

Connecting rural Halton online

By DONNA DANIELLI

The Region of Halton often has a lot to say to its citizens and it's important that its messages reach all corners of Halton.

The Region's new initiative, *Connecting Halton*, looks at creating and implementing an infrastructure involving the use of information and communication technologies in new and innovative ways.

This vision of more intricately connected communities could have a significant impact on the rural community, which according to *Connecting Halton's* proposals makes up approximately 76 per cent of Halton.

Many times The Region has reiterated its commitment to the rural community, and in a draft of its new Strategic Plan states one of Halton's primary goals is "To protect rural lands and promote the continued viability of agriculture in Halton."

The new technologies and smart services being examined by *Connecting Halton* will address what is seen as a significant gap in services to the rural community.

At present time, all households in Halton have the availability to dial-up-access to the Internet if desired, and public portals to the Internet are

available at all public libraries, Human Resource Development Centres and the Halton Region Business Development Centre.

Halton is also in the process of applying for funding to establish more public access portals in such venues as youth centres, seniors centres, and housing facilities for the physically disabled.

A pressing concern for rural Halton, however, is the lack of availability of services or community applications on the Internet, as well as limited access to the high speed access services found in the more urban areas of Halton. *Connecting Halton* calls for these issues to be addressed in order for rural Halton to retain a viable economy.

A dedicated group of stakeholders attended eight different sessions on the *Connecting Halton* project, and their recommendations were brought forward to an Integration Group consisting of key members from each of the stakeholders groups.

After reviewing all project possibilities to connect Halton's infrastructure, The Integration Group prioritized the projects based on the likelihood they could be developed and the impact they would have on the community. These priorities were

then presented to the public in a series of workshops held throughout The Region.

The first priority identified was the establishment of an e-commerce system. This system would create a network within Halton to market and sell farm products to food service companies, restaurants, institutions and the general public. In this way, locally produced farm products could be promoted to anyone in the food services industry.

A professional services directory and resources centre was found to be a second priority. This centralized

database would have directories of all agricultural professionals and standard information to help farmers. It would provide a quick link to websites about repair services, accounting, legal, marketing resources and government links and will fill in the gap in the historical support system farmers have used in the wake of the growth of more non-farm operations in Halton.

The third priority, as defined by *Connecting Halton*, speaks to the need to educate the public about agriculture in today's society; to show young people a future in agriculture and to

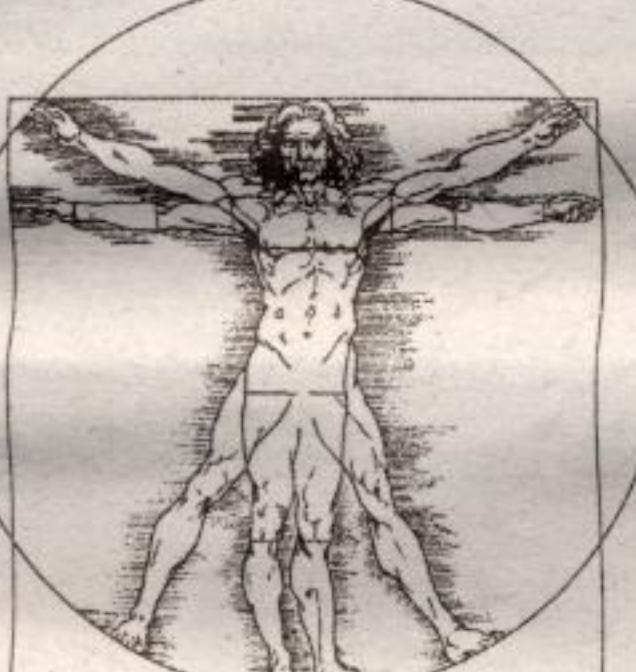
inform consumers of the impact of local purchasing.

The fourth priority listed by *Connecting Halton* is the need to also educate farmers. This priority would see the creation of a succession plan for future farmers as well as making training and education opportunities available in a central location.

"Although we've had small crowds at the public workshops, they've been enthusiastic crowds," says Ralph Blauel, Director of Technology Services for the Region

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