

ENVIRONMENT: Hwy. 407 extension considered a major threat to lands in York and Durham regions

Group lobbies province to preserve prime farmland

BY MIKE ADLER
STAFF WRITER

Prime farmland is too precious to trade for anything, preservationists from Markham and Pickering argued Tuesday at a Queen's Park press conference.

"A-1 farmland is not worth money," Norman Collier of Pickering said, because it's priceless, like Algonquin Park is to Ontario.

Collier, who on Tuesday was 34 days and 42 lost pounds into a 40-day protest fast, lives in the Duffin-Rouge Land Assembly — 8,000 acres along the quiet boundary of

York Region and Durham. The province expropriated the lands a quarter-century ago, rented them to farmers and tenants and later protected them as an agricultural preserve.

Three years ago, it decided to sell them, but not before Dave Johnson, then minister responsible for the lands, pledged they would stay agricultural in perpetuity, Collier said.

President of a local group called The Last Green Door Co-op, Collier said he's been fasting, and drinking nothing but water, to make certain the province keeps its word.

"It's very hard to talk to a distant government," he explained.

Markham and Pickering have said they are committed to keeping the lands rural, but the urban boundaries of both towns have grown, most notably in east Markham, where another 2,400 provincial acres beside the Duffin-Rouge Land Assembly was sold to create the massive Cornell development.

Adding to the concern in Collier's group is the extension of Hwy. 407, due to start this spring from Hwy. 48 into Pickering. The four-lane toll road, expandable to

10 lanes, will split the former land preserve and spur Markham and Pickering into allowing subdivisions, preservationists say.

A spokesperson for Ontario Privatization Minister Rob Sampson said the bidding by private companies for the highway ends March 31, and a new owner for the 407 should be chosen soon.

Co-op member Carroll Gair said the Duffin-Rouge lands are part of Ontario's last large collection of Class 1 farmland. The term refers to a near-perfect set of soil conditions that is rare in Canada.

"If you go up to the top of the

CN Tower and look north, you will see 80 per cent of Canada's Class 1 farmland," the Markham woman told reporters. "And we own it. The taxpayers of Ontario own this land," Gair said, arguing the government should stop the sales.

Bernadette Manning, another co-op member from rural Markham, added she worries the highway will lower local air quality and add to global warming.

Gloria Boxen, a member of the Toronto's Better Transportation Coalition, said she has noticed yellow smog around her Richmond Hill home since the 407 opened.

NDP leader Hampton promises protection

Instead of selling its prime farmland in Markham and Pickering, Ontario should create agricultural preserves to save farming areas and stop urban sprawl, NDP leader Howard Hampton says.

Responding to a Tuesday press conference on the future of the provincially-owned Duffin-Rouge Land Assembly, Hampton charged Ontario's Tories have changed planning rules to favour "fast-buck development."

"The Conservatives have gone back to the urban development scenarios of the '60s and '70s, where basically anything goes," he said.

The public, Hampton said, has to pay for more highways and sewer lines to service urban sprawl. The NDP would create rules to ensure development happens "where it makes environmental sense, economic sense and a social sense to do it."

And, following a method used in the U.S. and Europe, agriculture preserves would be created to save endangered farming areas, Hampton said.

Politicians in Durham have decided to try adding easements restricting development on properties in the Pickering side of the Duffin-Rouge lands, which the Tory government is selling as "surplus." The province's land agency, the Ontario Realty Corporation, has said it will fight the easements at the Ontario Municipal Board.

Easements are redundant, ORC spokesperson Jim Cassimatis said yesterday, because local zoning already protects the land. "It's artificially impacting the value of the property to add an easement onto the zoning."

But several U.S. states have been stepping up the use of easements to stop farmland losses. By last June, Maryland had bought easements, it says will permanently protect 152,288 acres. Last year, New Jersey permanently preserved 10,103 acres at a cost of \$36 million (U.S.). Farmers who voluntarily accept money for an easement on the land that restricts all non-agricultural development can enter the program permanently or for eight years.

Hampton said Ontario's former NDP government had signed up some Niagara fruit growers for a permanent easement program aimed at preserving farmland. The program, the first of its kind in Ontario, was cancelled when the government changed. Hampton noted his government turned the Duffin-Rouge lands into a formal agricultural preserve. "We continue to think that that is the appropriate direction."

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