

Agriculture means big business, jobs for GTA

By IRENE GENTLE
The Champion

Agriculture is a \$1.3 billion dollar industry that employs 34,700 people in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), a recent report has stated.

And that could pave the way toward a new respect for the industry, said Halton Chair Joyce Savoline.

"I'm thrilled," she said. "I think the agricultural community has been the GTA's best kept secret."

The GTA Agricultural Impact Study was released by the Federations of Agriculture in Halton, York, Peel and Durham.

Mayor Gord Krantz also applauded the report, which announced that 4,621 GTA farms produced more than \$585 million in farm receipts in 1996, while another \$743 million was generated by the industry through indirect sales.

"I wholeheartedly endorse what they are doing," said Mr. Krantz.

Overall, the report found GTA farms to be more productive than those in other areas in Canada.

"When you compare us to the island of Prince Edward Island, we outyield them," said Peter Lambrick, president of the Halton Federation of Agriculture. "We outproduce them, and that's a province."

Part of that is attributable to the lands themselves, which were identified as being among only 5 per cent in Canada considered to be prime.

But 150,000 acres of farm land have been wiped out between 1976 and 1996, the report stated.

"Urban growth will have to happen, but it doesn't have to happen on our best agricultural lands. Does it all need to be preserved? I don't know. I question that. But a good portion of it should."

GORD KRANTZ



And more has been tagged for urban use in the future. Not all farm land can be preserved, warned Mr. Krantz. Building on lands that aren't prime is a way to support growth without posing too great a threat to agriculture, he said. "Urban growth will have to happen, but it doesn't have to happen on our best agricultural lands," he said. "Does it all need to be preserved? I don't know. I question that. But a good portion of it

should."

But agricultural lands are a continuing source of income for the region, argued Mr. Lambrick, and that may not be the case once the land is developed.

"Once you pave it over, some lucky fellow makes a killing," he said. "After that, it's downhill."

He hoped the report will make planning departments reexamine their policies.

Good planning strives to strike a balance between growth and the preservation of farm lands, said Ms Savoline.

"What has to be recognized is that growth can't be stopped," she said. "You could not be defensible legally if you tried to stop growth dead in its tracks."

And Halton is on the right track, said Mr. Lambrick.

"Of the official plans across (the GTA) I think it's one of the strongest," he said. "There is some sense of responsibility within our official plan."

Tacking growth onto the fringe of existing urban areas instead of delving ad hoc into agricultural lands is one way to promote manageable, defensible growth, said Ms Savoline.

And Milton seems to have chosen the same route, said Mr. Lambrick.

"We've seen the plan for Milton," he said. "They're working from the centre out."

That is unlikely to change, assured Mr. Krantz.

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