

Agriculture brought back into light after decline

By Melanie Hennessey
Special to the IFP

The agricultural sector is a major driver of Halton Region's economy — to the tune of \$450 million-plus annually — and is experiencing a decline that needs to be stopped.

This was among the key messages delivered last Wednesday evening by Margaret Walton, the Region's consultant who recently prepared the Halton Rural Agricultural Strategy background report.

Walton presented the findings of the study to a crowd of about 35 residents, including many local farmers and councillors, at a public information centre at the Halton Region Museum.

The lengthy document revealed several trends in the local farming industry. They include:

- A decline in the number of farms (from 1,035 in 1976 to 469 in 2011) and a 45,000-acre decrease in farmland during the same period
- Pressures from urban growth
- A decrease in the livestock sector
- Pessimism about the future

amongst farmers

- An \$8-million-plus decline in gross farm receipts between 2006 and 2011

There's also a "disconnect" between rural and urban residents, with farmers facing additional challenges and stress while operating near an urban population.

While agriculture may not always be viewed as a major economic driver in an urban-focused world, Walton said that's not true.

"Rapid urbanization has really tended to obscure the important role of the long-established rural and agricultural community in maintaining a balanced economy," she said. "When we move forward with this strategy, we don't want to just focus on protecting land; we want to create circumstances for healthy, prosperous businesses."

Walton studied the region's agricultural data gathered in the most recent census, conducted in 2011, and found that its collective gross farm receipts benefitted the local economy with \$453 million in direct and indirect/induced impacts. Halton's agricultural sector also supported 2,942

jobs and generated \$208 million in gross domestic product.

While the Region has a long-standing commitment to promoting agricultural and rural sustainability, more action is needed, including planning policy that goes beyond farmland protection, said Walton.

"You have to create the circumstances for that land to be used profitably," she said. "But the Region can't do everything. It's constrained by provincial policy and provincial rules. During the next review of the Official Plan and provincial plans, hopefully there'll be some innovative planning policy."

The study concluded the Region has much to offer the agricultural sector, including a quality land base, good climate and water, proximity to market and support from the Region.

The rural economy also consists of businesses that have set up shop in local hamlets. While it's believed there are many home-based businesses, a lack of data made it difficult to conclude the economic impact — a gap that will be addressed going forward.

Those in attendance at the meeting

went on to suggest other aspects that should be looked at or considered, such as the creation of small food processing plants in the rural hamlets that could be used by local farmers and the inclusion of community kitchens in potential food hubs.

Mike Van Dongen said he feels there's a contradiction between what the Region is aspiring to in helping farmers and the current policies that hinder that help.

Walton concurred, noting there's a disconnect that needs to be addressed. "I think there are good intentions," she said. "Hopefully, as we move the strategy through, we can make changes."

Burlington Councillor John Taylor said the strategy needs to consider factory farming as an opportunity to feed the world's ever-growing population.

"We're getting two billion more people in the world by 2050. We need a 55 per cent increase in food production or a lot of people are going to starve to death," he said.

Walton contended the strategy is "not going to solve the world's food problems."



Margaret Walton, Halton Region's consultant, presents the Halton Rural Agricultural Strategy background report on Dec. 9.

Photo by Melanie Hennessey

"But we can be a leader," replied Taylor.

The study is a precursor to the creation of the Rural Agricultural Strategy, which will aim to build a prosperous and sustainable local agricultural system.

The Region will be accepting comments from the public on the background report, available at www.halton.ca, until Jan. 22.