to augment the trail system and create Uxbridge Municipal Park, which would, in part, border the Federal Lands.
- **Sep. 21** – As COVID cases rise again after a dip over the summer, aviation analysts now anticipate “a lost decade for aircraft manufactureres and suppliers.”
- **Sep. 28** – Nav Canada, the private corporation that owns and operates the country’s civil air navigation service (which includes air traffic control, flight information, weather briefings, and much more) is cutting its workforce by 14%, as the number of flights remain low, airlines drop routes and services, and our border with the U.S. and most other countries remains essentially closed.
- **Oct. 8** – Pickering's mayor continues to promote a Pickering “aerotropolis.” Today, he hosts (virtually) the City’s “Second Annual Realtor & Developer Symposium.” Mayor and staff, in their contributions, ignore or distort the content and conclusions of the KPMG report and the pandemic’s disastrous and potentially long-term impact on aviation. The City’s “forward-thinking” is indistinguishable from business as usual.
- **Oct. 15** – A supporter, responding to the Anglican Bishop of Toronto’s challenge to parishes to identify projects that would be beneficial to the environment, has chosen to support the protection of the Federal Lands as farmland, and launches an online petition to the federal government. Our MP, Jennifer O’Connell, has agreed to endorse and present it.
- **Oct. 25** – We release our latest research paper: “Indoor Farming and North Pickering.” It shows, unequivocally, that local politicians’ embrace of vertical farming facilities as part of a Pickering airport is uninformed and unsound. Such operations could never make up for the loss of the Lands’ prime farmland.
- **Oct. 27** – Aviation news remains dire. CNN reports that airlines are bleeding money, business travel isn’t expected to return to its former levels (thanks to the convenience and lower cost of video conferencing), leisure travel will be slow to recover while people don’t feel safe... Even the, the articles suggest that none of the forecasts on the sector’s future, bad as they seem, have factored in the impacts of climate breakdown and the necessity of lowering/eliminating emissions within the decade.
- The Airports Council International Europe (ACI Europe), which represents airport operators, reports that nearly 200 airports in the UK and Europe will “go bust” within months because of the “dramatic collapse in air travel” triggered by the pandemic. Apparently 193 of Europe’s 740 commerical airports face insolvency if passenger traffic isn’t well into recovery by year’s end. As there’s no guarantee of a vaccine by then, and no public vaccination timeline as yet, the end-of-year deadline will not be met.