

# Open Letter from Cataract Village

By David Kendall

**D**ear Greta Thunberg, You don't know me, but I'd truly love to sense your gentle tread upon my fertile southwestern Ontario soils, your stare upon my green terrain and rustic structures. I am a wee hamlet perched on a bluff overlooking the swift-flowing north branch of the Credit River and its 70-foot cascade. Hence my name: Cataract Village.

I'm 47 houses—each with its own fresh-water well. My two streets and my 200 human inhabitants live shaded by venerable maples, cedars and pines. The Forks of the Credit Provincial Park stretches against my southern flank. The heritage grey stonework and Georgian brick of the Cataract Inn extends its welcome as it has since 1875.

I'm writing to invite you to visit while I'm still alive and unscathed. But you'll have to hurry, 'cause I'm facing my doom.

I'm easy to reach, nestled in the heart of the Greenbelt and just outside the UNESCO Niagara Escarpment world heritage biosphere reserve in the Caledon hills an hour by car northwest of Toronto. (You could hike here—I'm the destination at one end of the 47-km Elora-Cataract Trailway, part of the 28,000-km Trans Canada Trail stretching from sea to sea to sea. And the 750-km Bruce Trail too, treks through the park.)

But I know your time is precious, so I suggest you just drive your battery-charged vehicle up Highway 410 and then north half an hour on Hurontario Street above Brampton. Veer left

onto highway 24 at the traffic light in Caledon Village and after a km or so you'll hit Cataract Road.

At that point, apply the brakes. There's one of those blinking roadside signs reminding you to slow to 40 kph. You're entering a "Community Safety Zone," it reads. A few metres further on my very own sign bids you: "Welcome to Cataract, settled circa 1858". Finally a third sign reading "Quiet Zone. Limit Vehicle Noise" features a drawing of a car and a motorcycle. That's the ironic one—the false promise of a "quiet zone".

- No sign depicting a cavalcade of dump trucks—one every two minutes all day long, six days a week, all year long.

- No image of dynamite explosions twice a week that will vibrate through my houses for the next 50 years.

- No picture of lethal fly-rock skimming up to a 1,000 metres.

- No sketch of toxic dust drifting into windows and lungs.

- Not even a notice warning folks to bring bottled water—my wells are about to go dry.

## 700-Acre Blasting Pit

Bang, boom, roar, oblivion. That's what's a-comin' to my "quiet zone". St Mary's CBM Aggregates, a wholly-owned Ontario division of Brazilian conglomerate Votorantim Cimentos, has applied to develop a 700-acre blasting pit flush up against my northern fringe. They aim to harvest bedrock limestone up to eight storeys deep for the next half century. It's a hard, carbonate deposit from the Silurian period of 420

million years ago that yields high-grade cement. Some 20,000 tons a year will be blown up and carted away where today trees rustle and fields yield their crops.

"PUBLIC NOTICE" shout signboards set inside the fields. "Official Plan Amendment and Zoning By-Law Amendment." In smaller print it reads: "The Town of Caledon has received applications to develop this site for Aggregate Extraction (Class A Pit/ Quarry below water table)."

My heritage core, where hundreds lived and mined rock in the 1880s, loading it onto trains to build the Queen's Park Legislative Building, Casa Loma, and Old City Hall, is about to be ravaged.

To operate, states the company's 6,000-page proposal, they'll need to "dewater" the site. So what will become of the pure, subterranean water that feeds my wells? Instead, a murky current will be excreted onto the trout of the Credit River.

The proposal includes the quarry company's recognition of its legal obligation to rectify citizens' water deficiencies throughout the

years of quarrying. But who knows what that means? A pipeline from a long-distance water source could cost up to \$20 million.

Torontonians experienced the worrisome wildfire smoke advisories of earlier this summer. Well, I'm about to inhale fumes for three seasons of the year for the next half century. Greenbelt goes grey.

And, not to be overly selfish, but my homes risk shedding up to a third of their value. Long speckled with 23 active aggregate pits including a trio of small quarries, Caledon last October imposed a one-year moratorium on all mineral aggregate resource applications. The Interim Control Bylaw (ICBL) aims to allow the town time to evolve a master plan for assessing ongoing and future proposals. In less than two months the thinking will be over, and the new criteria will be in place.

Under the current licensing system, aggregate operations pay Caledon 16 cents per ton of extracted aggregate—a total last year of \$362,000. Caledon Mayor Annette Groves told a public

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▲ Entry to the village of Cataract.

briefing on the ICBL on the evening of June 20 that road repairs inflicted by the heavy aggregate trucks far outpaced that puny revenue.

So how do my residents react to all this? The 200 members of the public in attendance that evening were loudly unanimous in condemning the “Caledon mega-quarry” proposal, prompting the meeting chair to warn “There are OPP officers present for the safety of everyone.”

“I’m not opposed to gravel mining and quarries in Ontario; of course, we all rely on those products for our infrastructure,” says David Sylvester, a Cataract resident and chair of the Forks of the Credit Preservation Group (FOTCPG). “But the fundamental issue we have is the corporation’s decision to apply for a mine right beside the Credit River, beside Forks of Credit Park, adjacent to a historic village and within the GTA. It is a very poor decision environmentally.”

**Nix the Pit**

“Caledon has one of the worst aggregate policies in Ontario,” environment lawyer David Donnelly told a batch of folks attending an FOTCPG fundraiser August 28 at the nearby Goodlot Farmstead Brewery. The village’s best hope is that the moratorium on aggregate applications gets extended another year, he said. By then, with a provincial election looming, the Ford government may be swayed to nix the pit.

The FOTCPG in early August wrote to federal Environment and Climate Minister Steven Guilbeault requesting an environmental assessment of the proposed project. “If approved, this blasting quarry would utterly destroy vast tracts of prime agricultural land, adjacent forests and natural habitat—

forever,” the letter warned.

Not to mention: destroy me. A meeting with an Environment Canada official has been promised.

Local councillors can murmur and say no. They can brandish their new master plan for pits ‘n quarries. At the very least, they can demand a 1,000-metre buffer zone between me and the explosions instead of the proposed 300 metres. But one Municipal Zoning Order from Queen’s Park and Caledon’s fledgling licensing rules will bite the dust. The Niagara Escarpment Commission can shake its conglomerate head. The Credit Valley Conservation folks can beg and squeal. But Ontario is open for business and “GROWTH” has become the mantra of a nation that aims for 100 million citizens by the end of the century. Growth that provides cheaper labour and bigger markets for the CEOs. And for the rest of us an eroded environment and exorbitant housing costs. Actually, our beleaguered Cataract houses will sell cheap.

**Impact on House Prices**

The quarry folks say the first bulldozer is likely five years away. But the “for sale” signs are already up. Former PC and Independent MP Garth Turner, always a real estate mogul, earlier this year bought a house in Cataract just before all those red STOP THE CALEDON MEGA-QUARRY signs began dotting local lawns. He sold the place July 14 “for unrelated reasons” after dropping the price by \$150,000. “There will be an impact on prices if the quarry goes ahead,” he warns.

“It will affect all of us,” says Oliver Allard, 47, a machine operator, father of three, who bought their one-acre property three years ago. “They say location, location, location. Now...” He has Cataract’s

deepest well at 130 feet and hopes his water flow will maintain. But he worries: “The earth is a filter.” Now that filter will be scrapped away.

He has been rebuilding the family home for the last three years and has no intention of selling and fleeing. “I’m rationalizing. It’s all better than the noise and pollution of the suburbs,” he says. “I can’t move my house, so that’s why we fight—a David and Goliath struggle—but I have a feeling it won’t go David’s way.”

He’s right. The slingshots this time are called fly-rock. And it’s the Goliath who will fling the pebbles.

“I’ve heard they’ve been told if you don’t open the quarry, then the (proposed) highway 413 won’t be built,” he adds. “So it’s not about us.”

He’s right again: it’s not about Cataract. Folks residing nowhere near me will benefit from the project. Karen Bennett, partner with Glenn Schnarr & Associates, hired to do the land-use planning for the project, at a June 23 public meeting in Caledon East spoke of “a critical shortage of high-quality limestone in the next 10 years.” She added that the proposed quarry “is one of the few such resources in the GTA.”

Jobs and materials to build roads and homes will be produced for a burgeoning Canadian population. Plus, half a century from now, a tree-dotted park is promised for my northern fringe. “Long term, it’s a net environmental gain,” Ms. Bennett told the gathering.

More like arboreal flowers for a gravesite, the way I see it.

A recent Ontario Chamber of Commerce report titled “The Long Haul” and commissioned by the Ontario Stone and Gravel Association, points out that Ontario infrastructure projects consume 164 million tonnes of aggregate a year. Of that, 25 million tonnes originate

in the GTA and Hamilton area—which includes me. If, instead, those 25 million tonnes had to come from 75 km away, it would add \$169 million in cost and an extra 89,000 metric tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions.

“From highways and transit lines to hospitals, airports and manufacturing processes aggregate underpins infrastructure, economic activity and social well-being in communities across Ontario,” the study concludes.

Well, not so much in this community, let me murmur.

Of course, I must confess, my lament has come late. I’ve stayed silent while my sister village of Belfountain just a km away has long howled against infringements from three sides. A 50-year gravel pit has been licensed on their western fringe. Seventy-five huge houses—even the developer refers to them as “manors”—are planned for 175 acres of forest and farmland hugging the southern edge of the historic hamlet. And a massive sewage plant is being constructed outside the exponentially expanding town of nearby Erin to gush its “treated effluent” into the west branch of the Credit River that flows along Belfountain’s northern flank.

Not nice, none of it. But Belfountain’s woes seem minor compared to the desecration about to be inflicted on me.

So, Greta, you once famously told the world: “I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.” I pray you consider my invitation. I’m kinda desperate, a senior citizen appealing to a young’un for rescue. An aging village about to be swept over a cataract.

Yours quite sincerely.

*David Kendall is a retired Toronto Sun newspaper reporter and the author of the novel Slag.*