

## The View from Southgate (Aggregate) Township

Guest Columnist Doug Karrow

### Part III: What We Can Learn From Other Communities?

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. Prior to considering these communities some important context is necessary.

It is important to understand that the *Aggregate Resources Act* (ARA) is currently undergoing review by an all-party provincial government committee. Over 40 years old, this Act no longer reflects the current state of the aggregate industry within Ontario nor the varied needs of its stakeholders. Its regulatory framework is in desperately out of date. As part of this review, communities across Ontario have been or are in the process of being consulted. Rumours abound regarding proposed changes, i.e., there have been suggestions for minimum setbacks of 1600 metres, increased royalties or levies, sunset clauses, surrender fees, even the faint promise of property compensation for adjacent neighbours. There is some hope here and it may explain why aggregate companies are aggressively pursuing licenses in Southgate Township, as they would rather play by the “old rules” instead of facing “new rules” that might restrict the exclusive privileges they’ve enjoyed. Added to this prospect, is a gradual shift in the balance of power from the aggregate industry to communities. Case in point, several recent large-scale gravel pit applications have been denied in areas to our south, i.e., Melancthon Township, Puslinch, and Mount Nemo. These communities have effectively lobbied the industry, the MNR, and municipal councils, to bring balance to land use issues. This may also explain why aggregate companies are trying to secure gravel pits in Southgate Township. We have fewer people, shallow pockets, and less experience dealing with such industries. The combined effects of such “fast-tracking” and “leap-frogging,” the upshot of these respective events, may partly explain why Southgate Township has become pay dirt.

What can we learn from Melancthon Township, Puslinch, and Mount Nemo? How have these communities organized and effected some influence on the aggregate industry, which until recently has enjoyed almost unbridled regulatory and business privilege?

Beginning with Melancthon Township, a group of people successfully lobbied against a 2300 acre mega-quarry by focusing the issue around *food* and *water*. To our immediate southeast, a large gravel company was buying up farmland in an effort to establish a quarry the size of Toronto. Four farming families led the lobby against the company by refusing to sell their farms to big business. Shortly

afterward, artists, chefs, musicians, lawyers, ranchers, and social media people catalyzed their stance. Such a diverse and eclectic mix broadened the support base, improved its credibility, and allowed to ferment the wide and diverse set of skills any activist group requires to launch an effective lobby. Of course, this also required large sums of money garnered through some very unique fund-raising activities, i.e., *Foodstock*.

In the case of Puslinch, the issue became focused around water use. Its close proximity to Guelph, Hamilton, and Burlington certainly gave the cause the political and economic support it required. Of course, it doesn't hurt either when the medical officer of health claims such a pit may "pose a public health issue."

As for Mount Nemo, a beautiful part of the Niagara Escarpment, the designation of "World Class Biosphere" certainly didn't hurt their cause. Despite this, their issues were as intense, complex, and real as the rest.

Common to each of these success stories are people who are passionate, dedicated, determined, and sincere in their commitment to community and environment. They express a collective will to chart a different future for their community. They also reach out to others who may not agree with that view and compel them to consider an alternative future. Money, resources, time, and people made each of these lobbies successful. Their efforts to think creatively during adversity, hold the line in terms of vision, and compel their politicians to do the same are lessons we could all learn from. Another similarity rests in the character of the proposed sites. Whether it be the enormity of the pit, its location near a water source, or its proximity to a World Class Biosphere, the vulnerability of the proposed site became questionable. Each pit application was unique (perceived or actually) in its proximity to a human community or natural feature. The combined effect of this feature and the political base were enough to quell applicants or convince OMB tribunals such applications were not in the public's best interests.

There is an interesting piece of information that remains to be shared (there always seems to be in this industry). Since 2005 the aggregate industry is *no longer* required to demonstrate demand for gravel. Today gravel companies apply for permits at will, receive approval almost cart blanche, and stockpile the resource. The market has a surplus of gravel and as any basic economist knows that drives price down. Farmers and municipalities certainly aren't being paid what the resource is worth. Ontario's current fee is only 11.5cents/tonne (townships only get a portion of this, hardly enough to cover road maintenance costs). (Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy, 2011). Let us hope that within the ARA Review, requirements to conserve this resource are imposed through increased recycling efforts and demonstration of market demand. This would help protect a valuable resource for future Southgate Township residents.

In closing, this three-part column has attempted to draw attention to unprecedented aggregate development within Southgate Township, something many of us are

unaware of, unless we become a prospective neighbour. True, the township has historically had gravel pits, but not in the number, size, and life-span current applications are demanding; certainly, *this is the first time in our history as a township we have experienced such concentrated gravel pit development*. The combined effect of global forces, the 2008 recession and various political *Action Plans* to stimulate the economy, and Golden Horseshoe growth, have made it extremely difficult for farming communities to prosper. Our insatiable appetite for cheap food without fair compensation to farmers may be indirectly at the root of these other problems. Inevitably, the environment pays for economic collapse. Southgate's unique situation demands we consider the *cumulative effect* of gravel pits—four approved and three pending, within short radius of Holstein. As each gravel pit application is treated separately, little to no consideration is given to the total effect such activities have on our community or environment. For instance, consider truck traffic. When a truck haul route is reviewed within an application, either by the County or Township (depends whose jurisdiction the haul route road falls within), it is considered with limited scope. Rather than examine the combined effect of other and intersecting haul routes, the route under question is treated in relative isolation. The focus of any review and the technical monitoring and regulating systems do not anticipate or are not sophisticated enough to determine the *cumulative* nature of such concentrated development. The same cumulative effect argument applies to noise, public safety, pollution, land use, and property devaluation issues. If one gravel pit/haul route has the potential to decrease your property up to 30% what effect might a second or third pit in your neighbourhood have? Because the ARA only requires pit applications to be considered individually, and local township councils to deal with amendments to Official Plans and Zoning By-laws individually, we miss out on the larger picture—the cumulative effect such development has on the village of Holstein and its rural community. As there is no regulatory mechanism to oversee this, it falls upon local municipalities who still have provincial responsibilities over local planning issues to demand this. As such, citizens near Holstein are requesting Southgate Council consider a moratorium on the approval of present and future gravel pit applications until a broad-based Community Task Force charged with the responsibility of commissioning research on the cumulative social, economic, and environmental effects such concentrated aggregate development has on our community, is demonstrated (see on-line petition: <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/southgate-township-gravel-pits-moratorium-on/> The Password is GRAVEL).

Recall, the second reason for this column was to extend an invitation to other citizens to share “their story.” In doing this, I hoped to broaden the perspective presented here. And to a degree, we have begun to do this. For those of you who have not put pen to paper, I encourage you to do so. Anyone who delves into the topic will quickly discover aggregate to be one of the most complex and contentious resources communities are compelled to deal with.

I would like to thank *Confederate* readership for considering this issue and the editor for devoting valuable space to the topic.

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