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Challenges, opportunities await farmers living next to suburbia, audience told

LISA TALLYN
Staff Writer

'Farming isn't primary production anymore, farming is a huge range of activities in order to have a product ready for the consumer.'

—Elbert van Donkersgoed executive director GTAAC

There are both challenges and opportunities for farmers living next door to urban areas, said Elbert van Donkersgoed, Executive Director of the Greater Toronto Area Agricultural Committee, at last Thursday's agricultural community meeting.

Van Donkersgoed, was the guest speaker at the meeting, held at Pineview Public School, that drew about 45 rural residents.

He said the challenges facing farmers in our area include complaints from non-farm residents about farm practices, the lack of affordable land to buy, shortages of rental land, loss of local farm services, loss of the farm community, problems with moving equipment on congested roads and trespassers.

But on the flip side, the pluses for farmers living near suburbia include the fact value of production per acre is higher, average farm sizes are smaller and more diverse, there is more opportunity for direct sales, farm shops and pick-your-own operations, close proximity to a growing number of farmers' markets, there is a large population with a growing interest in local food, and more opportunities for agri-tourism and culinary tourism.

Van Donkersgoed said according to a poll taken last year in Ontario 45 per cent of people surveyed said they always or usually buy locally grown food when it's available, and 38 per cent said they sometimes do.

He stressed the key there is the phrase, "when it's available."

He said today, big box stores dominate the food system, but initiatives supporting local agriculture such as farm markets and pick-your-own farms are popping up around the GTA.

van Dokersgoed said there is a "pent-up demand" for more farmers'

A different kind of wholesale and logistics options for locally grown food is definitely needed, he said.

That's the case already in the United Kingdom, he explained, as the big box stores there are creating regional procurement centres to access locally grown food.

"We're not anywhere near that phase yet," he said.

So, he said, farmers are going to have to build alternatives to get into the local food market and suggested establishing specialty shops for locally grown food.

He said many farmers aren't interested in selling their products at farmers' markets or running pick-your-own farms, but are interested in producing locally grown food but "they need someone else to move it to the consumer."


He said the Ontario Food Terminal, was designed for being in the middle of the food system, but over 90 per cent of the product that goes through there is imported and it only "works so-so for locally grown food."

As a result, he said, there is not "the right kind of services to really build a strong local food sector in the GTA."

Also at the meeting, Halton Hills Wards 3/4 Regional Councillor Jane Fogal suggested that thought be given to the idea of setting up a year-round farmers' market in Georgetown and an audience member heartily agreed with her.

The audience heard from several Town staff members about issues pertaining to agriculture and the rural area including Public Works Manager Ted Drewlo who said progress is being made in paving rural roads and next year there will be less than 50 miles of gravel roads within Halton Hills.

(Lisa Tallyn can be reached at tallyn@independentfreepress.com)



**Happy 90th Birthday
Bertha Scott**

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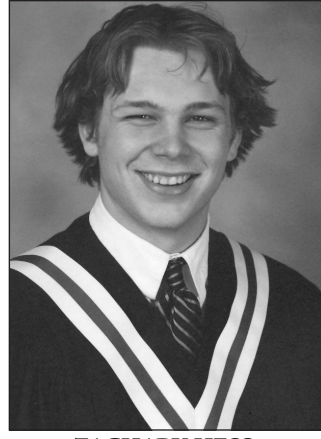
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