

Burlington Agricultural Action Plan

Executive Summary

The Burlington Agricultural Action Plan sets out ten core actions that the City can take to advance opportunities for economic growth, innovation and resiliency in the Rural Area. The actions are structured in a manner that aligns with the City's commitment to conserving the character of the Rural Area and protecting and enhancing its natural environment, while also enabling the rural economy to evolve and change. By investing in this sector, the City will not only protect farmland but also foster a thriving rural economy, strengthen food security, and enhance climate resiliency.

The agricultural sector faces regulatory complexity, rural/urban land use conflicts, rising land costs, succession planning challenges and infrastructure gaps. The Burlington Agricultural Action Plan (the Plan) outlines a comprehensive strategy to strengthen and sustain the city's agricultural sector while aligning with updated provincial policies. The Plan emphasizes collaboration, streamlined development processes, economic development, infrastructure support, and public awareness through the following core actions:

1. Review the rural and agriculture-related policies of the Official Plan to ensure alignment with the updated provincial policy framework.
2. Develop a targeted economic development strategy to foster businesses needed to support a healthy agricultural system.
3. Work with regulatory agencies to establish an expedited approval process for rural development.
4. Develop an awareness program that informs the public about the benefits of local agriculture.
5. With input from the rural community, develop and implement an infrastructure plan required to support the agricultural system.
6. Assess leading agricultural and related sectors to quantify what they require to thrive and how the City can assist.
7. Establish a system to track key components of the agricultural and rural system.
8. Encourage the implementation of progressive financial opportunities that support agriculture.
9. Secure the long-term productive use of agricultural lands.

10. Coordinate policies for the natural heritage system and agricultural system to ensure they are mutually supportive and enhance climate resiliency.

The Plan is intended to function as a living document which will be reviewed at the outset of each new Term of Council and Vision to Focus update. At this time, the actions and sub-actions within the Plan are intended to establish a set of key priorities to guide future work. As the City settles into its expanded planning responsibilities for Rural and Agricultural Systems post Regional transition, more detailed work plans will be developed to implement the actions, including timing and resourcing.

Background

The City of Burlington is considered an “urban” municipality, given its overall population of approximately 186,948 people, and is often recognized by its beautiful downtown and waterfront. However, approximately 50% of Burlington’s geography is considered rural, with the majority being permanently protected as part of the Greenbelt (which includes the Niagara Escarpment).

Much of Burlington’s Rural Area has been designated as a Prime Agricultural Area and is home to a wide variety of farming operations. As of the [2021 Census of Agriculture](#), Burlington had 73 operating census farmsⁱ which generated a total of approximately \$46,388,046 in Gross Farm Receiptsⁱⁱ. Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the 73 farms by industry type, while Table 2 provides breakdown by size (both have been sorted by order of prevalence).

Table 1: Farm Industry Type

Industry Type	Number of Farms
Other crop farming	20
Other animal production	19
Oilseed and grain farming	11
Greenhouse, nursery and floriculture	8
Vegetable and melon farming	6
Fruit and tree nut farming	3
Beef cattle ranching and farming	2
Sheep and goat farming	2
Poultry and egg production	2

Table 2: Farm Acreage

Acreage Range	Number of Farms
10 to 69 acres	29

Under 10 acres	16
70 to 129 acres	13
130 to 179 acres	6
180 to 239 acres	3
240 to 399 acres	2
560 to 759 acres	2
400 to 559 acres	1
2,240 to 2,879 acres	1

Though all levels of government have implemented policies designed to preserve farmland and support the agricultural community, the sector continues to face ongoing decline. Research conducted by Halton Region during the development of its former [Rural Agricultural Strategy](#) in 2016 indicates that, although there continues to be an established 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 issues contributing to uncertainty about the future of farming in Halton. Key concerns identified by the Region include:

- a complex, multi layered, regulatory regime;
- negative impacts related to urban development including conflicts between agricultural and non-agricultural land uses, lack of rural based infrastructure, traffic congestion, and urban service standards in rural areas;
- rising land prices due to urban proximity and high operating costs which discourage new agricultural operations and complicate inter-generational transfers;
- limited access to rental land complicated by uncertainty related to short term or non-existent leases, as well as increasing controls on how land can be used;
- continuous decline in the amount of land under agricultural production and a drop in the value of gross farm receipts;
- decline in the livestock sector, particularly in proximity to non-farm development;
- an aging farm population and reduced opportunity for cooperation amongst farmers due to declining numbers;
- lack of agricultural support services and deteriorating on-farm infrastructure;
- shortage of knowledgeable, experienced agricultural workers;
- increased restrictions on farming related to the management of the natural heritage system;

- public perception of rural land as recreational land;
- uncertainty regarding the future of the prime agricultural area that lies outside of the Greenbelt and current urban boundaries; and
- rising stress related to the challenge of farming in an urbanizing area.

Since the development of the Halton Rural Agricultural Strategy, new data has become available through the 2021 Census of Agriculture (see Appendix A to this Plan). While there has been an increase in the value of Gross Farm Receipts and the number of farms, many of the trends identified in 2016 remain.

Burlington's Rural Area in particular faces a unique policy paradox: it is home to 73 operating farms and subject to the full suite of provincial land use controls designed to protect rural and agricultural lands. Yet Burlington is ineligible for key provincial funding programs intended to support rural economic development due to its classification as an urban municipality. For example, the Ontario Rural Economic Development (RED) Program defines "Rural Ontario" as:

"...all Statistics Canada census subdivisions (including lower-tier and single-tier municipalities) that either have a population of less than 100,000 people, or have a population density of 100 people per square kilometre or less, as identified in the most recent Statistics Canada Census of Canadian Population. Refer to the RED Program ["Rural and Urban Areas" map](#)."

Since these criteria are applied to the City as a whole and there is no distinction among rural and urban land use designations, Burlington does not qualify even though its rural area is:

- entirely within the permanently protected Greenbelt;
- largely designated as a Prime Agricultural Area; and
- largely covered by the Niagara Escarpment Area of Development Control, which imposes more restrictive land use policies and overrides local zoning.

This mismatch between policy and eligibility creates a challenge. Burlington's rural area must comply with strict land use rules while contending with near-urban compatibility issues yet lacks access to many of the financial tools available to other rural communities to support economic resiliency. Further compounding the issue, the Niagara Escarpment Commission does not collect fees for development applications within the area of Development Control. This can limit the ability of municipalities to

recover the costs associated with development review and make it more challenging to assign dedicated staff resources to the rural and agricultural portfolio.

As a result, Burlington's rural area is left navigating a higher-regulation, lower-support environment—rural in character and constraints, but often urban in classification and funding. In response, Burlington has worked with its agricultural sector to identify a series of priority actions focused on building context-sensitive supports for the industry. The Plan is based on actions contained within the former Halton Rural Agricultural Strategy, which have been scoped, refined and prioritized to align with the Burlington context.

Vision

The Burlington Official Plan, 2020 sets out a community vision which includes the prosperity of the Rural Area. In the Official Plan, Burlington's Rural Area is envisioned as an economically and socially active area, producing agricultural products and providing rural recreational activities for the city.

The City is committed to the protection and strengthening of the rural community. This means conserving the area's rural character and protecting and enhancing its natural environment while enabling the rural economy, particularly agriculture, to evolve and change.

The health of the Agricultural System and the protection of the agricultural land base are central to the future of the Rural Area. Connections between the Urban and Rural Areas will protect and strengthen the social, economic, and environmental well-being of both the Urban Area and the Rural Area, including through the production and consumption of local food.

Actions

- 1. Review the rural and agriculture-related policies of the Official Plan to ensure alignment with the updated provincial policy framework.**
 - 1.1. Review existing Official Plan guidelines addressing agricultural uses, agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses, in consideration of forthcoming updated provincial guidance.
 - 1.2. Consult with the agricultural sector to confirm the appropriate elements and implementation approach for the agricultural system.
 - 1.3. Develop guidelines addressing edge planning and the interface and need for buffers between urban areas and the agricultural system.
 - 1.4. Confirm mapping boundaries which define the agricultural system, having regard for natural features and intra and inter regional connectivity.
- 2. Develop a targeted economic development strategy to foster businesses needed to support a healthy agricultural system.**
 - 2.1. Confirm the types of businesses required to support the agricultural system.

- 2.2. Build on provincial and Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance asset mapping to identify gaps, target business opportunities and promote businesses that exist.
 - 2.3. Pursue membership with the Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance.
 - 2.4. Source and provide relevant information about programs that could assist in addressing gaps.
 - 2.5. Evaluate the feasibility of tools such as “Business Improvement Areas” and “Community Improvement Plans” for the Rural Area.
- 3. Work with regulatory agencies to establish an expedited approval process for rural development.**
- 3.1. Establish a coordinated development approval process to expedite the review of agriculture-based applications by the City, Niagara Escarpment Commission Conservation Authorities, and Halton Region (where applicable).
 - 3.2. Develop communications materials and educational tools illustrating a streamlined development review process and identifying all technical requirements.
 - 3.3. 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.
 - 3.4. Develop best management guidelines to assist in planning for a successful agricultural system.
 - 3.5. Investigate the potential of a “Development Permitting System” for use in association with the agricultural system.
- 4. Develop an awareness program that informs the public about the benefits of local agriculture.**
- 4.1. Integrate agriculture into parks and conservation areas, encourage community gardens and investigate options for integrating agricultural uses into urban areas.
 - 4.2. Working with the Halton Region Federation of Agriculture, form partnerships with other public agencies (e.g. Halton Public Health) to highlight the contribution of agriculture and rural areas to the well-being of all residents and to communicate the importance of a secure and sustainable local food supply.
 - 4.3. Link local producers with consumers to promote agriculture.
 - 4.4. Explore possible linkages between Foodland ON branding and promotion of agri-tourism.

- 5. With input from the rural community, develop and implement an infrastructure plan required to support the agricultural system.**
 - 5.1. Investigate the appropriate agency to study the extension of natural gas access to rural properties.
 - 5.2. Investigate tools to support the installation of broadband infrastructure in rural and agricultural areas.
 - 5.3. Work with Halton Region to investigate a rural-based roads program addressing agriculture friendly road infrastructure.
 - 5.4. Work with Halton Region to review policies on the use of road salt to address agricultural needs with input from appropriate organizations (Ontario Federation of Agriculture, Halton Federation of Agriculture, Municipal Engineers Association, Landscape Ontario, Conservation Halton etc.).
 - 5.5. Work with Conservation Halton to establish policies to maintain existing and install new agricultural drainage infrastructure.

- 6. Assess leading agricultural and related sectors to quantify what they require to thrive and how the City can assist.**
 - 6.1. Identify emerging opportunities for production and ensure that the regulatory framework is sufficiently flexible to allow those opportunities to be captured.
 - 6.2. Utilize results from provincial business retention and expansion study on equine to support the sector, where appropriate.
 - 6.3. Undertake a pilot program with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness (and potentially other Halton municipalities) to conduct a business retention and expansion study for another key sector, supported by a subsequent sector development plan.

- 7. Establish a system to track key components of the agricultural and rural system.**
 - 7.1. Develop and maintain a State of Agriculture report, to be updated in alignment with the Census of Agriculture cycle, to track key data such as the number of farms, amount of land under production, the commodity profile and gross farm receipts.
 - 7.2. Support the maintenance of the provincial and Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance Asset Mapping to ensure there is a comprehensive inventory of businesses involved in agriculture and food in Burlington.

- 8. Encourage the implementation of progressive financial opportunities that support agriculture.**

- 8.1. Support small-scale value-added businesses by assisting with access to funding, required certification and planning approvals.
 - 8.2. Support the agricultural community's efforts to implement a farm property assessment class based on productive value for agricultural not market assessment through MPAC.
 - 8.3. Work with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness to investigate and implement incentives to keep agricultural land in production.
 - 8.4. Target funding to support rural businesses focused on agriculture and agri- food innovation.
 - 8.5. Review future census data to determine if there is a need for the introduction of a "Small-Scale On-Farm Business" subclass tax rate based on MPAC eligibility requirements.
- 9. Secure the long-term productive use of agricultural lands.**
- 9.1. Encourage and provide templates for secure land rental agreements.
 - 9.2. Lead by example by allowing access to public land for agriculture and implementing long term secure leases.
- 10. Coordinate policies for the natural heritage system and agricultural system to ensure they are mutually supportive and enhance climate resiliency.**
- 10.1. Investigate compensation for the provision of ecological goods and services where normal farm practices are limited to benefit the natural heritage system.
 - 10.2. Identify and promote environmentally progressive stewardship practices that do not inhibit agricultural production, including soil restoration and enhancement.

Additional Considerations

Given the ongoing transition around planning responsibilities and economic development at the municipal level, certain actions were not put forward in this initial version of the City's plan to support agriculture. This includes the assessment of Halton's potential to develop as an innovation hub for agriculture and agri-food.

This is a substantial undertaking that would require multi-jurisdictional funding and collaboration. In the absence of a Regional role in economic development leadership, it is less clear how this study would be coordinated. However, were such an initiative to be undertaken, it would be critical for the City to participate. With respect to this action, the Region's former Rural Agricultural Strategy had identified the following sub-actions which would have relevance to the City of Burlington:

- 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.
- Support the development of a forum for discussions between local 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.

Monitoring

A core action of the Agricultural Action Plan is to prepare a detailed “State of Agriculture Report” which examines key data from the Census, and other sources, to establish a baseline for Burlington. As the current Census cycle aligns with the municipal election cycle, the State of Agriculture Report will be updated every four years to support ongoing monitoring, and to inform refinements to the Plan where needed. Once the initial State of Agriculture Report has been created, it will inform the development of Plan metrics for long-term monitoring. The Plan itself is intended to function as a living/iterative document that is responsive to evolving and emerging needs. The next review will occur at the end of 2026, to initiate a four year-review cycle which aligns with each Term of Council and Vision to Focus planning cycle.

Resourcing

The City’s jurisdiction is clearly defined through, and limited by, legislation and resources. Therefore, the Agricultural Action Plan for Burlington focuses on actions that will specifically address local municipal concerns and not duplicate or infringe on actions more effectively dealt with by another agency or level of government. The plan is designed to target actions, avoid duplication and focus in areas where the City can be most effective.

At this time, the actions and sub-actions within the Plan are intended to establish a set of key priorities to guide future work. Many of the larger actions will require multi-jurisdictional partnerships and long-term coordination, meaning the City would have a supporting role versus a leadership role. As the City settles into its expanded planning responsibilities for Rural and Agricultural Systems post Regional transition, more detailed work plans will be developed to implement the actions and clarify the City’s roles and responsibilities, including timing and resourcing.

ⁱ **Census farm** refers to a farm, ranch or other agricultural operation that produces at least one of the following products intended for sale: crops, livestock, poultry, animal products, greenhouse or nursery products, Christmas trees, mushrooms, sod, honey or bees, and maple syrup products. Also included are feedlots, greenhouses, mushroom houses and nurseries; farms producing Christmas trees, fur, game (animals and birds), sod, maple syrup, or fruit and berries; beekeeping and poultry hatchery operations; operations with alternative livestock (bison, deer, elk, llamas, alpacas, wild boars, etc.) or alternative poultry (ostriches, emus, etc.), when the animal or derived products are intended for sale; backyard gardens if agricultural products are intended for sale; and operations involved in boarding horses, riding stables, and stables for housing or training horses, even if no agricultural products are sold. Sales in the previous 12 months are not required, but there must be the intention to sell.

ⁱⁱ **Gross farm receipt** refers to the gross farm receipts of the agricultural operation in the year prior to Census or the last complete accounting (fiscal) year. This includes receipts from all agricultural products sold, program payments and custom work receipts. It does not include sales forestry products (firewood, pulpwood, logs, fence posts, pilings, etc.), of capital items (quota, land, machinery, etc.), or receipts from the sale of any goods purchased only for retail sales. It is gross receipts before deducting expenses.