

Vanishing farmland a concern, Halton Region committee told

By DENNIS SMITH
Metroland Media Group



and it's happening here now and no one knows about it," he said.

Barry Lee was unhappy about the effects of provincial legislation mandating long-term population growth targets for municipalities.

"The GTA (was) picked as Places to Grow," said the Milton councillor. "The issue here is the Province is talking out of both sides of its mouth about Places to Grow and supporting agriculture."

He feels that greenbelt legislation froze all the marginal land and opened up agricultural lands for development.

Walton believes agricultural lands were missed when the greenbelt was created, but feels there's an opportunity to correct the situation.

"We have to finally get through to the Province that in order for agriculture to continue in the area, it has to be profitable and sustainable," she said.

A low profile and an aging workforce were cited as some other challenges. The average age of Halton farmers is 55.5 years, second-highest in the GTA.

"We need to create links to agriculture," said Walton. "Some of us are connected to agriculture, but that's not the case today (with younger residents)."

She noted the GTA's primary agriculture producers made a \$2-billion economic impact in 2006.

"The GTA's advantages include transportation, a diverse and educated workforce, lots of research and development and lots of opportunities for new products to meet the ethnic diversity here," she said, adding the area has great soil.

Walton said agri-business and food-related manufacturing is clustered more in the western GTA, with Halton having the advantage of being closer to the border.

Shrinking farmland is posing a growing challenge for Halton and other Greater Toronto Area (GTA) communities, a Halton committee was told recently.

"The number of farms in the GTA is continuing to decline at a consistent rate," said Margaret Walton of Planscape.

"The trend is to larger farms." The consultant was outlining a study of GTA agriculture to Halton Region's planning and public works committee.

The presentation was made on behalf of the GTA Agricultural Action Committee.

Halton has an ongoing decline of farm acreage and half of its land that's in agricultural production is rented, the study noted.

"The rate of rental land is quite high in the GTA and it's highest in Peel and Halton. The cost of land is prohibitive," said Walton. "A tremendous amount of land is held in the GTA for speculation and it's put into farming to qualify for the agricultural tax rate. That's a good thing."

She said the problem is rental farms have short-term arrangements, so long-term farming like orchard and vegetable growing doesn't occur. Walton added there's a lot of competition for land, with some growing areas considered prime for development.

The consultant said the provincial government needs to get involved.

"We need a policy on how to manage productive farmland," said Walton.

She's encouraged that numerous farms generate more than \$500,000 annually, but added sometimes size is driven by commodity prices.

"The farms get bigger because prices are stagnating and they need to produce more," said Walton.

Oakville Councillor Allan Elgar expressed concern about foreign ownership of local farmland and potential outsourcing of food products to other countries.

"It's a huge issue in other countries

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