

TRANSPORTATION: Public meeting about Pickering airport attracts 300 people



Stephen Fredericks, president of new anti-airport group.

Residents rally to halt airport plan

BY MIKE ADLER
STAFF WRITER

The quiet community life in Stouffville, Pickering, Ajax and part of Markham will be destroyed if the Pickering Airport becomes a reality, concerned citizens were told at a public meeting Thursday night.

To drive the message home, a grassroots movement is launching a campaign to make politicians take a stand against a permanent airport designation for the federal land.

After that, they'll take the fight to Stouffville, which lies in a Pickering airport flight path, promises Steven Frederick, president of a new

anti-airport umbrella group, VOCAL.

The "sense of community" in Stouffville, Pickering, Ajax and part of Markham will be lost once planes start flying from the Pickering site, he warned.

"Once they climb out of the airport, they will be banking over Stouffville," Frederick told the 300 residents who turned out to support VOCAL — Voters Organized to Cancel the Airport Lands.

Residents' resistance to plans for an international airport on the lands, after the federal government expropriated 18,600 acres in Pickering, Markham and Uxbridge in 1972, is

now the stuff of local legend.

In 1975, the airport was shelved after hundreds of residents volunteered to lie in front of bulldozers clearing runway space on the airport lands.

But now that the government has said it wants to designate the massive agricultural area as an airport site, people in Claremont and elsewhere believe their old battle has restarted.

VOCAL will be as successful in its fight as People or Planes, resident Louanne Sanders wrote on a banner.

"I'm ready for another bulldozer," she added.

The fledgling group, which claimed 100 volunteers before the Thursday meeting at Claremont Community Centre, is finding out people in other areas surrounding the airport lands don't know the facts, said Kurrie Storie, president of the Claremont and District Community Association.

But once people in Pickering, Markham and Stouffville are told about the airport threat, "it's pretty scary and you get them on side pretty quickly."

Half the crowd would be from Stouffville, one man argued, if they knew about the sound waves planes from a Pickering airport would produce over their area.

Federal Transport Minister David Collette has maintained he wants to designate the lands to protect them from development and that he doubts any airport would be built on the site for at least 20 years.

But VOCAL organizers know officials of the Greater Toronto Airports Authority, operators of Pearson International, have other plans.

A short video, which VOCAL plans to play in nearby communities, calls forecasts that show a need for the airport "pure invention."

"Once this property is turned over to the GTAA, it's all over," argued Frederick, adding Collette "is being pushed" to change his mind.

Residents of Markham's new east-end Cornell development don't realize if this airport development goes through, they will have planes going over their heads for the rest of their lives, he said.

"They're going to be terribly upset and rightfully so."

The federal government has given people and governments until Oct. 31 to comment on the designation.

Authority vice-president Steve Shaw didn't deny the GTAA wants to put a regional airport on the site within a decade and is trying to convince Collette the Pickering lands are a valuable asset.

"We're hoping to make it happen at the right time," he added yesterday. "We believe that's our mandate."

Planes may fly overhead, but in technical terms, even residents of Claremont should be well-protected by distance, Shaw argued.

"It's a very large area," he said. "The noise will be well-accommodated within the lands."

Storie said talk of "protecting" the land is a smokescreen. It may be Collette's intention, but it's definitely not the intention of the GTAA or the regional governments of Durham and York, he argued.

A short video, which VOCAL plans to play in nearby communities, calls forecasts that show a need for the airport "pure invention."

"The airport is as wrong today as it was in the 1970s," it says. "It's time to break up the (airport) land bank and put it back in private hands."

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