

# Looking for municipal solutions to farming problems

Farmers know there are no quick and easy solutions to agriculture's financial woes. Fixing what currently ails agriculture is going to require input and co-operation from a multitude of sources, and the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) is prepared to work to a successful conclusion.

Agriculture has historic links to municipal governments, and we believe those links could yield some answers to curing the industry's issues. Last year, as an example, Ontario farmers paid \$101 million in municipal taxes, and since 1998 these taxes paid by farmers have risen about \$2 million per year.

The OFA is aware that municipal taxes are essential to keeping modern infrastructures functional. Without roads and bridges, farmers and those who service them with everything from livestock feed to farm equipment and veterinary services couldn't get their jobs done. But there are areas where efficiencies could be achieved and costs to farmers reduced.

We're asking that municipalities take a look at some of the regulatory bylaws that have been enacted, resulting in increased operating costs for farmers. Some municipalities have approved nutrient management regulations to deal with local situations, ignoring the focus of the provincial laws and creating barriers to competitiveness for their own farmers. For years, farmers have been encouraged to find niche markets and do more value-added production on their farms. In some areas, these efforts have been met with local laws and new taxes that defeat what the farmers are attempting to do — finding new ways of generating income for

agriculture.

Farmers made up the majority on municipal councils in earlier times, but amalgamations and shifting demographics have resulted in local councils dominated by non-farm councillors.

This has resulted in councils lacking knowledge and understanding of the issues of agriculture. To partially overcome this difficulty, some areas of the province have established Agriculture Advisory Committees to provide an operating link between urban-dominated councils and the farming sector.

The OFA wants to see agriculture maintain and expand its position in rural Ontario — a position that over the years has seen farming serve as an engine to drive the rural economy. Economic

Impact Studies, sponsored by local federations of agriculture in recent years, provide ample proof of the value of farming to the rural Ontario economic picture.

The results provided by these studies have made it clear to all levels of government that agriculture makes an important contribution, information that municipal councils need to remember as they develop plans for future economic development. The possibilities are only limited by the imaginations of those involved — everything from ethanol plant development to the promotion of deer and elk marketing as a tourism attraction.

As Ontario's non-farm rural population expands, there's an increased need to expand agricultural awareness programs, even in rural Ontario. Municipal councils have regular lines of communication with their residents, and the OFA would welcome the opportunity to work with municipalities to help deliver agriculture's message to society.

*Ron Bonnett is president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.*

## OFA Ron Bonnett Commentary

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