

# Rural study demonstrates need to protect farmland

By DEBORAH QUAILE

Nothing is easy for farmers these days, especially when it comes to maintaining good farmland.

Two recent information sessions, presented by the Town of Halton Hills regarding the Discussion Paper for the Halton Hills Rural Area Study, brought the farmers' reality into the light.

The paper raises a number of issues that need to be resolved within the context of the new Official Plan. An important one focusses on the role and function of the rural area in Halton Hills, which is under stress (particularly the agricultural area).

Meridian Planning Consultants, who have undertaken the review, believe rural areas play a valuable role in the health of any area since they produce food, contribute to biodiversity, provide open space and recreational opportunities, and serve as "effective separators between urban areas, thereby helping to create distinct and identifiable communities."

Nick McDonald, partner in Meridian, said their view is that the agricultural sector of the economy of the Town is presently healthy, but as land values and taxes increase, farms are becoming more expensive to operate.

As well, new generations of farmers are reluctant to farm in the more competitive environment of

the Town. Meridian notes good agricultural land must be preserved as a resource, and operations that take good land out of agricultural use should not be permitted.

Tracey Atkinson, also of Meridian, told the crowd about one-third of the farms of Halton Hills have been lost over the last 30 years.

"The majority of Halton Hills is Class 1, prime soil. Farmers benefit from high heat units and grow a good variety of crops," she said.

Halton Hills, she noted, receives an average of \$1308/acre in gate sales, which is approximately double that of many other farmers in Ontario. GTA farmers receive \$770/acre, the Region of Halton \$1184/acre, and across the province the average is only \$560/acre.

Much of the Limehouse evening's discussion regarded the rural clusters, of which there are 14.

Clusters were identified with a minimum of six residential uses and one non-residential use.

Of the spots identified (Crewson's Corners, Ballinafad, Terra Cotta, Hornby, Silvercreek, Bannockburn, Limehouse, Henderson's Corners, North Speyside, Speyside, Ashgrove, South Norval, Mansewood, and St. Stephen's) there was thought that some of the clusters could accommodate some development.

Mr. McDonald said they were looking to "create new land for building, and develop for non-residential uses, for example a convenience store, or small scale industrial use. We looked at the size of each cluster to see if it functions as a community, looked at the boundaries, and we want to make sure the line is drawn hard and fast."

Meridian believes there is enough urban land within Hornby, which was the most notable area under examination, to satisfy needs for the next 20 years. There are many options for this cluster and this could be a special study area for the future to see how it should be developed.

"The Region of Halton is clear that they do not support development north of Steeles Avenue now."

Some clusters, such as Mansewood, St. Stephen's, and possibly Speyside and North Speyside, could have their designation deleted. Meridian's report also recommends the following designations be included in the Official Plan: Escarpment Rural Area; Escarpment Natural Area; Escarpment Protection Area; Mineral Aggregate Resource Area;

Environmentally Sensitive Area; Greenlands A; Greenlands B; Rural Cluster; Rural, and Agricultural.

The results are, however, only part of a discussion paper and no decisions have been made. Community input is welcomed into the process.

For more complete information visit the Town of Halton Hills website [www.town.halton-hills.on.ca/civic/planning/Official%20Plan%20Review.asp](http://www.town.halton-hills.on.ca/civic/planning/Official%20Plan%20Review.asp) and click on "Discussion Paper" for the Halton Hills Rural Area Study.

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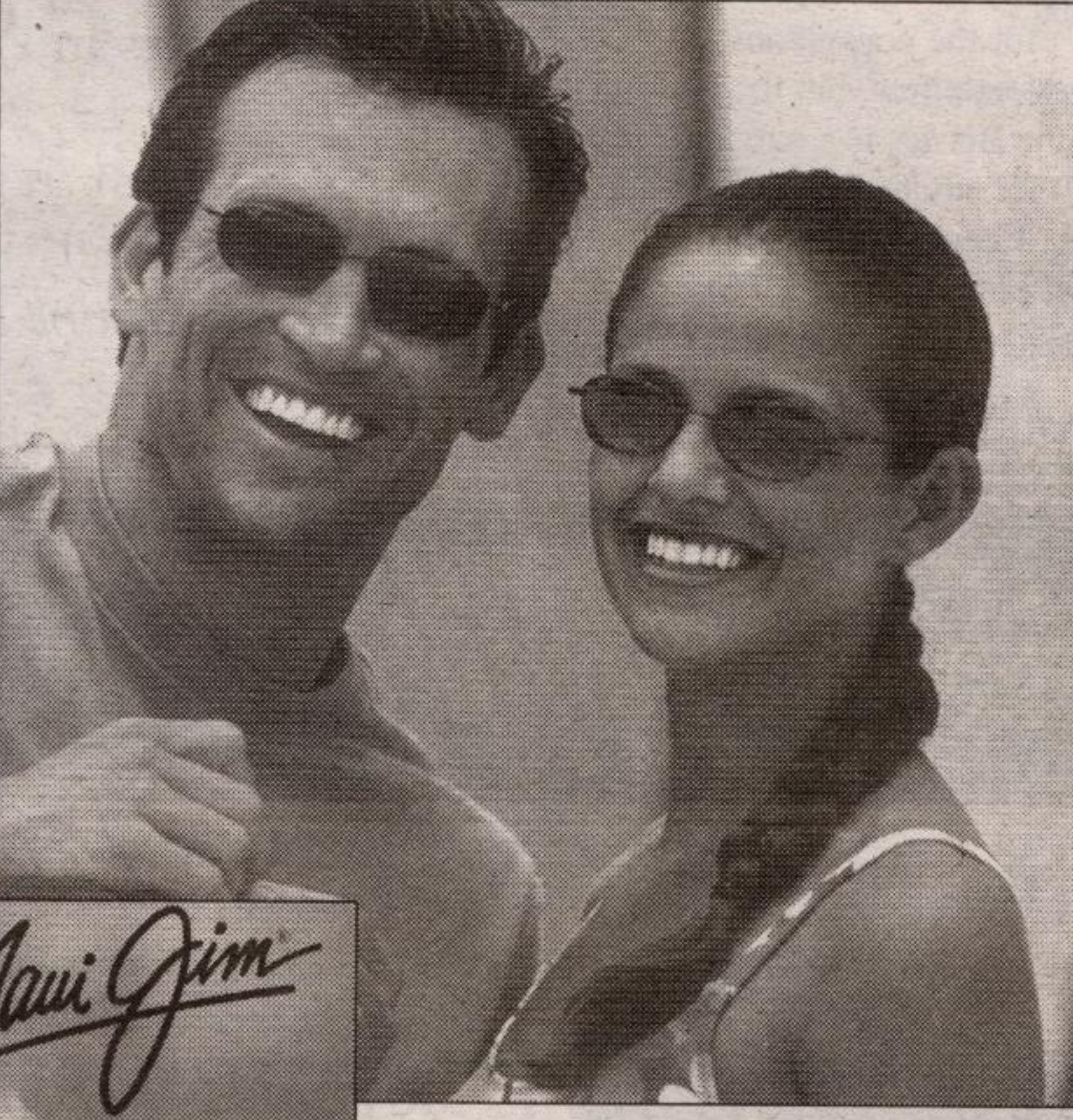
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