

Farmers aim for paradigm shift

By David Fleischer

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The agriculture industry is rallying to change your thinking about how food gets from the farm to your plate.

“The opportunities are endless here,” Greater Toronto Area Agricultural Action Committee executive director Janet Horner told members of the region’s planning committee. “The largest landowner in the greenbelt is the farmer.”

That’s contrary to perceptions urbanization might make food processing and farming a losing bet in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, action committee chairperson Nick Ferri said.

Increasingly, urban residents are seeing local food as a foundation for healthy living, he said.

The pair was on hand to ask the region’s support for a new action plan aimed at uniting the disparate industry and promoting local food across the GTA.

The plan was formally launched in Niagara Region last weekend, where local food and wine were on the menu.

“We are, in my mind, the centre of the universe,” said Ontario Federation of Agriculture director Peter Lambrick at the launch in Vineland.

“What people don’t recognize is agriculture plays a very central role financially in this province,” Environment Minister Jim Bradley said.

“To those in agriculture ... and production, I am deeply grateful to you. I am hopeful this will be a viable pathway to the future.”

The Greater Golden Horseshoe agriculture and food production sector is the second biggest on the continent and the agricultural action committee wants it to grow to become a world leader, Mr. Ferri told regional councillors.

The land has been protected through legislation such as the Greenbelt and Oak Ridges Moraine acts, but how to make the farmers working that land more successful is a bigger question.

“At the end of the day, this is a heck of an ambitious thing,” Holland Marsh Growers’ Association executive director Jamie Reaume said. “This is about everything. That’s the beauty of it.”

For a long time, the industry needed a long-term plan dealing with the connections between farming, production and consumers. It finally has one in place, he said.

The problem to date, he said, is the industry is dominated by individual,

entrepreneurial farming operations.

Collectively, however, they're responsible for 780,000 jobs and is the biggest industry in the province besides automotive, he said.

The estimated value of agriculture and food processing in the Greater Golden Horseshoe to the province's economy is \$12.3 billion.

Beyond just hitting consumers at the supermarket, there are opportunities to work with schools, catering businesses and other enterprises to make local food a staple, Mr. Reaume said.

Markham, for example, has led the way, implementing a local food policy affecting things such as how food is procured for the town hall cafeteria.

Co-operation across the various sectors is key, as is making a concerted effort to educate the public. Education is particularly important in a region such as York, Mr. Reaume said, where there's an urbanized bottom end, a rural top end and something indistinct in between.

He cited Newmarket streets as places you might suddenly encounter a tractor rumbling down the street, evidence of where farming infrastructure overlaps with urban.

"In York Region, that urban-rural line is not a blurry line anymore," Mr. Reaume said. "It's all over the place."

Regional council endorsed the plan, but no funding, for now.