

Halton Region

Rural Agricultural Strategy



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Halton Rural Agricultural Strategy

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Background

Halton Region has always been committed to sustaining a prosperous and progressive agricultural and rural community. Public consultation sessions over time have confirmed this as an ongoing priority for Regional residents. A key goal in **The Citizen's Priorities, 2011-2014 Action Plan**, adopted during the previous term of Council and endorsed by the current Regional Council, is *"to preserve for current and future generations a landscape that is rich, diverse, balanced, productive and sustainable and a society that is economically strong, equitable and caring"*¹. To achieve this goal, the Region acknowledged that it must *"plan for communities where urban sprawl is minimized, where infrastructure is maximized where natural heritage is protected and natural spaces and farmland are preserved."*²

Not only is agriculture and a healthy rural area an integral part of the Regional landscape, agriculture contributes to the Regional economy. In 2011, Gross Farm Receipts generated in Halton resulted in an economic impact of \$453 million in the Regional economy³.

Strong rural businesses anchor healthy rural communities. Productive agricultural operations provide inputs to the large agri-food sector that is based in the Golden Horseshoe. Employment in the rural area provides alternative, locally based opportunities to live and work in the Region. As the demand for a range of local produce grows, having a strong productive agricultural sector enhances the attractiveness of Halton as a place to live.

Throughout its history, the Region has implemented policies designed to protect and preserve farmland and support the agricultural community. While these policies may be supportive, they have not prevented ongoing decline in the rural sector. Research conducted by the Region confirms that there is uncertainty about the future in the rural area⁴. Although there continues to be an established, experienced agricultural sector in Halton and there is evidence of an evolving production profile focused on high value, lower acreage operations (nursery, greenhouse, mushroom, fruit, equine); there are significant negative trends which are creating uncertainty about the future of farming in Halton. Key trends of concern include:

- Ongoing continuous decline in the amount of land under agricultural production;

¹ Halton Region, **The Citizen's Priorities 2011-2014 Action Plan**. Pg. 6.

² Ibid., pg 6.

³ Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance, **Agriculture and Agri-Food Profile for the Golden Horseshoe**, October, 2014.

⁴ This background work conducted in support of the strategy is summarized in the **Halton Region Rural Agricultural Strategy Background Report** (Background Report) dated April 2016 and available at www.haltonregion.ca.

- An aging Regional farm population;
- A drop in the value of Regional gross farm receipts between 2006 and 2011;
- Conflicts between rural and non-rural land uses particularly in areas close to urban and residential development;
- Uncertainty regarding the future of the prime agricultural area that lies outside of the Greenbelt and current urban boundaries;
- High land prices which discourage the establishment of new agricultural operations, complicate inter-generational transfers and drive up the cost of doing business;
- A complex, multi layered, regulatory regime;
- Decline in the heavily regulated livestock sector particularly in proximity to non-farm development;
- Limited access to and competition for rental land for farming complicated by uncertainty related to short term or non-existent leases and increasing controls on how land can be used;
- High operating costs due to high land prices and limited access to agricultural services;
- Negative impacts related to urban development including conflicts between agricultural and non-agricultural land uses, lack of rural based infrastructure, congestion, inappropriate urban service standards in rural areas, rising land prices and lack of an agricultural community;
- Reduced opportunity for cooperation amongst farmers due to declining numbers;
- Shortage of knowledgeable, experienced agricultural workers;
- Public perception of rural land as recreational land;
- Increased restrictions on farming related to the management of the natural heritage system;
- Lack of public understanding about farm practices and rural living;
- Rising stress related to the challenge of farming in an urbanizing area;
- Conflicts between recreational and agricultural uses in the rural area;
- Increased property taxes and capital gains due to high land prices; and
- Lack of agricultural services and deteriorating on-farm infrastructure.

Combined these trends are resulting in a pervasive pessimism amongst farmers about the future of agriculture in Halton. This pessimism is of concern given that farmers tend to plan in generations, not years. If farmers are uncertain about the future for agriculture in Halton, they may quit farming or relocate elsewhere.

Outside of the agricultural area, the balance of the Halton rural community is comprised of eight designated rural hamlets and seven rural clusters. These communities should be an integral part of the rural community. Not only should they function as service centers for the rural area, they should strengthen the social fabric of the rural communities. However, recent research conducted by the Region indicates that that these functions have largely been lost. The identified trends of concern about the rural hamlets and clusters include:

- Lack of formal structure to support implementation of programs;
- Shortage of data about hamlets and clusters which makes assessment of opportunities difficult;
- Limited services;
- Aging demographics;
- Lack of diversity;
- Difficulties in capitalizing on opportunities related to a creative, knowledge based rural economy;
- Disconnect between residents of hamlets, settlements and agricultural communities;
- Failure to capitalize on economic opportunities associated with agriculture and the agri-food system;
- Lack of connection between rural and urban residents.

The Region is aware of the issues impacting the rural area and works on a continuous basis to address them. In 2014, the Region's Official Plan was modified to adopt a systems approach to planning for agriculture based on the goal to "*maintain a permanently secure, economically viable agricultural industry and to preserve the open-space character and landscape of Halton's non urbanizes areas.*"⁵ The policies implementing this systems approach encouraged comprehensive management of the rural area.

However, these policies in and of themselves will not be sufficient to reverse the negative trends. To translate policy into action, implement the **Citizen's Priorities** and build on potential strengths, an effective strategy is required. The Rural Agricultural Strategy (RAS) presented below has been developed based on extensive research, public consultation and input from local municipalities, partner agencies and the agricultural and rural communities. Actions have been carefully selected to target the specific trends that are negatively impacting Halton's rural and agricultural sectors.

⁵ Region of Halton, Halton Region Official Plan, consolidation dated November 28, 2014, Policy 91.

The Rural Agricultural Strategy

The Halton Rural Agricultural Strategy must empower the community it is designed to serve. Farmers and rural residents have been and must continue to be part of decision making and be consulted on an ongoing basis during implementation. To ensure the strategy is effective, measures to gauge success must be established and applied as the strategy is being implemented.

The Region's rural community is diverse. The key industries and subsectors that contribute to a thriving Regional rural community include:

- Primary agriculture;
- Agri-tourism;
- Rural businesses clustered in existing hamlets;
- Home based businesses;
- On farm businesses; and
- Agricultural service businesses.

The RAS respects this diversity and is comprised of a comprehensive set of actions and tasks to address a variety of needs.

The Region's jurisdiction is clearly defined through, and limited by, legislation and resources. The RAS respects these limits and focuses on effective actions that can be successfully implemented within them. Where critical actions can be more appropriately addressed by working with others, partnerships will be established.

Many agencies at the national, provincial and local levels are working to support and promote rural and agricultural development. Halton's strategy must focus on actions that will specifically address Regional concerns and not duplicate or infringe on actions more effectively dealt with by another agency or level of government. The strategy is designed to target actions, avoid duplication and focus in areas where the Region can be effective.

Representatives from Halton's local municipalities are members of the Steering Committee guiding the development of the strategy. Ongoing coordination with the local municipalities will be key to successfully implementing programs to support the agricultural sector and the rural hamlets and settlements. Local municipalities have jurisdiction over many of the issues identified. This jurisdiction must be respected.

The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs has an extensive mandate to support rural and agricultural development. Effective implementation of the strategy will involve drawing on the Ministry's expertise and accessing its programming.

In February 2012, Regional Council agreed to be part of the Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance (GHFFA) established to promote food and farming in the seven regions and cities that comprise the Golden Horseshoe. As part of this commitment the Region endorsed the **Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Action Plan 2021. (GHFFAP)** This Plan lays out a program of actions to achieve the following vision:

The Golden Horseshoe is globally renowned as a vibrant food and farming cluster, characterized by profitable farming operations, a thriving hub of food processing, food retail and food service businesses, extensive research capacity, innovative technology, and a wide range of healthy and safe products. ⁶

The GHFFAP is based on five pillars. To be consistent with, build on and compliment the Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Action Plan, the Halton RAS is also based on these five pillars.

Fundamental Principles

Halton's location is such that it is subject to ongoing pressures for urban growth. Sustaining a thriving rural and agricultural community in the face of this pressure is challenging. Implementation of the RAS will address this challenge using innovative approaches that include:

- Systems based planning to sustain the rural and agricultural communities.
- Permanent protection of contiguous prime agricultural areas.
- Effective buffering between agricultural areas and non-agricultural development that allows rural and urban land uses to co-exist.
- Targeted programs to support and enhance development of rural hamlets.
- Integrated management of the Regional Natural Heritage and Agricultural Systems.
- Comprehensive planning for support services that respond to the specific needs of the rural and agricultural communities.
- Flexible policies to accommodate variations in types of agricultural production and support the Regional agri-food system.

⁶ PLANSCAPE Inc., prepared for the Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance; Golden Horseshoe Agriculture and Agri-food Strategy, **Food and Farming: An Action Plan 2021**. January 2012. Pg. 7.

- Showcasing of Regional agricultural products.
- Rural based economic development programs.

The challenge for the RAS is to promote:

- Strong, permanent and cohesive agricultural areas;
- Healthy rural settlements;
- A locally integrated food value chain with strong connections to external markets;
- Supportive rural infrastructure;
- Education about rural and agricultural issues and the benefits of a productive rural sector;
- Rural and agricultural business opportunities;
- System based, scientifically validated agricultural policies; and
- Effective programs coordinated with other agencies, including the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA).

The Halton Rural Agricultural Strategy responds to this challenge.

Halton Rural Agricultural Strategy

MISSION

To sustain and grow a prosperous rural community and permanent agricultural system within Halton Region.

VISION

A rural community and permanent agricultural system that is diverse, prosperous, productive and sustainable as an essential component of a healthy and complete Regional community.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The rural agricultural strategy will;

- Establish and sustain a Regional Agricultural system;
- Protect the integrity of the rural area;
- Enhance rural and agricultural prosperity;
- Contribute to well-being and quality of life for Regional residents; and
- Support vibrant rural communities.

Building on these principles, actions to implement them have been categorized under five pillars.

Pillars

- A. Grow the Cluster
- B. Link Food Farming and Health
- C. Foster Innovation
- D. Enable the Cluster
- E. Cultivate New Approaches

A. GROW THE CLUSTER

In a modification to the Official Plan approved in November 2014, Halton adopted a systems approach to planning for agriculture based on the goal to “*maintain a permanently secure, economically viable agricultural industry and to preserve the open-space character and landscape of Halton’s non urbanized areas.*”⁷ Adopting a systems approach to supporting the agricultural sector within the Region was a bold and progressive step that includes recognition that with limited exceptions, the Regional Natural Heritage System is part of the Agricultural System and that agricultural operations are compatible uses with the NHS and are promoted and supported.

These modifications were an initial step that addressed the recommendation in the RAS Background Report that a regional agricultural system be established. However, more needs to be done to support and strengthen the system.

Research indicates that a successful agricultural system is comprised of a *connected, permanent land base that supports a critical mass of prosperous agri-food businesses including input services, primary production, first level processing, infrastructure support, marketing opportunities and delivery. The system incorporates rural settlements and natural heritage systems.*⁸

Not all of these elements are present in Halton. This pillar focuses on actions for addressing gaps and strengthening and enhancing the system. In doing so the role of rural hamlets and clusters which, in the Background Report were acknowledged as an integral part of a comprehensive Regional agricultural system, is addressed. Ensuring that the network of services required by agricultural producers is available is key to the health of an agricultural system. The hamlets and rural clusters are the logical location for such services.

Strategy

Confirm and strengthen the regional agricultural system incorporating the components required for agriculture to prosper.

⁷ Region of Halton, Halton Region Official Plan, consolidation dated November 28, 2014, Policy 91.

⁸ Planscape in collaboration with Jim Hiley, Regional Agri-Food Strategies for the Greater Golden Horseshoe: Policies and Tools to Sustain Primary production, prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs, September 2015, pg 75.

Actions

A1. Amend the Regional Official Plan to further define and strengthen the Regional agricultural system.

Rationale: This action will clearly define the agricultural system, specify the land area upon which it is based and identify the components that will be incorporated in it. This will create the certainty that farmers need to confidently invest in the future.

Tasks

A1.1 Consult with the agricultural sector to confirm the appropriate elements of a Regional Agricultural System and amend policies to incorporate appropriate elements.

Identifying the essential elements of the Regional Agricultural System will allow gaps in infrastructure and services to be identified and addressed.

A1.2 Establish permanent boundaries to define the agricultural system having regard for natural features and intra and inter regional connectivity.

Defining the agricultural system geographically will establish a permanent land base for the system.

A1.3 Develop guidelines addressing edge planning and the interface and need for buffers between urban areas and the agricultural system.

Once the geographic extent of the land base is defined, specific policies to manage land uses in different parts of the system can be established. This will facilitate detailed management of land uses at the interface with urban areas.

A1.4 Update the Regional Guidelines addressing agriculture related uses and on farm businesses to incorporate the 2014 Provincial Policy Statement, provincial guidelines and updated Official Plan policies.

Halton has detailed planning guidelines to manage agricultural land uses. Since these were prepared, the Provincial Policy Statement has been updated and has become more flexible. The Province is in the process of preparing guidelines to address agriculture related and on farm businesses. The Region will need to update their guidelines to incorporate the provincial changes. At that time changes can be made to implement systems planning

by addressing how uses identified as being essential elements of a successful agricultural system will be managed.

A2. Develop a targeted economic development strategy to foster businesses needed to support a healthy agricultural system.

Rationale: A successful agricultural system includes the range of economic activities required to support successful agriculture. This action will allow such activities to be specifically identified in the Halton context, to determine if such uses exist, to address gaps and investigate opportunities that will support the agricultural system.

Tasks

A2.1 Confirm the types of businesses required to support the Halton agricultural system.

Working with the agricultural sector, identify the types of businesses that are required to support a successful system.

A2.2 Build on GHFFA asset mapping to identify gaps, target business opportunities and promote businesses that exist.

The GHFFA has completed mapping of agricultural assets in the Region. This work can be the base to confirm which businesses and services exist and where there are gaps that need to be addressed.

A2.3 Source and provide relevant information about programs that could assist in addressing gaps.

The province and the local municipalities have economic development programs that can be used to address gaps in essential services and support businesses. Partnerships should be established to access these programs.

A2.4 Support recommendations from the Agri-Tourism Action Plan.

In 2013, the Region completed an agri-tourism strategy. Implementation will support this aspect of the agricultural system and provide a link between farm and non-farm residents.

A2.5 Work with the agricultural community and informed groups such as Feeding Halton, to conduct a locally focused food hub feasibility study.

Indications are that Halton may benefit from the establishment of a locally focused food hub. As part of the analysis of the essential

components of the agricultural system, the potential role of a food hub should be evaluated.

A3. With input from the rural community, develop and implement an infrastructure plan required to support the agricultural system.

Rationale: In the interviews and consultations completed as part of the background research for this strategy, farmers and rural residents were very specific about the types of services needed to support their businesses. Many of the concerns expressed about lack of rural infrastructure.

Tasks

A3.1 Investigate the need for access to high speed internet in rural and agricultural areas.

Access to high speed internet is variable across the rural area. The Region should work with provincial and other agencies to conduct a gap analysis to determine where gaps exist and how they can be addressed.

A3.2 Work with Conservation Halton to establish policies to maintain existing and install new agricultural drainage infrastructure.

The ability to install and maintain drainage infrastructure is essential.

A3.3 Review the Regional policy on the use of road salt to address agricultural needs with input from appropriate organizations (Ontario Federation of Agriculture, Municipal Engineers Association, Landscape Ontario).

The negative impact of road salt on soil quality and ground water is, according to input from the horticultural sector, having a negative impact on production. Although there is an existing policy on the use of road salt, this should be adjusted to address these negative impacts. Access to alternative sources of water could address some of these concerns.

A3.4 Investigate a rural based Regional roads program addressing agricultural friendly road infrastructure.

Urban road standards do not work in the rural areas. Overhanging trees, narrow shoulders, short turning radii, bicycle lanes and high speed limits impede or endanger the movement of farm equipment. Within area of the agricultural system, farm supportive road standards should be implemented.

A3.5 Investigate the feasibility of supplying non potable and potable water for agriculture, e.g. stormwater capture.

Farm operations providing produce require access to potable water to wash and prepare fruit and vegetables for market. Where feasible access to potable water should be provided to farm operations. In areas where ground water is negatively impacted by road management practices access to non-potable water should be considered.

A3.6 Investigate the appropriate agency to extend access to natural gas to rural properties.

Access to natural gas would decrease the costs for producers. The Region could facilitate discussions with natural gas providers to facilitate access to this resource.

A3.7 Investigate the need for agricultural storage facilities (cold storage, grain elevators).

As part of the public consultation process, a need for storage for agricultural product was identified. Often these facilities are provided through a cooperative arrangement. The farm community should be consulted to determine if this service would be beneficial and if so, how it could be provided.

B. LINK FOOD, FARMING AND HEALTH

There is a growing public awareness of the links between healthy living and access to a local food sector. Informed consumers who are aware of and support local food production, enjoy access to local producers who in turn benefit from enhanced business opportunities. The Background Report noted these trends and recommended that the RAS address the delivery of integrated public health and educational programs focused on agri-food.

Strategy

Work closely with a broad range of stakeholders to educate and inform the public about the benefits of sustaining a healthy food and farming sector in Halton.

Action

B1. Develop a public awareness program that educates the public about the benefits of local agriculture.

Rationale: In the past many Canadians had some connection with agriculture. Today however, with an increasingly urban population, this is no longer the case. Many people have no understanding of where their food comes from, who grows it or what is involved in production. Educating the public about agriculture can address this lack of understanding and build support for local production.

Tasks

B1.1 Working with the HRFA, form partnerships with other public agencies to highlight the contribution of Halton's agriculture and rural areas to the well-being of all residents and to communicate the importance of a secure and sustainable local food supply in Halton.

There are numerous programs designed to educate the public about the importance of local agricultural production. The Region should explore opportunities to disseminate Halton based information. This can be done in partnership with agencies already involved in producing agriculturally related educational programs.

B1.2 Continue staff support to Feeding Halton and the Halton Food Council.

Halton currently has services focused on promoting local food. These efforts should continue and be used as a mechanism for informing the public about Regional agriculture.

B1.3 Integrate agriculture into parks and conservation areas, encourage community gardens and investigate options for integrating agricultural uses into urban developments.

Hands on experience with food production is a strong tool for educating consumers about food production. Visible demonstrations and opportunities for participation can build support for agriculture.

B2. Link local producers with consumers to promote Halton agriculture.

Rationale: Encouraging local food production builds support for the agricultural sector. Providing opportunities for producers to sell directly to consumers can increase the return for the producer, create a relationship between the producer and the consumer, educate the public about agriculture and build support for local production.

Tasks

B2.1 Expand the Simply Local program to be inclusive of the entire agricultural sector and promote it through signage, partnerships, targeted programs and social media.

The Simply Local program is well established with brand recognition in Halton. Building on it to include a full range of agricultural products will build this and raise the profile of regional agriculture.

B2.2 Leverage the Provincial “Foodland Ontario” brand to expand the “Simply Local” program and inform Halton residents about the availability of local choices for agricultural products.

Linking the Foodland Ontario brand with the Simply Local branding will leverage ongoing provincial work that supports local agriculture. The Simply Local program can provide a targeted Halton focus.

B2.3 Acknowledge restaurants, caterers, institutions and other establishments that source local food through the Simply Local Program.

Showcasing local businesses that support local producers will strengthen the local economy and link rural and urban residents.

B2.4 Develop a Regional signage program to educate the public about agricultural practices.

Signage can deliver effective messaging that educates non rural residents about agricultural practices. This in turn can build respect and support for local producers.

B2.5 Develop food literacy information as an extension of the “Simply Local” program.

The members of the Steering Committee from Public Health expressed interest in promoting regional food literacy through public education. Incorporating a food literacy component into the Simply Local program would be another way to showcase local production and build linkages between rural and urban residents.

B3. Lead by example, implement an agricultural based buy local procurement strategy for agricultural product for Halton Region.

Rationale: Public institutions (government offices, retirement homes, schools, etc.) purchase large amounts of product. Implementing a local first policy will raise awareness about local products, support producers and set an example for consumers.

Tasks

B3.1 Investigate the feasibility of developing purchasing guidelines to increase the amount and range of local product used by the Region and its institutions.

The Region could set an example by establishing a local first purchasing policy for any agricultural products. This should include food and non-food products.

B3.2 Share Regional guidelines on buying local with other local public agencies to encourage similar practices.

Once established, the local first guidelines could become a model to be shared with other public institutions.

B3.3 Develop material for Halton businesses and developers to inform them about and promote local agricultural horticultural products.

Halton is a centre for the nursery and horticulture sector, both of which produce commodities that do well when grown in proximity to urban markets. Encouraging developers and businesses to buy local first will support local growers.

B3.4 Work with local retailers to promote the purchase and sale of Halton agricultural and value-added products.

Recognizing businesses that carry and promote local product will support local producers and raise the profile of local production.

C. FOSTER INNOVATION

Halton is part of a region where due to a combination of climate, soils, geography and access to water, an extensive variety of commodities can be produced. These commodities in turn can support an extensive agri-food sector. Indications are that this sector is flourishing in Halton. New and innovative approaches are required to support a range of agricultural production, link it to the Regional agri-food cluster and encourage a range of businesses.

Strategy

Promote innovation and entrepreneurship related to agriculture and food as an economic development focus in Halton Region.

Action

C1. Assess Halton's potential to develop as an innovation hub for agriculture and agri-food.

Rationale: Halton is part of the Golden Horseshoe agri-food cluster, one of the largest in North America and home to numerous agri-food businesses. Many of these businesses are small and have difficulty establishing and maintaining market. As the Regional agricultural system strengthens new opportunities will emerge. The Region can promote these opportunities and assist new business by identifying resources available to support them. Promoting rural hamlets and settlements as potential locations for appropriate businesses should be part of this action.

Tasks

C1.1 Working with existing resources such as the Milton Innovation Hub and Country Heritage Park, investigate the feasibility of and opportunities to establish an incubator for food and agricultural related businesses.

One of the issues identified as being of concern was a lack of opportunity for new rural businesses. Establishing an incubation centre where businesses can be nurtured by using existing resources can address this issue.

C1.2 Develop a forum for discussions between Halton educational institutions, government agencies, private industry and the agricultural community to stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship that supports and is a component of the agricultural system.

Considerable work is being done at the provincial level to stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship in the agri-food sector. The Region can assist in promoting this in Halton by sourcing available information and making it available to regional residents.

C1.3 Support small scale value added businesses by assisting with access to funding, required certification and planning approvals.

In updating the guidelines regarding these businesses as recommended in Action A1, the Region could provide information about where to access funding, how to secure certifications and how to efficiently obtain planning approvals.

C2. Assess leading Regional agricultural and related sectors to quantify what they require to thrive and how the Region can assist.

Rationale: Agricultural production evolves and changes. To ensure farmers have the flexibility they need to remain current regulations must be flexible and limited.

Tasks

C2.1 Identify emerging opportunities for production and ensure that the Regional regulatory framework is sufficiently flexible to allow those opportunities to be captured.

Ongoing consultation with agricultural community through organizations such as the Halton Agricultural Advisory Committee must be conducted to ensure Regional controls are flexible.

C2.2 Utilize results from provincial business retention and expansion (BR&E) study on equine to support the regional sector.

Although Halton has an extensive, well established equine sector, in interviews conducted for this strategy, frustrations were expressed that the potential for the sector in Halton is not being realized. OMAFRA has done work on equine through the implementation of a BR&E study. The results of this work could provide the detailed information required to develop a Regional equine strategy.

C2.3 Undertake a pilot program with OMAFRA to conduct a business retention and expansion study on horticulture supported by a subsequent sector development plan.

Horticulture has a strong presence in Halton. Horticultural production is generally very successful in proximity to urban areas and is therefore a sector where growth can be expected. Encouraging OMAFRA to support a BR&E study with a regional focus would provide the insight required to effectively encourage growth.

C3. Target funding to support rural businesses focused on agriculture and agri-food innovation.

Rationale: The Region currently has funding to support rural businesses. This program should be continued and updated to target gaps identified in the agricultural system under Action A2.2.

Tasks

C3.1 Leverage the existing funding to the Agriculture Community Development Fund and leverage that funding to focus on agriculture and agri-food innovation and entrepreneurship.

This established program can be an effective tool for targeting businesses that will strengthen the agricultural system and encouraging their establishment in specific locations.

C3.2 Monitor and report annually on the effectiveness of Regional funding geared towards agriculture and agri-food initiatives.

To ensure that the targeting is effective in addressing gaps in the service /business infrastructure associated with the agricultural system an ongoing monitoring program is required.

D. ENABLE THE CLUSTER

Successful agricultural systems are diverse, evolving, dynamic and entrepreneurial. Policies clearly address the key components that define the system and create the circumstances for it to flourish. To achieve this, current information about the system and the activities within it must be available to policy makers so they can monitor and respond to changing circumstances.

Strategy

Develop rural based policies and regulations that are coordinated across the Region and designed to encourage and support appropriate rural development and expedite approvals.

Rationale: Agricultural land use is subject to a broad range of regulatory controls managed by a variety of agencies. In consultations conducted with the farming and rural communities, the frustration and expense of dealing with this multiplicity of regulations was an ongoing theme. To address this requires cooperation between the various agencies involved in the regulatory process. The Region has established inter municipal liaison groups that can address this issue.

Action

D1. Work with regulatory agencies and local municipalities to establish an expedited Regional approval process for rural development.

Tasks

D1.1 Work with local municipalities to establish a coordinated development approval process to expedite the review of agriculture based applications by the Region, local municipalities, Conservation Authorities and the Niagara Escarpment Commission.

In the consultations conducted to support this strategy concerns were expressed regarding the time and cost required to secure planning approvals from multiple agencies. While the process at the local municipal level is reasonable, when multiple agencies are required the process becomes onerous.

D1.2 Develop best management guidelines to assist in planning for a successful agricultural system.

Once the components of the agricultural system are defined, consideration should be given to what additional best management practices should be implemented to assist in its

implementation. These best management practices should be developed in consultation with the agricultural community and local municipalities.

D1.3 Work with local municipalities to investigate the potential of a “development permitting system”⁹ for use in association with the agricultural system.

Development permitting, as permitted under Regulation 608/6 of the Planning Act should be investigated as an effective approach to streamlining the development approval process in the agricultural system.

D1.4 Develop communications materials and educational tools illustrating a streamlined development review process and identifying all technical requirements.

Effective communication is helpful in explaining the planning approval process. Providing guides that lay out and explain the planning process for applications in the agricultural system should be used to reduce confusion.

D1.5 Build on programs such as the Environmental Farm Plan to establish a process whereby if a plan is filed, expedited environmental approvals may be available.

Maintaining shared property files for individual properties should be explored. Having all of the information in one place and allowing different agencies to access could assist with coordinating and expediting approval processes.

D2. Establish a data base to track components of the Regional agricultural and rural system.

Rationale: To monitoring of the state of the rural area and determine if policies to manage it are effective, accurate data is required. This is challenging to collect for hamlets, settlements and rural areas. Statistics are generally not disaggregated to this geographic level.

Tasks

D2.1 Expand the Employment Survey to collect information on all businesses in the rural area.

The Regional Employment Survey is a valuable tool to provide insight into what is happening in rural settlements and hamlets.

⁹ Reference is to Development Permitting as defined in the Planning Act of Ontario.

It should be maintained on an ongoing basis and when the agricultural system is clearly delineated, expanded to track employment in the system.

D2.2 Maintain the recently developed Asset Mapping to ensure there is a comprehensive inventory of businesses involved in agriculture and food in Halton Region.

The GHFFA has developed asset mapping to identify all of the agricultural related businesses and services in the Region. The Ontario Federation of Agriculture has been working to define the services required to service agriculture. This data should be tracked at the regional level.

D2.3 Maintain a State of Agriculture and Food report card that tracks the amount of land under production, the commodity profile and gross farm receipts.

Statistics Canada tracks the status of the agriculture through the Agricultural Census conducted every five years. OMAFRA uses this data to provide regular updates on the status of agriculture in municipalities. Over the past 20 years the Region has used this data to track regional agricultural activities. This tracking should continue and be used as the basis for a report card to record any changes to the agricultural profile of the Region.

D3. Secure the long term productive use of agricultural lands.

Rationale: Access to land for agricultural production has become challenging as property values increase. This is a barrier for farmers to acquire land. Even when land is available for rent, there is increasing competition for it and the lease agreements tend to be short term and unreliable. Steps to increase secure access to land for production would assist in sustaining agriculture in the Region.

Tasks

D3.1 Investigate innovative financial and other approaches to encourage additional lands to remain or be put into agricultural production.

One of the most effective tools for ensuring that rural land not owned by farmers is available for production is the farm property tax rebate program. Other programs to encourage land to be made available for production should be investigated.

D3.2 Encourage and provide templates for secure land rental agreements.

Short term or informal lease agreements for agricultural land negatively impact the management of the land and restrict the type of production that occurs on them. If a farmer does not have access to lands for long enough to realize a return on investment they will not invest in the property to improve it or cultivate crops which take a period of time to come to into production (grapes, hops, tender fruit, greenhouse). There are incentives that can be used to encourage long term secure leases. These should be investigated for possible implementation in Halton.

D3.3 Lead by example by allowing access to public land for agriculture and implementing long term secure leases.

Public agencies including municipal governments, utilities and Conservation Authorities own or control large areas of land. Allowing access for agricultural production could be a response to the difficulty and expense experienced by Halton farmers in attempting to get access to additional land to farm.

E. CULTIVATE NEW APPROACHES

Implementing a systems approach to planning for agricultural and rural land uses is a departure from the traditional incremental approach to planning. To be successful, the land use policy must be supported by a suite of tools, programs and incentives in a framework that will protect the land base, create the circumstances for rural business to be sustainable and link primary production and the larger agri-food system. It requires the implementation of new approaches.

Strategy

Be a leader in implementing innovative policies that define, establish and support an agricultural system based on a vibrant rural economy.

Action

E1. Coordinate policies for the Regional Natural Heritage System (NHS) and Agricultural System to ensure they are mutually supportive.

Rationale: Large areas of the Regional NHS are located on rural land, much of it owned by farmers. In developing the agricultural system, recognition must be made that the NHS is part of that system and techniques devised to allow protection of resources and production.

Tasks

E1.1 Identify and promote environmentally progressive stewardship practices that do not inhibit agricultural production.

There are examples of programs designed to balance environmental stewardship and agricultural production. These should be identified and adopted as best management practice in Halton.

E1.2 Give the agricultural sector priority in accessing compost or green waste for agricultural use.

Partnership programs of this nature will establish partnerships between agriculture and environmental stewardship.

E1.3 Investigate compensation for the provision of ecological goods and services where normal farm practices are limited to benefit the natural heritage system.

The federal government has run several pilot projects under which farmers are compensated for providing ecological goods and services. The province has current programs in place to compensate land owners for sustaining environmental areas. These examples could be a template for developing a program for Halton farmers who manage components of the regional NHS.

E2. Expand the role of rural settlements and hamlets in supporting an agricultural system.

Rationale: A successful agricultural system includes a range of agriculturally related businesses. The existing hamlets and rural settlements are logical locations for such businesses.

Tasks

E2.1 Undertake a pilot project to establish a rural enterprise zone in a designated hamlet with policies to attract targeted businesses.

Rural enterprises zones, focused on businesses that support or are related to agriculture, are often part of successful agricultural systems. This is a model that could be used as the basis for a pilot project in one of the hamlets to attract businesses.

E2.2 Undertake a feasibility study of establishing businesses in rural hamlets that will increase capacity for value retention and further processing (IQF, slicing, flash freezing, packaging).

Changes to the Provincial Policy Statement have broadened the controls governing value added and agricultural related businesses. In addressing the details of the agricultural system the types of and locations for these types of business should be considered. Effective Management of these businesses can assist in developing a strong system.

E3. Encourage the implementation of progressive financial opportunities that support agriculture.

Rationale: Taxation policies could be an effective tool for addressing some of the economic inequities associated with farming in Halton that result from a market based assessment system. However, changes to taxation policies is a provincial responsibility so addressing this issue will involve lobbying of the province to make changes. There are local adjustments that could be made to equalize the taxation burden. If establishment of an agricultural system

enforces the concept that the land within an agricultural system must remain in agriculture, the speculative forces that drive up value may not be such an issue.

Tasks

E3.1 Support Halton's agricultural community's efforts to implement a farm property assessment class based on productive value for agricultural not market assessment through MPAC.

E3.2 Work with OMAFRA to investigate and implement incentives to keep agricultural land in production.

There are models where this has been done for different types of land uses that could be adopted for agriculture.

E3.3 Investigate opportunities to provide incentives for Halton farmers who accept and utilize bio-solids through a regional program.

Farmers acceptance of biosolids is a service to municipalities which need to dispose of them. Working directly with farmers to establish an incentive program will support agriculture.



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