



Richmond Hill Naturalists

October 29, 2007

Dear Chair and Council,

**RE: The David Dunlap Observatory
Consideration of Surplus Lands**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I hope that we can continue an open process with the University of Toronto with regard to this important issue. Our organization is over fifty years young. Dr. Helen Hogg, a notable astronomer at the David Dunlap Observatory, University of Toronto, was the Richmond Hill Naturalists' founding member along with Dr. Lillian Langstaff. Both were influential in Richmond Hill's history. Like our predecessors, we work towards protecting nature, enhancing greenspace and educating the public.

The Observatory is the last remaining greenspace in a town that has grown up around this hill of green with its prominent dome. This perceived public parkland has been a part of our community for over 70 years. This reference to the park first appears in Dr. Chant's 1954, Astronomy in the University of Toronto where he wrote about the original 1919 project. Later in 1930, this again is referenced in the provisional statement "while the park will be developed in a scientific way by the Faculty of Forestry." Our connection with the University of Toronto continues to be strong with many of our residents being proud alumni. This connection should not be lost with this council.

Last year, our club hosted an outreach public education forum on dark skies presented by Dr. Tom Bolton from the University of Toronto, David Dunlap Observatory. At this fall's regional meeting, our group introduced 30 other Ontario affiliates to "Dark Skies". Soon this issue will be brought forward to Ontario Nature members across the province. Over time, we expect this issue will be addressed at municipal and regional levels across Southern Ontario. While Richmond Hill lighting conditions are not perfect, Town bylaws which require lighting that does not interfere with astronomical observations have largely stabilized light pollution. DDO astronomers have stated that with the help of filters and sensors that are considerably more powerful than those used in the 1970's, they continue to use the Observatory productively. The need for Dark Skies is not part of the reason for closure as DDO research continues today with ongoing projects with NASA and others.

The Dunlap Observatory property is currently designated as institutional. Property use may be constrained by high aquifer vulnerability, aboriginal, environmental and heritage conditions on these lands. To our knowledge none of these constraints have been analyzed by the Toronto Region Conservation Authority or the provincial government, as these lands may have been considered "public".

It is our understanding that the Faculty of Forestry has had responsibility for the surrounding property and has throughout the years had on going projects related to the Observatory reforestation. This forest is now home to 20-25 deer, birds, plants and animals. Some of the tree species are not common to the area and are found in much warmer Carolinian forests. Has the Faculty of Forestry been consulted during this process?

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Does this council have absolute authority? Have they received a legal opinion that states that the U of T is to benefit? Does this benefit belong rather to the “public,” and would it be in keeping with the original intent of the Jessie Dunlap gift? We believe you ignore your own history with us if these issues are ignored.

As the harsh reality of climate change and the problems of development moves deeper into the public and political realms, we see encouraging evidence that the University of Toronto is rising to these challenges by offering advanced programs in forest conservation and conservation biology. This administration has been active in promoting sustainable practices on U of T campuses. The St. George campus, in particular, has become greener and friendlier to people with the help of native plants and the addition of hundreds of trees.

With such widespread academic, administrative and student support for a healthy environment within the University of Toronto, it is our sincere hope that you will not allow 189 acres in Richmond Hill to be turned into homes or big box stores. By preserving these lands, we will help mitigate climate change and soften the effects of our shared urban heat island.

We are therefore asking that you slow this process down and not declare this property as surplus land. We recommend that you consider offering this property only to a public agency, preferably the Town of Richmond Hill, or the provincial or federal governments. It is our hope that the University of Toronto and the David Dunlap Observatory property, with a new start, will continue to provide a natural island of green in our now urbanized town.

Thank you,

Marianne Yake
President
Richmond Hill Naturalists

Cc: Premiere Dalton McGuinty