

Action being taken to market Ontario farmers

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By Matthew Strader, Enterprise Staff

The Greater Toronto Area Agriculture Action Committee (GTA AAC) is working with the City of Hamilton, the Niagara Region and the Holland Marsh Grower's Association to develop a strategy to benefit GTA farmers.

According to a news release, the "anticipated outcome of this project is not just another consulting report, but a 10-year plan that will serve as a blueprint for progress."

The committee recently announced important funding granted to their project from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada through the Canadian Agricultural Adaptation Program (CAAP).

The benefit, they say, will be an improved marketing strategy for farmers who are great producers, but don't have the resources available to be great marketers.

"We live very luckily surrounding one of the largest populations in North America and we don't always connect very well with them," said Peter Lambrick, chair of the GTA AAC. "We need to do a better job of making that connection directly with the population. We have North America's second largest processing sector in the GTA between Peel, York and Toronto. Once again, we are not making a good connection with that group. We need to know how to. How do we better have a dialogue with them to know who they are, what they want and can we deal directly with them?"

According to Lambrick, and project co-ordinator Barb Shopland, the problem is simply that many local farmers don't have a productive marketing plan for their products, or even a working knowledge of the most profitable products they can produce and whom they can locally produce them for.

And of course, there is also the added benefit of using a defined strategy to reinforce a commitment to the agriculture industry, and push for more governmental support to an industry that often sees its biggest producers struggle to make ends meet.

"It's putting together a strategy, and most importantly an action plan for the future," said Shopland. "When we look at the Golden Horseshoe and the Holland Marsh, which is prime agricultural land for Ontario, we all think farming is great and have been doing it for hundreds of years, but we live in an agri-food system and there are tons of questions today about whether agri-food is a viable business."

To Shopland, it comes down to a simple fundamental question.

"To steal a quote from Joni Mitchell, do we pave paradise and put up a parking lot, put up a business? Is it financially viable to get into this industry? We need to make that decision. Are we just going to import food, or are we going to support our farmers? Our local food producers?"

The GTA AAC would like to think that creating a marketing plan for GTA farmers is going to better define their available revenue streams, open the doors to new markets for farmers and create a stronger network for Ontario's food producers. According to Lambrick and Shopland, the growth of the GTA has opened new markets that many farming communities are not aware of. Awareness of those markets will only increase profits and viability and through that, create a stronger industry.

"If you look at the growing ethnic groups, they're (farmers) not appealing to this diverse demographic. How do we attract ethnic farmers? How do we start growing ingredients that are sellable to these markets? There is a whole new market available, and we need to look at that," said Shopland.

"We're very good producers, we're just not very good marketers," added Lambrick. "Therefore we need to define the markets and start the dialogues as to what the market wants, then we can hopefully produce what it's looking for. Beans travel a long way to the Asian market, but we can grow very good beans right here in Ontario."

It's about getting farmers in touch with their consumers, added Shopland. Through that strategy they believe that a strong industry can be further strengthened and solidified not only for the benefit of farmers, but for all Ontarians.

"If you put up wall and locked down Toronto we would only have one to two day's food for our population," said Shopland. "Farmer's are sweating to death trying to make a living, they could just stop and become auto mechanic's right?"

"We have to make the decision, do we want to import all of our food, or do we want to support the people who grow it."

The goal, according to the report, is to create an action plan that will guide an environmentally and socially responsible agriculture industry.

This funding will begin that process.