

Text of letter submitted to the Minden Times by Andy Muirhead

(January 16, 2010)

The recently revealed but long standing OMB “mediation’ between a family long established in the area and the township of Algonquin Highlands is only one confirmation of the ever increasing costs of the misguided airport expansion project. The issues involved in this dispute go far beyond the loss of more than 95% of the family’s land, and include the negative impacts (such as noise from near and close overflights) which will further reduce the value and enjoyment of the lands the family has been “allowed to retain”. Publically available documents from the OMB give some detail of the issues and the actions thus far taken.

Here are questions I would ask, and I believe we should all consider them: Can any one replace 100 acres of land with potential for deeded access to several hundred feet of shore line for \$200,000? What value can be placed on restrictively shallow shore-lots which will require ongoing control of tree heights and be subject to risk and disturbances from low-flying aircraft?

Although my personal tax dollars will need to be spent on any settlement in this matter, I have absolutely no problem with this family fighting for maximal (fair) compensation for damages inflicted in my name by a council bent on proceeding with a project that will have so little benefit to anyone beyond the private aviation community. ***This not a project that needs to go forward, and they could just as easily be me...or you.***

So far as the townships’ ‘...offers to surrounding landowners to buy "vegetative rights"...’ this effort consists, as far I am able to determine, of laughably small one-time payments to three out of possibly a dozen landowners – at least two of whom are in Dysart township. Those who have been approached have my full support for their decisions to reject these offers and those who have never even been informed of eventual impacts should be as outraged as I am. An ever growing number of individuals and Associations have been warning of these impacts and costs for years and the continued refusal of the township to address the issue, assess the cost or even admit to the facts is unconscionable.

This coming Thursday the council of Algonquin Highlands will begin public discussions on the upcoming budget with the certain knowledge that County tax rates (which taxes are a significant portion of our municipal bills) will need to rise by up to 17% to cover the first part of upper level funding reductions coming over the next years. The township must be forced to take into consideration, publically, not only the potential extra costs noted above, but also give a clear accounting of moneys already spent for the expansion plan.

Earlier published documents and estimates have never taken these and a number of other costs into account and have been chronically optimistic and misleading; The “Financial Information Report” tabled by the former CAO gives the absurd impression, because of the selective use of figures, that by borrowing up to \$1.2 million dollars for the second runway there will be a *reduction in the annual impact of airport costs on ratepayers*. In fact, interest and principle repayment for the townships’ portion of the project funds will ADD from \$80,000 to \$145,000 annually over a period of 10 to 30 years to current costs of nearly \$100,000 per year which will themselves increase by at least 50% simply as a result of the expansion.

Costs to the taxpayer will increase from around 3.5% of the annual budget to up to 9% - these are no avoidable or optional costs; once a loan is taken payments must be made and once an airport opened it must be maintained and operated in a responsible manner; Short of abandoning the second runway, the cost increase(s) will be permanent and the borrowing would still be on the books.

The council and administration under our new CAO, who has no history of backing this project, must undertake an objective review of costs that will need to be covered either by significant tax increases or by reductions in other, more widely beneficial services. In the matter of the ongoing screening by the CEAA, we are all fortunate that this is a process that does not (and should not) take into consideration the possibility that a funding deadline may be missed. Even when the *preliminary screening report* is released, there are several steps ahead including further public comment and consultation and, almost certainly, further work and expenditures to be undertaken before the project will be allowed to advance. While it is not possible for anyone to say how much this will cost or how long it will take, we can say without any fear of contradiction that there is not a single line in the current estimates for it, though the probability has been (or should have been) recognized from the start.

How much further out on this particular limb does Algonquin Highlands want to go?

Andy Muirhead,

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