

Withering on the vine

Vineland's historic agriculture research station is down to just three researchers

BY JOANNE MCDONALD
THIS WEEK

Government support for local research is crucial for the success of the Greenbelt in Niagara says a director with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.

Crucial, yes. Forthcoming, who knows?

"The premise, is if you want a successful Greenbelt you have to have a successful farm sector within it because it's farming that keeps it green," says Mary Lou Garr of Grimsby.

"One of the critical components is research and the ability to get that research information into the hands of farmers."

"Agriculture has had to adapt over and over again. A key part of it was the research station," Garr said. "That was the real legacy of the experimental station in Vineland."

Garr sat as the agricultural representative last year on the government-appointed Greenbelt Task Force which made recommendations for a greenbelt area.

Every Friday, during six months of day-long sessions, they met around trays of imported fruit to discuss the preservation of farmland in Ontario, said Garr.

It was a bitter irony, further soured by government officials' excuses that the lunches, from out of the country, were contracted to caterers and therefore, out of their hands.

"They can't have it both ways. They can't freeze the land for producing food in the Greenbelt and not buy what we produce."

"The government should buy Ontario produce if they want a Greenbelt. They should buy Ontario fruits and vegetables and milk for their institutions."

Faculty at the former Horticultural Research Institute of Ontario in Vineland Station, now called the Vineland Campus of the Department of Plant Agriculture University of Guelph are planning a 2006 centennial celebration to mark the facility's 100 years of research and service to the local agricultural community.

"The combination of the climate in Niagara as well as the research that was done is a big part of the success of the fruit

*Every Friday, for six months
of day-long sessions, the
Greenbelt Task Force met
around trays of imported fruit
to discuss the preservation of
farmland in Ontario:
Mary Lou Garr, OFA director*

industry and the grape industry."

Garr said that as time has moved on, the focus of the experimental station has changed. "There was a time if you had a strange weed or bug you could take it in to the research station. The transfer of information to the farming community was done through OMAF extension offices."

"That office in Vineland was really busy. People really relied on it." There is an OMAF office on site, the only one in Niagara's entire Greenbelt area, but 1-800 numbers have been set up to help farmers with their concerns.

"The reason it's not being done out of these buildings is because they were turned over to the ORC (Ontario Realty Corporation) and the University of Guelph has to pay astronomical rents to the ORC."



MARY LOU GARR

"The bottom line is dollars," Garr said. "The University of Guelph is feeling the impact of the cost so they moved research back to where they have facilities."

Garr said that from the farm community's perspective it has been basically gutted from the purpose it served in the agricultural community in Niagara.

Garr said a key factor for Greenbelt success is combining a strong link between research and the ability to work with farmers. She said it was the direct link that facilitated the success in the past.

"Vinifera grapes didn't happen by magic," said Garr, adding it took the local research to adapt the European-variety grapes to Niagara's climate and growing conditions. "Where better to do the research than in Niagara?"

Garr said the province must design the future of agriculture based on its past success. Niagara's past success in growing the best grapes and fruit was built on local research. Now, Garr said, the Vineland research station is all but shut down and extension services almost non-existent.

She said provincial and federal levels of government should partner with growers to support and accelerate the kinds of agricultural research that have led to past success.

"The key part of my advice was to keep the agricultural sector economically sustained in order to sustain the greenbelt." Garr said that freezing farmland won't keep it farmed.

"Farmers do that."

She outlined a number of factors crucial to the Greenbelt and to sustaining agriculture in Niagara including: support for local research; provincial infrastructure funding for a Niagara-wide irrigation system; more shelf space in LCBO stores for VQA wines that are made from only Ontario grapes; and opening up the Wine Content Act so that more Niagara grapes are used in wines that are listed as Ontario products.

"They should commit to using less imported bulk wine and more grapes grown here in Ontario."

"We need to look to the future with a vision in order to create a successful greenbelt and not just legislate a boundary. A successful greenbelt would require a financial commitment from Ontario," Garr said.