

Green Door Alliance



Green Door Alliance (GDA), Presentation to Standing Committee on Bill 16

We applaud this Bill and make no recommendations for change either to the proposed Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act itself or in the required changes to the Conservation Land Act. We would like to briefly outline our past involvement with the questions before you and then explain why we feel it is so essential this act be passed.

History and GDA Involvement.

Many GDA members including myself have had a history of involvement with the area now known as the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve before the GDA was incorporated in the early 1990's as members of People or Planes. I was looking the other day at an old People or Planes Booklet from 1979 entitled 'The last Green Door' which among other things called for preservation of these lands.

The GDA's first major publication was a 42 page document outlining a conceptual plan for the Provincial and Federal lands which proposed selling the agricultural lands, including the Preserve lands with easements ensuring future protection.

When the Province initially decided to sell these lands we were dismayed and argued strenuously against Ontario Realty Corporation's intention to sell the land at agricultural prices, but do so without placing any restrictions on title to prevent the land from being bought at fire sale prices and flipped for development.

Our organization proposed to the Region that the Region require easements be placed on these lands as a condition of their approval of the ORC's lotting plan.

The Region and subsequently Pickering bought into this approach. ORC initially opposed that condition and appealed to the OMB. The Green Door Alliance were parties in this OMB process that led to the 1999 Memorandum of Understanding, (MOU), between ORC, the Region and the City of Pickering that required easements held by Pickering be placed on these lands. These easements called for the land to remain in agriculture or natural uses 'in perpetuity'. And

Directors

Dr. Paul Thompson, Mr Brian Buckles, Mr Lorne Almack, Ms Kathryn Dean, Ms Marion Thomas, Dr Bruce Flattery,
Mr Tommy Thompson, Mr William Wilder, Mr Edward Falkenberg

Green Door Alliance Inc., PO Box 97586, 364 Old Kingston Road, Scarborough, On., M1C 4Z1
www.greendooralliance.ca

although we were not signatories to that agreement, we signed off on the Minutes of Settlement on the understanding that the MOU permanently protected these Preserve lands.

We were appalled when early this year Pickering hurriedly and unilaterally released the easements. Along with another signatory to the 1999 Minutes of settlement, we applied to the OMB to review whether Pickering's release of the easements was in contempt of the settlement agreed to. The OMB declined to intervene stating it was a matter for the courts not the OMB.

The Importance of Passing Bill 16.

We have long supported private stewardship and the use of easements. Many of our members myself included and members of our affiliated organization the Durham Conservation Association have donated easements on our own lands.

Pickering's action, as Minster Ramsay and others have indicated have put into question the legal integrity and long term validity of conservation easements. So the first important reason for taking action is to redress this situation.

Secondly, some may argue that since the Preserve is protected by the Greenbelt Plan no further protection is required. However given the immense windfall that would occur if this land were developed, coupled with Pickering's attitude, immense pressure would continue to be put on this and subsequent governments to change the greenbelt boundaries. To underline the amount of money involved here, the March 11 National Post had an article with the headliner, "Greenbelt Plan will cost me \$ 240m developer says". Sylvio De Gasperis, the president of TAAC Group, the Post article reports, told them that "the land is now worth as little as \$5,000 an acre because it can only be used for agricultural purposes".

We obviously had strong disagreement with Pickering about urbanizing the Preserve and about their unilateral release of the easements. However even if one were to accept Pickering's position that the Preserve should be developed and they had the unilateral right to remove the easements at any time their action was in our judgment appalling.

Without Greenbelt protection which Pickering wanted removed, the only thing standing between the land being worth \$5,000 an acre as agricultural land and hundreds of thousands per acre as developable land would have been the easements. By releasing the easements Pickering was effectively transferring the vast lion's share, and perhaps virtually all of a public asset potentially worth hundreds of millions from public to private hands!

Passing Bill 16 and reinstating the easements will increase public trust and provide reassurance to a cynical public that such a gigantic public rip off will not occur. Without such reassurance we are likely to get back into the situation that existed in the last round of elections. Great amounts of private money being spent supporting pro Preserve development candidates who want green belt boundaries changed and full page ads week after week attacking those opposed.

Thirdly, the Province is currently working with other stakeholders to develop a plan for both the Seaton and the Ag. Preserve lands. As long as property owners and their backers feel there is any possibility of developing their land most will feel it is not in their best interests to take and support actions which improve economic viability in the countryside. They will continue to do what has been done in the recent past - highlight all the problems of making near urban agriculture viable; make no investment to improve the farms and then argue the land isn't really class 1 anyway, and on and on.

The Duffins Rouge Agricultural lands provide a terrific opportunity for the Province, farmers and other stakeholders to examine different approaches to support farm viability - approaches which could not only have benefits on the Preserve but that might over time benefit the broader farm community in Ontario. None of this will even get off the ground without the certainty passage of the Duffin Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act will provide.

Fourthly and finally, many groups and individuals in Durham and for that matter across the GTA support a vision of a non urbanized corridor from the lake to the Moraine. The Act ensures the Preserve will form a permanent part of this corridor. And when plans for Seaton are firmed up a very major portion of those lands will also be added to this corridor.

Directly to the north, the Federal Government has committed to permanently protect 7200 acres of the more than 18,000 acre federal airport holding as green space. These 7200 acres are mostly on the Moraine but also include a southern link.

Even if an airport were built on these lands at some point in future - and we still feel any such proposal is still wildly premature - all evidence points to the fact that far more land and a far broader link could be protected in future creating a larger and even more viable countryside that could better support necessary farm infrastructure and adding again to the viability of the Preserve, and the creation of a more robust natural heritage corridor.

We urge the Province to take an active and critical interest in what is happening on the Federal lands. It was the Province who by withdrawing infrastructure support pulled the plug on the Federal Airport proposal in the 1970's saving taxpayers billions of dollars.

We are delighted all parties support this current action. It was the NDP that created the Preserve in the first place; Conservatives who signed an MOU calling for the lands to be retained in agriculture 'in perpetuity' and who approved the Crombie recommendations reaffirming this protection; and it has been the liberals who have stood up to Pickering and with all party support are reinstating the easements and ensuring future protection.

Through Bill 16 the public will be reassured that the integrity of easements have been restored; that the public interest is not being squandered; that a vital step will be taken in focusing efforts away from urbanization and towards the development of a viable farm and countryside economy; and that a critical first step in ensuring a permanent link between the Lake and the Moraine will have been taken.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you.

Brian Buckles, on behalf of the Green Door Alliance
Phone – 905 649 3331, e-mail buckles@zing-net.ca
www.greendooralliance.ca

