

# Airport's future still up in the air

BY MIKE ADLER  
Staff Writer

Federal Transport Minister David Collenette could save Buttonville Airport or seal its fate, airport spokesperson Derek Sifton confirmed this week.

Sifton said the future of Markham's busy airport depends on securing financial support through Collenette, who is studying the Greater Toronto Area's aviation needs this summer.

"He told us Buttonville is part of his plan. He promised me a resolution by September," said Sifton, vice-president of Toronto Airways Ltd., which owns the airport and operates it jointly with the town.

For seven years, Buttonville enjoyed a \$1.5-million provincial subsidy, as well as an indexed subsidy from York Region. Last year, the region's indexed subsidy was \$242,652, financial support the

region has agreed to continue over the next two years.

Last spring, the province handed another \$1.7 million to the airport, a subsidy the province called a final instalment.

Since then, the airport and region have negotiated unsuccessfully for a subsidy from the Greater Toronto Airports Authority (GTAA), a non-profit agency that operates Pearson International Airport.

Buttonville handles the same amount of private air traffic as Pearson, and often acts as a small-craft "reliever" for the international airport. Sifton said he was disappointed to find the GTAA, spending billions to modernize Pearson, was unwilling to put a relatively small amount into a local airport that assists the larger airport.

"They've turned us flat down twice for support," he said. "Unless

we're (planning to be) around for 50 years, they don't want to help us out."

But Sifton, seeking an arrangement that will keep the airport operating for 10 to 15 years, was encouraged by a recent meeting with Collenette. "He's the only one that can twist the GTAA's arm."

Because its lease with the town hasn't been renewed, the 16th Avenue airport, home to 29 businesses with 300 employees, hasn't collected rent this year from its tenants. Sifton said Toronto Airways Ltd. will ask Markham to renew its lease so it can collect the region's subsidy, allowing the airport to pay some bills.

Sifton thinks the airport, run by his family for decades on land which has increased in value as the surrounding area turned into a suburb, will operate through 2001, regardless of what happens.

"You don't shut down the ninth-busiest airport in the country in a month," he said.

Regional Councillor Frank Scarpitti said the airport is important to the economy of the entire GTA, so extending the region's financial support is important.

"We need to keep those dollars there and possibly look at what else the region can do to keep the airport viable."

Scarpitti argued replacing Buttonville by opening a new airport on the Pickering lands, a vast federally-owned tract in Pickering and northeastern Markham, would take at least seven to 10 years.

Over the summer, Collenette will be studying the GTA's aviation needs, his communications director, Anthony Polci, said this week. "Buttonville will be examined in that context."



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