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Farming could be Niagara's No. 1 economic driver: Lincoln mayor

By BLAIR BURGESS, SPECIAL TO THE STANDARD

If nurtured by government and industry, the Golden Horseshoe's \$35-billion food production and processing sector could grow dramatically over the next decade while helping consumers eat healthier, says a new study ordered by a group of agricultural action committees.

That's a "positive move" for Niagara families, farmers and processors, say local food experts who attended a brainstorming session last week centered on the study's release and development of a subsequent 10-year action plan.

The lengthy study looked at the entire area between Holland Marsh in the north, Durham in the east and Niagara to the south.

"I would expect us to see significant growth in Niagara (over the next decade)," said Lincoln Mayor Bill Hodgson, who took part in the Mississauga summit of farmers, processors, retailers and public servants.

"I think there's a great potential to expand."

Hodgson, who chairs Niagara Region's agricultural task force, said farming and food processing has the potential to be Niagara's No. 1 economic driver if there's a stable "level of investment and innovation in the commercialization of our products" by government and industry.

"There's a real tendency out there to underestimate the importance of the food and agricultural industry to both our health and well-being and to economic growth," he said in a telephone interview.

"Our action plan is intended to ensure all stakeholders along the value chain recognize the outstanding opportunities for growing the industry."

By 2021, the mayor envisions new crop varieties and food processing techniques in Niagara to service consumer demand, including the GTA's rapidly expanding ethnic market, "on a year-round basis."

That, he said, could help reverse the region's troubling trend of food plant closures.

"There's a need for research and for stability in the profitability of the industry so you can focus on taking advantage of some of the opportunities there," he said. "We really need to ensure we keep the industry alive."

Shopping at a local grocery store known for promoting Ontario products, Irina Tsenz of St. Catharines said the government should support domestic food production and processing where possible to "create more work for locals."

"This way, we would support (the Ontario food industry) and the money wouldn't go anywhere else," she said, adding the quality of locally produced food she buys is "good."

More Ontario food on local grocery shelves is all well and good, says west St. Catharines farmer Arden Vaughn, but only if there's a profit for those who produce it.

"How is it going to improve our life?" she said of the 10-year action plan.

"Are we going to have a better bottom line that we can live on?"

Vaughn, owner of rural Lake Land Meats and Farm Market, attended last week's summit in her capacity as a director of the Niagara North Federation of Agriculture, and a member of Niagara Region's agricultural task force and agricultural subcommittee.

She said the 10-year action plan is a positive move that has left her "cautiously optimistic" about the future of food production and processing in Niagara.

But she said the government needs to do more groundwork in Niagara, such as improving irrigation, to help it reach its potential.

"There need to be incentives out there, financial or otherwise," she said, noting the region has suffered the loss of numerous food production businesses in recent years, including the closures of fruit processing plants, and a slaughterhouse that helped service the meat production side of her business.