

The View from Southgate (Aggregate) Township

Guest Columnist Doug Karrow

Part II: The Experience of Living Beside a Gravel Pit

In this second installment of the three-part column, I wish to describe the experience of living and working beside a gravel pit. Descriptions of our lived-experiences centre on the general operation of the gravel pit and our interactions with the applicant, property owner, and various pieces of legislation over several years (Advisory: there are some dry and dirty statistics here). These observations apply to one gravel pit operating across from our farm. With four gravel pits now approved and three more undergoing review, I will speculate on the cumulative effect seven potential pits near Holstein may have on the community and environment. In the words of a former Southgate Township Major several years ago, “The next big sleeper is go’in to be aggregate.” Southgate, wake-up!

Noise, Traffic, and Public Safety

A typical day during the “extraction months of May-October” runs from 7:00am-6:00pm. Initially we were told weekdays only, but this eased into weekends; Sundays and holidays no exception. Although I commute some distance to work, I am able to work a portion of my time out of our home. Simply put, noise is distracting to the type of work I do. It also interferes with our enjoyment of living in the country. This is why we have chosen to live where we do. Others too, have chosen such a lifestyle, opting to leave the frantic pace of the city in return for the solitude of the country. Despite a re-forested area across the front of our farm (purely coincidental—we just enjoy trees), the noise travels far. The source of the noise is primarily truck traffic, hauling extracted gravel off the site, however there are other sources of operational noise, i.e., the constant “beeping” of reversing trucks, excavating equipment, banging of equipment, to name a few. The original number of trucks going in and out soon grew from 12-14 per day to over 250 per day when the demand for gravel skyrocketed during the installation of the Hydro One, Milton-Bruce line (when a site application references “average truck rotations per day,” it is an average over the course of a year). I recall one summer the incessant noise from truck traffic was akin to living beside a series 400 Highway. What’s more, 25 tonne gravel trucks are not exactly graceful vehicles. They gear down and up at precisely slow speeds. A rigid and inflexible suspension system that meets up with uneven terrain punctuates the atmosphere. And then there is the piece de resistance—the stone-crusher--pulverizing stone into gravel, operating daily for two weeks during the height of our summer; frequently mistaken by visiting guests as a freight train coming from the north (little do they know our local railway ceased decades ago). The peace and tranquility of our countryside, something we have always valued and enjoyed, is vanishing. With the prospect of a second pit to our east, and according to its Site Plan the operation of another stone-

crusher for 4-6 weeks, three times a year, we wonder if we'll be able to hear ourselves across the breakfast table.

Regarding public safety, such an increase in truck traffic exerts an effect on surrounding traffic travelling at a fair speed along our county road. Our local geography amplifies this, as we are located at the bottom of a steep hill with a sharp and abrupt approach to the west and east. It was not unusual as I stood with my children waiting for their school bus to witness more than one vehicle, travelling too quickly, narrowly miss a gravel truck. Shortly after the pit opened, a fully loaded truck overturned while turning toward Holstein. Word has it, a few years ago, a driver employed by this same company drove right through one of our country intersections colliding with another vehicle. More anxious days are on the horizon, as our third teenager, a bit hesitant about driving, now has to maneuver around gravel trucks travelling down our country roads. Add the daily truck rotations from this pit to the one to our east, if approved, and the truck rotations increase to 75/day. This directly impacts the quality and safety of our lives, whether we are Mennonites travelling along our country roads by horse-and-buggy, children riding our bicycles to community schools, or adults enjoying an afternoon walk.

Pollution (air, soil, water)

At the outset, we were told the lifespan of the pit would be five years. Despite our initial concerns, we consoled ourselves in knowing this would be a short-term inconvenience. This all changed last year with an application to expand the original pit. Concerns about dust, air, soil, and water pollution now take on greater significance. While gravel trucks are required to suppress gravel dust with dust covers and spray dust suppressants on roadways, this is not the case during extraction activities where significant amounts of dust may become airborne, drifting potentially off-site. Even when a dust suppressant is used, it has to be reapplied frequently as its effect wears off. As a result of operating heavy diesel equipment, increases in air pollution were noticeable. The combination of summer heat, humidity, and exhaust was un-breathable at times. Living in a valley, the potential for elevated levels of air-borne pollutants (carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, carbon particulate), by-products of diesel combustion, was inevitable. Given the close proximity of the Beatty-Saugeen river, opportunities for water pollution are also great. There is the potential for air-borne dust, leaching of the dust suppressant itself (commonly a chloride-based product, toxic in trace amounts to aquatic life), petrochemical leaching or spills from heavy equipment, to contaminate the river and feeder springs. Besides "visual inspection" little to no instrumental monitoring of the air, soil, or water occurs. As excavation activities disrupt the sub-soil through the removal of top-soil and the gravel to within 1.5 metres of the water table, the integrity of the ground as a percolation site is disrupted. As well, because the water table is so close to the extracted surface, the possibilities for water table contamination through accidental petrochemical spills or leaks is great. Questions posed of applicants about possible pollution sources, are frequently downplayed, dismissed, or explained away. Mitigating measures (if

recognized at all) are not monitored or measured. The Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR), ultimately responsible for compliance, requires the applicant to complete an annual “self-compliance” review—a 90-item checklist. Non-compliance is difficult to determine as MNR site visits rarely occur: to quote one Ministry spokesperson, “We get there when we can.”

Land Use

In the Holstein area, most prospective pits are originally classified “agricultural land”. Local governments amend Official Plans and Zoning By-laws to reflect a new definition of land use: “industrial extraction”, a classification of land-use peculiar to aggregate. In our experience, while these lands can be “gravelly” they have supported various agricultural practices since colonization. The pit in question to our north (Flanagan Pit) and the prospective pit to our east (Peyton Pit)--different names, same family--will collectively remove over 200 acres of farmland, for ten and twenty years respectively (average period of removal or 15 years x 200 acres = 3000 acres). Once stewards of the land, some farmers are engaged in industrial practices that will strip and stock-pile topsoil from once arable land, and excavate, for example, up to fifty feet of gravel from the sub-soil. We are assured these pits will be “restored” to their original purposes—agricultural land--and according to the applicant, “improved” as a result. So typical of humankind’s vanity to assume we could improve upon a post-glacial deposit that has structured the local geology and ecology since the last Ice Age. Yet, there are no absolute requirements on the part of the applicant to do this. The pit could be rezoned some other purpose, or, as in our case, if additional aggregate is discovered, apply for another expansion. What’s more, it is not uncommon to see gravel pits accrue added value. When exhausted, they commonly attract industry, or, in some local cases, the construction of residential houses; a new spin on “added value” for the aggregate company, particularly if they are also in the business of providing concrete foundations for homes. There is some concern expressed lately by the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) regarding a large gravel pit in southwestern Ontario. The original plan for the gravel pit was to restore it to agricultural land, however someone has discovered it might be more profitable to rezone that gravel pit as a landfill site. Both the Flanagan and Peyton Pits are located near the Beatty Saugeen River--a cold-water spring-fed stream— headwater to the Saugeen River. Many sensitive birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects, birds, and plant-life inhabit these areas. For example, indigenous brook trout flourish here. They are susceptible to minute changes in water quality and temperature. The types of fluctuations possible when percolation sites (gravel deposits) have been removed allowing surface water to run more freely and warm up more quickly. There is also concern about source water protection, in lieu of the Walkerton water crisis. Many of us draw our water, directly/indirectly from this river basin. Upstream from the community of Holstein, this would certainly be of interest to citizens “downstream”. The degree to which both of these sites will be able to design and operate gravel pits to prevent an ecological crisis remains to be seen. As there are no surrender fees paid out by the gravel company (a financial incentive to restore said lands), no sunset clauses

guaranteeing a finite end to extraction should market demand and supply dictate otherwise, and haphazard enforcement, one is left with the unsettling feeling that compliance is a long shot while profit making and ecological compromise a bull's eye.

Property Devaluation

Frequently downplayed is our concern about declining property values. There is credible and robust research to establish this as fact (Pembina Institute, 2005; Erickcek, 2006; Hite, 2006; Engbrecht, 2011). This research demonstrates, on average, that properties within a one kilometre radius experience 30% property depreciation with those up to five kilometres away almost a 5% reduction (No one wants to live near a gravel pit unless they're looking for a good real-estate deal, or hope to profit handsomely from speculation because said property has aggregate deposits). Many of us don't fall into these categories. As such, we are immediately put into a position of vulnerability if, in the future, we have to sell our property for a variety of reasons. As the local market has been seriously tainted, it will be difficult if not impossible to get fair price for one's investment. Applicants respond with clichéd phrases such as, "In our experience property devaluation doesn't occur," or more absurd, "Some people like to buy property near a gravel pit," without empirical evidence to support this. Some of my neighbours have chosen to retire here only to discover they will be living and experiencing the daily nuisance of gravel pits. Too, there is speculation about the role some local real-estate agents played in facilitating property sales, when rumours of gravel pit applications were rampant. One immediate neighbour (a long-standing member of our farming community) who built a retirement home on a lot across from us several years ago, will have a panoramic view of the pit, if approved, to the east of us. Many of us were here well before the gravel pits and find ourselves hopelessly vulnerable to its collective activities. Further evidence of declining property values is the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation's (MPAC) recent announcement that properties immediately adjacent to gravel pits will be eligible for an automatic 4% reduction in the property tax assessments. The long-awaited public admission that property adjacent to gravel pits will decrease in value, although woefully under-estimated, is finally at hand.

In case you've been "sleeping," plan a day trip through Holstein and Southgate Township, to see what's unfolding. You can now add aggregate to the list of "desirable economic opportunities" Southgate Township has considered over the past decade—up there with the 1000 hectare mega-dump, bio-sludge, and more recently wind turbines (note: gravel will be used to support wind turbine footings). It's typical of humanity to view land in instrumental ways. Of its various instrumental purposes, what would it take to consider "land" from the standpoint of a public walking/cycling trail, a green space, a wildlife sanctuary, a fishing stream, a park, an outdoor education centre--hey, how about a farm?

In Part III, the last installment of this column I want to explore what we can learn from other communities trying to shape public policy in a way that creates a more balanced consultation process resulting in a more sustainable approach to a necessary industry within our province.

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