

# Halton Hills mayoral race reignites debate over quarry

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In an election season dominated by hard-fought 905 contests in Mississauga and Brampton, the mayoral race in Halton Hills, a rural community north of Milton that includes Georgetown, has morphed into a bitter showdown between a long-serving incumbent and a challenger whose controversial stake in a decommissioned local quarry has proven to be more than just a tempest in a gravel pit.

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Sally Stull, a Town of Erin planner whose husband hauls construction debris and clean fill to a former gravel pit they own in the area, is challenging Rick Bonnette, a 32-year council veteran who has been Halton Hills' mayor for 11 years.

Ms. Stull says she's running to push a "long-in-the-tooth" council to adapt to development pressures and traffic in a community of almost 60,000 residents. But her candidacy has reignited a fierce local fight – which has played out at the Ontario Municipal Board, council and now in the courts – over attempts by her and her husband to infill a long-dormant quarry and operate an aggregate facility on the property. The 67-acre site, which abuts some rural homes, is located just a few hundred metres away from several Georgetown subdivisions.

The showdown comes at a time when several 905 municipalities are grappling with what to do with the mountains of excavated material flowing out of Toronto and into decommissioned quarries in rural areas around Greater Toronto. Residents in areas such as King, Pickering and Scugog are upset about dump-truck traffic along rural roads, as well as threats to groundwater if some of the "clean fill" contains toxic substances such as benzene, motor oil or other hydrocarbons.

Critics say the province hasn't properly regulated clean-fill brokers, who are paid to haul soil and inert debris off construction sites, while developers and municipal contractors scramble to find landfills that will accept the material.

Some 905 municipalities in recent years have passed highly restrictive dumping bylaws, which have forced haulers to look further afield or deal with shady operators, according to Earthroots campaigner Josh Garfinkel.

"There's all this dirt coming out of the ground and no one's tracking where it's going," he says. "What's too dirty for the City of Toronto is being dumped adjacent to valuable water sources and farmland. It's a huge policy gap in terms of lack of monitoring."

The booming clean-fill industry, linked as it is to Greater Toronto Area development, is worth millions of dollars for haulers and pit owners. "On Highway 27 coming north, it's basically like a train of dump trucks," observes Greg Locke, who is running for King Township council and has campaigned to stop this kind of dumping.

In Halton Hills, the quarry at the centre of the dispute has been dormant for 25 years, and the province formally revoked the licence in 2006. According to Elizabeth Doell, a real estate agent who lives nearby, the property, which included two ponds, had been regenerated with trees and other plant life.

But in 2012, after the land was quietly rezoned, Rick and Sally Stull, who own the site, stripped the plant life, drained one of the ponds and began hauling fill into the site. Ms. Doell calculated that about 13,000 truckloads arrived at the property over a four-month period before the town obtained an injunction to shut it down. Council blocked the Stulls' application for an exemption to a "site alteration" policy that would allow the site to be used as an aggregate transfer station.

The Stulls objected to the town's land-use decisions, and an Ontario court will rule on the case next March. But the simmering two-year-old controversy has become an election issue. "The fact that she's running for mayor is adding insult to injury," says Ms. Doell, who adds that she's concerned about the potential of contaminated well water.

Ms. Stull, however, defends her actions and claims that the attacks are politically motivated. She says her husband's company obtained test results for any fill that came onto the property, which is adjacent to farmland owned by the couple. "We get soil analysis before we get the material," she adds, noting that the fill came from greenfield development projects in Brampton.

But she concedes that they plan to bring in 100 truckloads of fill each weekday for the next three to five years.

Ms. Stull has also been accused of conflict of interest because she wrote and administered the clean-fill bylaw for the Town of Erin, where she works as the municipal planner. The municipality ruled that Ms. Stull is not in a conflict position because her family's fill business doesn't operate within Erin, which is about 20 kilometres west of Halton Hills. "I have no, shall I say, influence with regard [to] council's choice to change the bylaw."

