

Speech by Senator Robert Black

Thanks, Lexi, for the introduction and for inviting me here today. It's a pleasure to be here in the room with ministers and members of Parliament, former members of Parliament, and town councillors and regional councillors.

It's an honour to be here to celebrate the Government of Canada's decision to end their plan to build an airport using the land put aside for the future Pickering airport and instead transfer most of the prime agricultural land to the Rouge National Urban Park.

This is an absolutely significant win for agriculture and rural communities. It ensures the preservation of some of the best – some of the *best* – farmland and the most important soils that we have in this province, which will not only benefit current and future farmers but all Canadians, because it will be protected and preserved from now on.

It's also a significant win for your community. For everyone here today, it's a celebration. And we heard that the fight isn't over, there's still work to be done. But let's celebrate today.

It's a testament to what can be done, what communities can do when they work together for a common goal. Just look at this room and the vibe that's in this room. It's overflowing. I can honestly say that I feel a sense of community and camaraderie here today – a community that's pulled together and supported the preservation of this prime agricultural farmland. It's the commitment, dedication, and advocacy of each of you that has led to the expansion of the Rouge National Urban Park and the reason we're here today to celebrate. You should *all* be proud of yourselves for your contributions towards this important change. While it took many years – 53 years – and many people involved, your work and advocacy will have lasting and positive impacts on all Canadians now and into the future.

As mentioned in the recent Senate report about soil health, we don't have another 40 years to protect and conserve our soils. The preservation of this land will help to protect and conserve the health of soils here and around the country. The United Nations says that today, 30 per cent of the world's soils are degraded to the point where they can't grow food, and they say that without work and protection by 2050 – that's 25 years away – 90 per cent of the world's soils will not be able to grow food. That's a scary thought. That's why I'm always glad to celebrate victories that reflect the progress that we're making towards safeguarding our soil.

I'm here today because Lexi Whalen, Chair of Land Over Landings, contacted my office last July. She'd heard about my interest in land-use planning and soil health and I appreciated her taking the time to reach out and ask for help and let me come and see it. I was honoured to be involved in the campaign to save these vital soils. At Lexi's invitation, I had the opportunity to come down here one day in early September, with MP Tim Louis and we toured the area with

two vans, driving around the countryside. After that, Tim and I wrote a joint letter to the Ministers of Transport, Finance, Agriculture and Food, Environment and Climate Change, the Treasury Board Secretary, and Rural Economic Development in September, and we also met with MPP Mike Shreiner, who was very supportive of what was happening here. Lexi and her team and Mary Delaney are true go-getters and deserve recognition for their hard work, and you have been acknowledged.

All this to say that when communities come together with a common goal, you can move mountains. Or in this case, stop mountains of infrastructure on prime agricultural land.

I tell you honestly that we need to protect our farmland. Someday – and I worry about this – someday we're going to wake up and realize we can't feed our province, let alone our country or the world.

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