

OPINIONS DIFFER AMONG FARMERS, COUNCILLORS

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residents and councillors, with a groundswell of opposition to agricultural land being redesignated for growth.

Among those against the notion is citizens' coalition Stop Sprawl Halton, which has supporters throughout the region who say they're standing up "for preserving farmland, watersheds, air quality and vibrant neighbourhoods within existing boundaries."

"It's unconscionable to be paving 5,200 acres," said Oakvillegreen president Karen Brock, who's also part of the Stop Sprawl Halton movement. "We're in favour of no urban boundary expansion, hard stop. We're not saying don't grow - we know the region has to grow. But it's a question of how you're going to grow and being wise."

The group contends that Halton's growth can be accommodated on the thousands of acres that have already been approved for development, and that planners should focus more on increasing

density within the current urban boundary.

"The decision to put an end to, or power forward with urban sprawl in Halton, will serve as a pivotal example of how serious our leaders are about the climate emergency they unanimously declared," said BurlingtonGreen executive director Amy Schnurr, a supporter of the Stop Sprawl Halton efforts.

For Campbellville poultry farmer John Opsteen, protecting prime agricultural land in the growth planning process is paramount.

"I think we have to look at good farmland as a scarce resource. And once it's gone, we've lost that resource forever," he said. "It doesn't matter to me who owns it or if it's even being farmed now or rented out — it's more (about) the potential. But if it's paved over, it's done. That's where my concern is."

But the sentiment isn't shared by all farming families in Halton.

Marg Saliba co-owns a farm on the Eighth Line of Milton with her sisters

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- John Opsteen

now that their parents have passed away. She supports the preferred growth concept and expressed concern that current aging farmers will have nobody willing to take over when they retire due to high equipment costs, the 24/7 demands of a farm, uncertainty around income and more.

"In my humble opinion, if you save the farmland, it will be for naught in the future when there are no more farmers. The land will stay vacant," she said in a letter she recently penned to councillors.

"Milton needs these employment lands to ensure employment for its citizens. Consider the employment opportunities, the salaries and benefits one would get from industry versus farming."

There are also differing opinions on the proposed growth plan around the council table and even at Queen's Park.

Halton Hills councillor Jane Fogal and Milton councillor Colin Best — who've spoken out against urban sprawl — recently joined Ontario Green Party leader Mike Schreiner in a virtual press conference, where he called on Halton to say no to the preferred growth concept and

protect farmland.

"Urban sprawl is not the solution to the housing crisis," said Schreiner. "It is expensive, terrible for the environment, and destroys farmlands and wetlands."

But others, like Halton Hills councillor Clark Somerville, have voiced support for expanding urban boundaries. He contends that Halton Hills doesn't have enough employment land to support new job opportunities, and space will be needed in the future for essentials like a new Georgetown hospital.

"You can have sustainable development and an expansion to the urban boundary at the same time," he noted.

In a statement to Metroland Media, Halton planning staff said a land needs assessment identified a shortfall of space in the existing urban areas for 15,000 ground-related housing units, such as single and semi-detached homes, and 24,000 jobs.

While accommodating these homes and jobs in the existing urban areas was considered, staff said it would result in "a high

proportion of apartment/condominium units that would not meet the need for a diverse range and mix of housing options for Halton residents at all stages of life, household sizes and incomes, as directed by the province."

"It would also not be able to accommodate jobs requiring industrial-type buildings, like high-tech manufacturing," staff noted in the statement.

While regional council was originally set to vote on the matter Feb. 9, the decision has been rescheduled to a future meeting, with the February session now serving as a council workshop.

- With files from Mansoor Tanweer

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: With much attention focusing on Halton's growth plan in recent weeks, we wanted to take a closer look at how residents and politicians feel before the significant decision is made.



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