

## **Address to Pickering Council, by Brian Buckles for the Green Door Alliance**

### **Growth Management Structure Plan Comments – June 29 Council Meeting**

I am speaking on behalf of the Green Door Alliance. We have commented in detail on a number of occasions during this process. We strongly oppose the Growth Management recommendations to develop in the Ag. Preserve. Many of us have fought for 30 years to preserve these lands. Our organization was instrumental in getting easements placed on these lands before they were sold in the late nineties.

We won't raise many of the points we've raised previously tonight. You've heard them before. If the fact that all three provincial parties do not support you; and the steps the previous Conservative Government and the current liberal government are now taking to ensure the Ag. Preserve is protected don't dissuade you; then nothing we say is likely to change your mind.

What concerns me the most about the Growth Management Study recommendations is something the recommendations remain very silent about.

The Study recommends developing almost 1500 acres of land in the Ag. Preserve.

When the Province sold these lands for some \$ 4,000 per acre, they only did so after a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by ORC, the Region and the City of Pickering that among other things called for the placing of agricultural easements on these lands - easements to be held by the City of Pickering. These easements restrict the use of the land to agricultural and conservation uses. What makes these lands unique then, and what is so important to understand, is that it is the public through these easements held by the City, that holds the development rights to these lands.

Development can only occur on these lands if these easements are removed.

I don't pretend to know exactly how much the land will increase in value if easements restricting its use to agricultural and conservation uses in perpetuity were suddenly withdrawn after all planning approvals enabling development had been put in place.

Let's say the land could be worth \$ 150,000 per acre. That would come to some \$ 225 million for the 1500 acres in question! That's an increase in market value of well over \$200 million from the some \$ 4,000 per acre the Province sold it for 5 short years earlier, sold at such a low price to reflect agricultural values.

*And who's to say much more of the Preserve wouldn't be developed in future?*

The important issue here is that this immense increase in value, a value likely to amount to hundreds of million of dollars, if this land were to become developable, belongs to the public and should be treated as a public asset.

There has been complete silence on this issue. Is there any reason why Council should be prepared to remove these development rights that are a public asset worth hundreds of millions of dollars without receiving full value for them?

We don't believe the Ag. Preserve should be developed. However if Council is going to approve a motion to develop these lands, shouldn't any motion to approve the Growth Management Recommendations be conditional on the public receiving full reimbursement for the development rights the city holds on any lands being developed, with the value of the development rights to be based on an independent evaluation of the difference between what the land would be worth if the easements remained in place and the land was permanently protected, and what it would be worth if all secondary planning and development approvals were in place and the easements lifted.

Approving Ag. Preserve development without such a condition leaves many in the public believing that in approving the Growth Management Plan you are approving the transfer of all, or at least part of a public asset that could well be worth hundreds of millions of dollars from public to private hands.

Please clear the air on this issue. Please clarify who gets to benefit from these publicly held development rights. And whatever these development rights could be worth - \$100 million or \$200million or much more, what possible justification is there for sharing one red cent of it with private interests who bought the land cheaply with full knowledge these rights no longer ran with the land. ?

With respect to the Seaton lands, this Council and the public generally would rightly be enraged if the Province didn't conduct the land swap in a transparent fashion, and make every effort to ensure that developers didn't get a sweet deal. That's why the Province has appointed a fairness commissioner – a respected retired Judge, to report on the appropriateness of the arrangement before Cabinet signs off on it, and also to report publicly subsequently, to assure the public that the public's financial interest is not being squandered.

Why wouldn't Council have provided the public with a similar level of assurance that the public assets they would be disposing of if portions of the Ag. Preserve were to be developed, are being looked at appropriately? Doesn't Council feel it too needs to act in a fashion that provides public assurance that what is being proposed will be guided by principles of transparency and appropriate regard for public assets?

When the Federal Government expropriated the airport lands in the 1970's, the Province's purpose in expropriating land to the south of the airport for a City was to avoid speculation, and to ensure that Government not private interests benefited from any increase in the value of the lands.

In subsequent years, all levels of government reached agreement that development would occur on the eastern portion of these lands and the area to the west including the Pickering Ag. Preserve would remain a green belt. As recently as 1998, Pickering itself in a study, confirmed the agricultural designation of the Preserve, and in 1999 executed the Memorandum of Understanding with the Region and the Province I have already referred to involving the placing of easements on these lands protecting them in perpetuity before they were privatized.

Now the Growth Management Recommendations call for the City to renege on this agreement, and not only renege on it, but maintain silence on the question of whether the value of a publicly held asset - the development rights on these lands, will effectively be transferred in whole or in part to private interests. Where is the transparency in this kind of process? Is the question of who gets to benefit to the tune of a couple of hundred million such a small issue that it doesn't merit public discussion and scrutiny?

We urge you not to go down this road. However we remain confident that if you attempt to do so, the Province will stick to its promises, and continue to intervene to protect the public interest and the interests of citizens and taxpayers of Ontario by ensuring the Ag. Preserve is permanently protected from development.

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