

HOSPITAL'S FARM TEAM 2

Politicians sure can move fast when they want to. And last week, apparently every living, breathing Liberal in the National Capital Region desperately wanted to. But that doesn't make their swift agreement to plunk the future Civic hospital campus near the traffic circle on Prince of Wales Drive a particularly wise choice.

Recall that the National Capital Commission, directed by the federal Liberal government to weigh in on the new Civic, undertook a methodical study of 12 potential sites over the summer and fall. The politics of this weren't subtle: the Liberals, and in particular Environment Minister Catherine McKenna, didn't want the new facility across Carling Avenue on Central Experimental Farm land used for soil research. Not coincidentally, the land had previously been approved for the hospital by the former Conservative government.

Criteria were developed, experts were called, consultations were held. Late last month, the NCC recommended offering the hospital land on the western portion of Tunney's Pasture.

The complaints started immediately — including from the hospital itself. The clamour for another site grew. By Friday, a veritable herd of Liberals, from the mayor to MPPs to MPs, to the hitherto low-profile McKenna herself, were gathering with hospital officials in the mayor's office to congratulate each other on choosing, instead, what is known as the Sir John Carling site.

It's on the farm, by the way. And it's a curious choice. In its own assessment of potential sites, published last April, the hospital noted:

- The site is next to a known fault line. (The hospital wanted assurance it could meet postdisaster construction needs. So do we.)
- Traffic along Prince of Wales and the NCC scenic parkway would increase.
- The nearby community would be "impacted" by construction.

The approved location has been modified slightly so it doesn't include heritage buildings such as the Dominion Observatory. Still, the NCC warned that a hospital here would affect the "cultural heritage" of the farm, a National Historic Site, and the Rideau Canal, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It added that the uneven topography "could create design challenges."

The site is also close to the Arboretum, the Ornamental Gardens and the Main Dairy Barn. The bucolic atmosphere of these areas, visited regularly by both locals and tourists, will change.

Which is not to say the site's a lousy choice; it's not. But many Ottawans will be as stunned by this choice as they were by the Tunney's Pasture pitch. They'll question, as we do, the abruptness of it. But that's what happens when politicians decide to fix self-inflicted political firestorms instead of focusing on solving real problems.