

## **Government Advocacy Priorities 2021 – Rural & Agricultural**

### **Rural areas within urban municipalities are at risk of being overlooked**

- Higher levels of government may overlook split municipalities in terms of engagement efforts, i.e. Statistics Canada did not reach out to Burlington to invite participation in its pre-Census of Agriculture public consultation because it is considered an urban municipality.
- Split municipalities such as Burlington are too rural for urban programs and too urban for rural programs; this can negatively impact funding eligibility (i.e. rural broadband) if the entire geography is generalized as 'urban' based on total population and/or proximity to services.
- This can also leave split municipalities somewhat stranded in terms of advocacy opportunities- Burlington is too urban to participate in ROMA, but how often are rural and agricultural issues highlighted through AMO?
- Planning departments are partially funded via development application fees, which are generated primarily via urban applications in cities like Burlington. This can make it difficult to build and maintain rural/agricultural expertise, or to justify a dedicated staff resource when the number of rural/agricultural applications is low. How can Provincial supports be utilized to fill this potential knowledge/resourcing gap?
- Similarly, economic development is driven largely by urban employment types, which result in a high number of jobs and support the achievement of mandated employment targets. Targeted economic development programs and incentives are critical in supporting resilient, adaptive near-urban agriculture yet (particularly in the face of increased vulnerability to the effects of a changing climate) yet, due to the low number of jobs per hectare, we lack the metrics to build the business case for significant investment.
- There doesn't appear to be established targets in terms of the protection, restoration or enhancement of agricultural lands and there are no targets in terms of the growth of registered farm businesses, hectares in active production, gross farm receipts, diversification of commodities, growth of local markets/export markets etc. that trickle down to local level land use planning and economic development.
- Burlington is not a municipality in transition- the Greenbelt Area introduces a hard-urban boundary that will maintain our rural area indefinitely. There are likely other municipalities within the Greater Golden Horseshoe that are in a similar position.

### **Policies introduce competing interests without acknowledging inherent hierarchies**

- Rural areas are subject to numerous pressures to accommodate agriculture, natural heritage, aggregate resources, urban expansions, infrastructure (i.e. 407 Transitway, Imperial Oil Pipeline), cemeteries etc. Although the provincial policy framework requires that all of these interests be accounted for, prime agricultural lands are most often compromised to accommodate other uses (e.g. urban boundary expansion) for the sake of protecting others (e.g. natural heritage). Yet, although prime agricultural lands are considered highly

limited/finite, they do not benefit from the same investment in restoration and enhancement that the natural heritage system does.

- As a result, near-urban agriculture faces unique challenges due to pressure from competing land uses which can introduce conflict and uncertainty. Mitigating these impacts requires more flexibility/creativity in the implementation of broad Provincial policies, including more context-sensitive tools (i.e. edge planning, tactical ruralism, landowner stewardship compensation programs) which maintain broader system protections while still contributing to local economic viability.
- These issues are further complicated by the challenges associated with inter-agency coordination within the Niagara Escarpment Plan Area, as well as inconsistencies between the Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs and the Niagara Escarpment Commission (Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry) in the interpretation of provincial policy objectives related to agriculture.

### **Suggested actions:**

- Consider more than population size and proximity to urban areas/services when developing program/funding eligibility criteria, not just Similarly, ensure that special efforts are made during public consultation to identify and connect with rural areas within urban municipalities. Many such communities have local agricultural advisory committees which are an efficient way of connecting with the target audience.
- Introduce enabling policies, programs and funding to support the restoration and enhancement of prime agricultural lands (similar to natural heritage). This would be complementary to Ontario's Agricultural Soil Health and Conservation Strategy, as well as Ontario's Climate Change Action Plan if opportunities for carbon sequestration were included.
- Support agriculture-appropriate stewardship and sustainability initiatives that enhance farm viability and offer flexibility and control to landowners, e.g. Alternative Land Use Services, or programs that enhance rural water quality or sequester carbon etc. and can elevate the value of agricultural lands to a level that invites permanent protection and long-term investment.
- Support capacity building for the utilization of statistical data and performance metrics to inform strategic, evidence-based decision-making as it relates to agriculture in land use planning and economic development.
  - A cumulative approach to Agricultural Impact Assessments, supported by quantitative (implementable) caps on the loss of prime agricultural lands within the Provincial Agricultural Land Base, with stronger impact mitigation requirements (particularly in cases where rehabilitation is not possible, such as below water table aggregate extraction, to require compensation via contribution to an agricultural restoration/enhancement fund).
  - Improve access to training opportunities for statistical analysis (Census of Agriculture, ON AgMaps, Golden Horseshow Food and Farming Alliance Asset Mapping etc.) to support municipalities in detailed developing local agricultural profiles and identifying targeted economic development opportunities.