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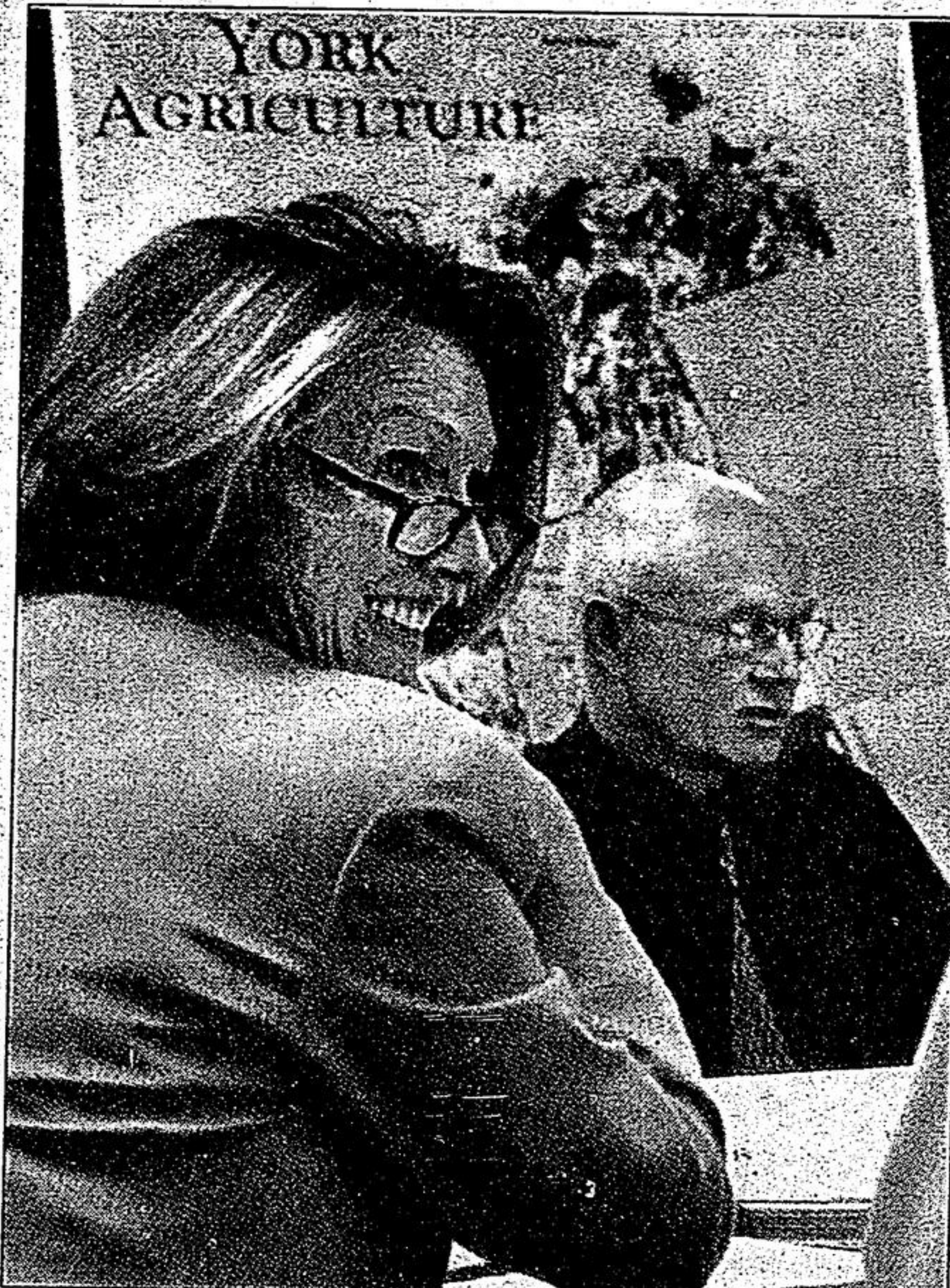
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## Farmland in trouble, minister told

BY JOAN RANSBERRY  
Staff Writer



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Ontario Agriculture Minister Helen Johns listens to area farmers during a conference in Stouffville with representatives from several levels of government and the agricultural community. That's Don Fieldhouse of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture in the background.

Urban growth is marching north and will soon gobble York Region's remaining farmland, Ontario Minister of Agriculture and Food Helen Johns was told during a visit to the region on Wednesday.

"We're spinning our wheels. In a few short years, all the farmland (176,000 acres) will be gone and we'll be the sadder for it. It will never be recovered," said Gary Johnson of Aurora.

Politicians from three levels of government, along with representatives of agricultural groups, joined York farmers in a three-hour brainstorming session to discuss ways for government to work collaboratively with farmers.

Mrs. Johns pointed out her job is to protect the vitality of the agriculture industry, including the family farm. She stressed the importance of finding ways to preserve the agricultural sector's important economic activity in York Region.

Since total farm revenue in York Region is estimated to be \$178.6 million, much work is needed to be done, farmers pointed out.

The meeting, chaired by Tourism Minister and Oak Ridges MPP Frank Klees, was held in Whitchurch-Stouffville's municipal office.

One of the saddest things about farming in York Region is the poor income, said John Holtrop, 58, of Georgina. "So many farmers in my generation have not been profitable," said Mr. Holtrop. And that's turning the next generation off agriculture as a career and lifestyle.

The average York Region farmer is older than 55, stressed Gormley's John Doner. Mrs. Johns said she's determined to make agriculture such a "profit-making business" that young people will want to work at it full-time. Farmers shouldn't have to take a second job or send their spouses out to work in order to survive, she said.

Kettleby chicken farmer Hugh Mitchell said although he's from a fifth-generation farm family, it's doubtful any of his four children will follow in his footsteps.

"We have to provide tax incentives, safety nets and other ways to attract young people to farming," said Mrs. Johns, adding she's targeting the 35-and-younger age group.

One of the ways to discourage farmers from selling their land to developers is to make sure the next generation makes enough money establish private pension funds, the farmers stressed. If they have security for their senior years, they won't have to sell, Mrs. Johns was told.

In the last five years, York Region has lost 16 per cent of its farms and is now down to 1,020, reported Don Eastwood of the York Region Agriculture Liaison Group.

Mr. Eastwood also requested a comprehensive agriculture policy to address the importance of farmland and have it identify the areas to be preserved.

The provincial government is quite aware of the need to address urban growth, stressed Mrs. Johns.

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