



THE REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY OF NIAGARA

REPORT TO: Chair and Members of
Planning Services Committee

SUBJECT: Final Report – Agricultural Task Force
*Securing A Legacy for Niagara's Agricultural Land:
A Vision from One Voice*

RECOMMENDATIONS

That this Committee recommend to Regional Council:

1. That Regional Council endorse the report of the Agricultural Task Force "A Vision from One Voice";
2. That the report be presented to the Province and to the Provincial Greenbelt Task Force as what is required to ensure the long term viability of agriculture in Niagara;
3. That Regional staff be directed to proceed with implementation of the Task Force report; and
4. That this report be circulated to the Federal government, the Provincial government, relevant Provincial ministries, local municipalities, the Niagara Escarpment Commission, the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority, the Niagara Economic and Tourism Corporation, the Niagara Training Board and all other relevant agencies and organizations as the Region's approved strategy for the long term protection and promotion of agriculture in Niagara.

PURPOSE

The Agricultural Task Force report, "A Vision From One Voice" is attached. The Task Force prepared an initial discussion paper between January 2003 and October 2003 when it was circulated and comments solicited. Based on the input received, the Task Force produced this final report and now recommends that it be adopted as a long term strategy to support the viability and for the promotion of the agricultural industry in Niagara. Therefore the purpose of this report is to bring forward the Task Force's recommendations for endorsement by Regional Council.

BACKGROUND

Summary

The Regional Agricultural Economic Impact Study, completed in June 2003 confirmed the critical importance of agriculture in Niagara. This study concluded that agriculture generates an annual economic impact of approximately \$1.8 billion within Niagara. The \$511 million in gross farm receipts generated in the Region in 2001 resulted in an estimated \$400 million in direct sales, \$562 million in indirect sales and \$832 million in induced sales in that year. Niagara ranks first in the province in terms of agricultural productivity with average gross farm receipts of \$2,195.00 per acre.

As a whole, the agricultural sector in Niagara is healthy. It is based on a highly productive, non-renewable land base that, because of a combination of climate, physiography, soil and location is unique in Canada. Its strength is enhanced by the diversity and depth of the industry in the Region. Over 50% of the Niagara land base is farmed and there is a strong network of services and industries tied to agriculture. The indirect benefits provided by agriculture to the quality of life for residents and the tourism experience for visitors are essential to what defines Niagara and distinguishes it from other regions of the Country. A healthy agricultural sector in Niagara benefits all residents, both of the Region and of the Province.

Although the Agricultural Economic Impact Study confirmed the importance of agriculture to Niagara, it also identified some disturbing trends. While the number of acres under production is relatively steady, the amount of rental land being farmed is growing. This reluctance, or inability, of farmers to make capital investment in land generally points to vulnerability of the land base. Sectors of the industry are experiencing pressure from foreign competition and are vulnerable to increases in the value of the Canadian dollar, discrepancies in service levels, costs of inputs, access to services and delays at the border. There is the pressure for urban expansions, and urban-type uses and related infrastructure are encroaching into agricultural areas.

History of the Task Force

The Agricultural Task Force was established as the result of a panel discussion on the concept of an agricultural preserve at the 2nd Annual Smarter Growth Niagara Summit held in November 2002. This discussion, coupled with the conclusions of the Regional Agricultural Economic Impact Study, underscored the need for a Task Force to make recommendations for the long term protection and promotion of agriculture in Niagara. At a breakfast forum held in January of 2003, representatives from all of the agricultural sectors in Niagara were identified and on this basis, with additional representation from government and interest groups associated with agriculture the membership of the Task Force was set.

Members include:

Norm Beal, Peninsula Ridge Estates Winery
Jim Garrett, Mori Nurseries
Fred High, Highview Farms
Jill Hildreth, Regional Councillor, Lincoln
Gracia Janes, Preservation of Agricultural Lands Society
Rej Picard, Westbrook Greenhouses
Bill Schenck, Schenck Farms
Ray Duc, President, Grape Growers of Ontario
Len Troup, President, Ontario Tender Fruit Producers Marketing Board
Albert Witteveen, Poultry Industry, Councillor – Twp. Of West Lincoln
Debbie Zimmerman, Regional Councillor, Grimsby
Donald Ziraldo, President and Co-Founder, Inniskillin Wines Inc.

The Task Force met over the next seven months and prepared a discussion paper as the basis for public consultation. Following Regional Council's endorsement of the Discussion Paper for consultation in November 2003, presentations were made to the following organizations:

- *All twelve Niagara-area municipal Councils*
- *The Board of Directors of the Niagara Economic and Tourism Corporation*
- *The Niagara Escarpment Commission*
- *The Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority*
- *The Honourable Steve Peters, Ontario Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, as well as Deputy Ministers of Agriculture & Tourism Ministries and Niagara-area MPP representatives*
- *Brock University's 'Eco-Summit'*
- *University of Guelph*
- *The Provincial Greenbelt Task Force*
- *Various agricultural commodity groups*
- *Editorial Boards of the St. Catharines Standard and the Hamilton Spectator*

During this time, along with feedback from the above presentations, many individuals and other organizations shared their views on the Discussion Paper. It was made available to anyone who inquired, and was posted on the Region's website throughout the consultation phase. Also, members of the Task Force attended an Open House event in the Town of Lincoln regarding the Discussion Paper – this Open House was held some weeks following the formal presentation that was made at Lincoln Council.

The feedback on the Discussion Paper was positive, constructive and robust. The feedback received was reviewed by the Task Force and was duly considered as part of preparing the Final Report.

It is important to point out the role of Task Force members themselves, in the consultation phase. Many attended the various presentations listed above. Also, as a central tenet of the Task Force mandate, the individual representatives functioned as communication conduit to the network of producers across many commodity groups, while concurrently providing the primary public participation that is the basis for the stakeholder-led Task Force.

This consultation is now complete and after considering all of the submissions the Task Force has finalized a strategy to support the long term viability and for the promotion of agriculture in Niagara.

This report contains a summary of this strategy. For complete understanding, reference should be made to the document, "A Vision From One Voice": in which the comprehensive strategy is laid out.

REPORT

The Strategy

The Agricultural Task Force report contains a strategy for ensuring the long-term success of agriculture in Niagara. It is intended to become a working document that acts as a guideline for future policy and a measure against which actions will be tested. The strategy consists of a bundle of actions to be taken by all levels of government, in the short and long term to ensure the health of agriculture in Niagara.

Basis -The Vision for Agriculture in Niagara.

The basis for the strategy is a comprehensive vision for agriculture in Niagara. The vision articulated by the Task Force is as follows:

Agriculture in Niagara is a diverse, multi-faceted industry based on a very special, limited, non-renewable resource created by a unique combination of physiography, soil, location and climate. The strength, stability and diversity of this industry is recognized and will be promoted and protected so it can continue to grow and evolve for the benefit of present and future generations.

Components of the Strategy

Financial

Profitability is critical to the ongoing survival of agriculture. The tools available to promote profitability include:

- Tax incentives. The cost of tax incentive programs for agriculture should be borne at the federal and provincial level. A strong agricultural industry in Niagara is a national benefit, the costs should be borne nationally;
- Productive value assessment should be implemented to counter inflated values created by those seeking lifestyle rather than a career in agriculture;
- Assessment protocols should be adjusted so farm related value added operations are not taxed at full commercial or industrial rates; and
- Tariffs and fees that are rationalized both nationally and internationally.

Farm Related Programs

The Province should be lobbied to continue support for programs such as plum pox eradication, integrated pest management and minimum use registration.

The Vineland Research Centre was a world class Niagara specific research facility but it is in decline. This decline should be reversed. With programs such as the Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute at Brock University, the teaching winery and horticulture programs at Niagara College and the programs offered through the Niagara Parks Commission there is potential for Niagara to be a centre for agricultural research specifically geared to the crops grown in Niagara that have a broader benefit..

Land Use Planning

There are a variety of community planning tools that must work together to protect the land, the farmer and the support structure required for both to thrive. Without good land and a favourable climate viable agriculture is not achievable. The required controls include:

- Strengthening provincial policies designed to protect the land base. The policies in the Provincial Policy Statement that allow re-designation of land for urban expansion, infill and non-agricultural uses should be removed.
- The Regional Growth Strategy implemented through the Regional Official Plan should be strengthened and given additional support through associated initiatives. Growth should be directed to designated urban areas and urban boundaries should be firm. Currently there are approximately 8,000 acres of vacant industrial land and sufficient designated land to accommodate approximately 70,000 housing units (approximately 1,500 units are built per year) within the urban areas in Niagara. Managing growth means directing it to designated areas. Where this has implications for assessment, innovative tax policies including the further investigation of pooled assessment, is warranted.

- An integral part of the growth strategy is the long-term goal of a multi modal mid peninsula transportation corridor. While it is recognized that this is not an immediate solution, preservation of agricultural land is a long-term commitment and in the long term this will be a critical tool.
- Unique and prime lands, as mapped on Figure 1 in the strategy should receive the highest level of protection. This map was based on and would defer to the Official Plan schedules. The designations recognize that all of the unique and prime land constitutes a limited, non-renewable Canadian resource and that maintaining it as a cohesive agricultural unit greatly increases its value. Fragmentation of the resource depletes its value and makes the business of farming needlessly less profitable and hindered by non farm activity. It is acknowledged that additional work may be required to confirm the areas of unique and prime land immediately south of the Escarpment. Studies to confirm the location of the resource in this area should be done as quickly as possible.
- Local municipalities have a critical role to play in implementing effective land use controls. Concern was expressed in the consultation that the Task Force was recommending a reduced municipal role. This is not the case. It is recognized that local municipalities are essential partners in the successful implementation of controls to support the farmer and protect agricultural land.
- In the early 1990's Regional Niagara in partnership with the Province, developed a program entitled the "Niagara Tender Fruit Lands Program". This laid out a process for creating agricultural easements, one that was supported by the Region and the agricultural community. A lot of work went into the development of this program. The concept should be revisited for possible implementation
- Tools such as land trusts may have a place in the box of tools for protecting agricultural land. However they must be structured in a way that is responsive to the ongoing realities of agriculture as a business and that does not permit monopolies to develop or land to stagnate through under utilization.
- Planning for infrastructure should be done with the needs of the agricultural community in mind. Expansion of urban style infrastructure that will encourage urban development, should not be allowed in agricultural areas, development of farm friendly infrastructure (irrigation, three phase power, appropriate road standards to accommodate farm vehicles) should be encouraged.

Bundled together and cohesively applied, it is the opinion of the Task Force that these tools will effectively protect the agricultural land base.

Legislation

There is a myriad of legislation working independently, making demands on farmers. At all levels of government, the rules and regulations affecting agriculture should be harmonized, rationalized and simplified.

The American market is critical. Access to it needs to be secured and steps taken to harmonize cross border and even cross continent regulations. The need for “just in time” delivery means that border crossing must occur in a timely fashion with a minimum of process.

Legislation that works against the use of local products should be reviewed and revised. Producers and processors need to be involved in this review so there is a balance in legislation that addresses the survival of the local producer while acknowledging the realities of the global market place.

Right to farm legislation has helped with the issues that negatively impact the farmers’ ability to operate their businesses. However it has not shifted the burden of responsibility for accommodating off site agricultural impacts such as odour, dust and hours of operation from the farmer to those who chose to live in agricultural areas. Amendments to strengthen the provincial legislation and consideration of Niagara specific “right to farm” legislation should be considered.

Agriculture in Niagara is extremely diverse and some of the non-traditional components are amongst the strongest economic contributors and supporters of the agricultural service infrastructure. A definition of agriculture which recognizes and accommodates this diversity while protecting the essence of what makes the activity “agricultural” will be established. It will be structured to ensure that it does not preclude an agricultural activity in the future that is not anticipated today.

Economic Development

The Niagara brand has strong recognition. This recognition should be capitalized through support for programs to “Buy Niagara”. Other levels of government should be encouraged to implement “buy local” policies in local institutions and government offices. Other commodities would benefit from programs implemented by the wine industry which has done an excellent job of promoting local wines. This success should be expanded to include initiatives such as creating VQA wine stores where smaller producers could sell Niagara wines to a broader market. Space for Ontario wines should be increased in the LCBO and supported with a “Buy Ontario” program. Other commodity producers should promote similar initiatives to promote Niagara products.

Farmers are small businessmen operating independently. Programs to assist them in establishing coordinated marketing initiatives would be beneficial. The accessory activities to farm operations such as farm gate stands, farm markets, and agricultural festivals should be part of the promotion.

There is opportunity in Niagara to enhance or create clusters of agriculturally based activity that contribute to all elements of the economy. Currently there are a number of examples of successful clusters; the wine cluster, the greenhouse cluster, the poultry cluster and the emerging carbohydrate cluster in Port Colborne. The NETC and local economic development departments have been successfully promoting these clusters but additional opportunities exist. These should be identified and pursued.

As part of economic development initiatives support for the agricultural service industry should be addressed. Services for agriculture are as important as the resource itself. Support for it should be forthcoming through planning controls which permit the uses and where appropriate, economic development initiatives to promote them.

Agricultural Representation

Where farm interests are involved, farmers should be represented and consulted. Farmers should sit on boards of organizations such as the NPCA, NEC or the NETC. Some of the issues that cause the greatest concern amongst farmers include:

- Designation of environmentally protected land that impacts agricultural operations;
- Preservation of wildlife corridors and habitat and resultant crop damage; and
- Salt damage from road maintenance.

Farmers are subject to a myriad of legislative requirements that add a huge administrative burden to the cost of farming. These regulations need to be harmonized and reduced. Where there is not already a commitment, farmers should be involved in decisions affecting their land.

Implementation

Cooperation

For the strategy to be successful, cooperation across government and agency lines is essential. The Federal Government, the Province, the Region, the local municipalities and organizations such as the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC), the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority (NPCA), the Niagara Economic and Tourism Corporation (NETC) and the agencies and boards appointed to carry out government programs must support the strategy in the implementation of their programs and policies. Strength and success will depend on this. As they are developed and implemented, policies, programs and actions at all levels of government and by all agencies must be measured against the strategy. Where there are conflicts, these must be acknowledged and addressed. In establishing the strategy. The Task Force set out goals and tests against which actions should be tested. The Task Force's goals should form the framework for decisions; the criteria, the test of success.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the strategy required to manage the agricultural resource so it is strong and productive into the future is based on tools that include:

- Financial support;
- Farm Related Programs
- Land use planning;
- Legislative amendments; and
- Promotion of the industry.

Flexibility is key and the need to create an environment where profitability is possible is critical. Regional Niagara has the position, credibility, and hopefully the will, to implement the strategy. In doing so the support of farmers will be essential.

Comments were made that the Task Force only represented the agricultural voice. There is no apology for this. To establish a strategy to preserve agricultural land you must start with those who create the value from the resource and have been responsible for protecting what survives today. Without the farmer there would be no reason to preserve the land. They must be an integral part of solutions to protect it.

Submitted by:

Mike Trojan
Chief Administrative Officer

This report has been prepared by Margaret Walton of the firm Planscape, with assistance and input from Patrick Robson, Director of Corporate Strategy and Corwin Cambray, Commissioner of Planning Services.