

# Regional planner studies agricultural co-ops in Brazil

By SARAH O'ROURKE

As part of an executive development program designed for individuals demonstrating leadership potential and commitment to agri-business and rural development, Helma Geerts, Senior Planner for the Regional Municipality of Halton, was given the extraordinary opportunity to study Brazilian agriculture firsthand. Thanks to the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program (AALP), Geerts found herself traveling to São Paulo and through the southern state of Paraná this past February.

**"I WAS VERY SURPRISED AT THE SOPHISTICATION OF AGRICULTURE IN BRAZIL,"**

Geerts considers the southern regions she explored to be examples of highly developed agriculture. "I was very surprised at the sophistication of agriculture in Brazil," said Geerts. "It's a very ambitious, global and forward-looking agricultural industry. You often think of Brazil as a developing country, but we actually saw it as a land with tremendous opportunity." Geerts cited the low cost of labour, huge domestic market, high global quality standards, and stability of the agricultural co-operatives as some of Brazil's most promising features.

The highlight of Geerts' trip was her tour of the co-ops, which she referred to as "the heart and soul of agricultural communities in Brazil." According to Geerts, "The backbone of Brazilian agriculture is in the agricultural co-operatives which are all-encompassing, requiring full commitment from members to purchase all inputs and sell all goods through the co-op."

The co-ops can also be credited with supplying transportation, schooling, and social programs—services which are here

commonly provided by the government. "We were impressed with the priority co-operatives place on improving the quality of life for its members and, in turn, the strong sense of loyalty of members," commented Geerts.

Geerts observed many significant differences between agriculture in Brazil and agriculture in Canada. "The farms in Canada tend to operate on a much more independent basis. In Brazil the land is based on its productive value, and here our farmland is based on its speculative value. Demographics in Brazil are also quite different than in Canada. There are a lot more young people in management and young farmers willing to take risks," said Geerts. While the fear of low returns often discourages new, young farmers from entering Canadian agriculture, co-operatives in Brazil are a huge draw because they help farmers reduce the cost of inputs and obtain a higher price for their products.

Although incentives such as increased social support, higher salaries, and a pre-

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ferred tax rate make co-operatives an appealing option for many Brazilian farmers, the agricultural industry in Brazil continues to face major obstacles. "The prime interest rate is 18.7% and loans are available at an interest rate of 28%," Geerts stressed. With such challenges in mind, Geerts suggested that "Canada's advantages relative to Brazil include: better transportation infrastructure, relatively lower energy costs, and

significantly lower interest rates."

So what lessons did Geerts learn from her trip to Brazil? "Halton's strength in agriculture is not necessarily in production agriculture (it is not the low-cost producer in the global marketplace), but rather in high value niche products that cater to the local population."

Helma Geerts is a Senior Planner for Planning and Transportation Services at the Regional Municipality of Halton. She can be reached at (905) 825-6000 ext. 7209 or GeertsH@region.halton.on.ca.

Recruitment for the next AALP class is currently in progress. Those interested should contact the AALP office at (519) 826-4204 or info@ruralleadership.ca. For more information, visit their website at www.aalp.on.ca.



Helma Geerts pictured in front of the Iguazu Falls, in Brazil

PHOTOS SUBMITTED BY HELMA GEERTS

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## Easter Parade

Born at 7.0 a.m. on Easter Sunday, this little filly is one hour old and just getting to her feet. Pictured with her mum, Cinder, at Whinney Acres in Moffat, the foal is doing well and looks like she's going to be a bay with a white blaze.

PHOTO SUBMITTED BY MARION SHANNON