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Burlington Airpark work maddening

Neighbours' nerves frayed over non-stop dumping of landfill



BURLINGTON

Barbara Sheldon watches big earth movers next to her home, which are fraying her nerves.

Hamilton Spectator

BURLINGTON Barbara Sheldon says life on her historic farm in north Burlington has been hell since 2008.

That's when she says dump trucks showed up one morning in early summer and started unloading piles of fill on the Burlington Executive Airport (also known as Burlington Airpark) property that surrounds her on three sides.

Fast forward to June 2013 and dirt fill continues to be piled around her farm. She says trucks and other heavy equipment operate six days a week from morning to night, fraying her nerves.

"I have lost five years of my life here," she said. "The sound you are hearing outside is inside. I can't open my windows. It's a hot day — my house is hot. I have lost the value of my home. This needs to be restored."

It's been five years of constant trucks going up and down the road, beeping and banging.

Wendy Cousins

North Burlington resident

Today's landscape is much different than when she bought the property in 2005, according to Sheldon. She says the land around her property was rolling, giving her a great view of the beauty of rural Burlington, as well as the planes taking off and landing.

Tim Crawford, identified on the airport's website as its executive adviser, says the fill is part of the first phase of its expansion.

It's coming from various sources, primarily from municipal sites, but taking Highway 407 fill during resurfacing work is voluntarily on hold until the airport shows plans to the city and region.

"When the airport started its enhancements in 2009, when we started working on the infrastructure, the first thing we had to do was get the whole area level," Crawford said.

"The fill that's coming in is the first step of a construction project to enhance the airport. The object is to effectively move the airport from a training facility into more of an executive airport."

Sheldon estimates some of the walls of fill bordering her farm are at least two-storeys high. She says she has written countless letters and made numerous telephone calls to federal, provincial and city officials over the past five years, but to no avail.

John Timmis, chair of the Lowville Area Residents' Association — which has come on board to support north Burlington area homeowners in their plight against the work and to protect the rural landscape — said jurisdiction is at the heart of the issue.

"The Aeronautics Act clearly states that the federal government retains sole, exclusive jurisdiction, but is limited to matters that are integral to aviation or aeronautics," he said.

"What they are attempting to do is call this fill operation the construction phase of the airport expansion and it has been a construction phase for five years. We are saying it is being disguised as a construction phase, when in fact, it is a landfill."

Plans for the development of the airpark include new aircraft taxiways, a terminal building, expanded runway width from 80 feet to 100 feet, enhanced lighting system and a helicopter ramp and taxiway.

The City of Burlington said legal action against the airport is a possibility and Conservation Halton is also looking into activity at the airpark.

Among Sheldon's many concerns is the soil quality of the fill, stormwater management and possible impact on her well, quality of life, dust and the destruction of the original rural landscape.

Wendy Cousins, who also lives next to the airpark, says she's also had enough. She lives on the farm where she was born 53 years ago. She settled there 30 years ago and her son and daughter-in-law also live on a house on the property.

Cousins and her husband, Carl, eat lunch on their front porch on warm days in summer, accompanied by an orchestra of heavy machinery.

"It's been five years of constant trucks going up and down the road, the noise, the beeping and banging of the trucks," she said. "We have no view, we can't see up the road — we live in a bowl."

Cousins says she's never had a problem with the airpark, which came into existence in 1962, until the trucks started unloading fill five years ago.

She alleges water has leached from the site into her creek, some parts of her property have become too wet to cut the grass, their view has been taken away and she is worried about the impact of the topographical change on the area's mature trees.

"We'd like to see the fill stopped, my husband would like to see (the fill berms) lowered and some compensation for all that we've had to put up with," she said. "We need the drainage fixed, maybe some trees planted."

Vanessa Warren, a Bell School Line resident, founded the group Rural Burlington Greenbelt Coalition (RBGC) in April in response to the ongoing fill operation.

The group's mandate is to preserve the greenbelt's protected countryside in north Burlington from what it believes may be ecologically and socially damaging development.

Among the coalition's members are Protecting Escarpment Rural Land (PERL), Burlington Green, Coalition on the Niagara Escarpment (CONE), Burlington Airpark Residents' Association, Nemo7G and Lowville Area Residents' Association.

Warren expects reaching a satisfactory solution will likely be an uphill battle.

"At the end of the day, it is all going to end up as a court battle unless we can, and the region can, convince ministers to get involved and do the right thing," she said.

The airport's Crawford maintains all of the truck traffic is the first phase of construction, which is almost done.

"We're not going to be seeing much more fill," he said. "The next construction project is the terminal building and the infrastructure that is associated with that."

Crawford anticipates trucks will stop bringing fill to the site by the end of the summer, weather permitting. He said final grading will follow and all berms will be seeded. The airport is in talks with an agricultural company to farm the unused portion of land until it is needed for construction.

"Unfortunately, there's been so much negative communication and the airport does so much good for the region and the city," he said.

He confirmed the airport is under federal jurisdiction, but added he is willing to work with the region and the city to mitigate any concerns.

Crawford and airport owner Vince Rossi met with Ward 6 Councillor Blair Lancaster and city officials recently. Crawford said the airport reiterated its willingness to work with the city at the meeting.

Council recently directed staff to take action regarding the airport, including developing a legal strategy around the issue, asking the Ministry of the Environment for soil testing at the airport and agreeing to take part in a lobby of the federal government for municipalities to have input on airport land filling operations and expansion plans.

Staff will report back on the legal strategy July 2. Airport representatives also plan to be a delegation at that meeting.

Mayor Rick Goldring has assured residents the city will do everything in its power to stop the infilling operation.

"This situation is absolutely bizarre," he said. "You think in today's day and age that all this development can go on in such magnitude without any monitoring or regulation?"

Goldring said he spoke with the area's MP Lisa Raitt that same day and sent a clear message municipalities should have jurisdiction over development at airports.

"She asked me who should have jurisdiction over what happens at airports in this situation," Goldring said. "I said the municipality should absolutely have jurisdiction over the site plan of what goes on at airports. Yes, the aviation (aspect) is the minister of transportation, but the rest of it should be in the domain of the municipality."

With files from Julia Le,

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