



# Message from the Chair

October 16, 2011

When I accepted the position as Chair of the Greater Toronto Area Agriculture Action Committee (GTAAAC), one of my mandates was to have a better communication plan for the stakeholders of this organization. It appears that lately, I have not lived up to my own expectations, especially when it comes to the people that I am representing--namely, the farming community. Admittedly, this is partially due to the time commitment of managing the harvest on my farm in the last several months.

But the other factor is the frustratingly slow process of getting the wording right on the Golden Horseshoe Food & Farming Action Plan 2021 that we have been working on for the last eighteen months. This process was originally scheduled to be completed in late spring and it was planned to have a 'close to final draft' ready by the summer to present to our stakeholders for comment. So, here we are, approaching the middle of October and still no agreement on the wording. As someone used to working with nature's schedule, this harvest seems never-ending!

One of the contentious subjects continues to be the discussion of the Greenbelt, which was established to preserve green space and agricultural land. As farmers in Peel, we made our voice very clear, starting back in 2003 when the Town of Caledon was reviewing its official plan and wanted to preserve agricultural land, and in more recent years at the Greenbelt consultation meetings. We said there was no sense preserving the land if you did nothing to help preserve the economic viability of the farmers. If farmers are profitable, farming will be sustainable. If farmers are profitable, land will be preserved for farming.

Over 90 per cent of Ontarians agree that the Greenbelt is one of the most important contributions to the future of our Province, and 93 per cent strongly support it. A greenspace was created within sight of some of the most densely-populated areas in Canada. Unchecked growth and development was halted on the near urban lands. 1.8 million acres of farmland are in the Greenbelt.

But the same support or enthusiasm for the Greenbelt does not come from the farmers who farm the Greenbelt lands. The Greenbelt has created uncertainty for the future of farming in near urban areas. Farmers cannot plan for the future if they feel that their land may be subject to political whims. They cannot plan for expansion if they have no access to water, three-phase power or gas. The protection of Greenbelt lands has not provided protection for the farmer and the business of farming.

Recently the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation held consultations on how the money that has been given to them should be spent. The GTAAAC sent some of our

members to consultations in Aurora and Halton Hills. One of the messages conveyed at the consultations was that the Foundation needed to engage the farm community before the review of the Greenbelt that is due in 2015. It will be imperative that the review incorporates ideas that will come from the experience of the impacted farm community.

Peel farmers have made it abundantly clear that they want no expansion of the Greenbelt in Peel. Because the GTAAAC was initiated to facilitate farming and to help make farming economically viable in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), we have to articulate Peel's wishes. The Peel Federation of Agriculture is currently reviewing the wording of our strategy document to ensure that they can support the vision of the Golden Horseshoe Food & Farming Action Plan for the next ten years of farming in the near-urban areas. Other Federations of Agriculture in the Golden Horseshoe will be given the same opportunity to comment shortly.

We are confident that we will soon have a version that everyone will be able to support. With the diverse views around the table, we are never going to be able to make everyone completely happy, but we can move forward on the items that we find agreement on. There is a lot of good work to be done and we actually have some partners that are 'chomping on the bit', wanting to get started. In advance of the document being finalized, two organizations did ask to have presentations on the draft Action Plan. These organizations were the Regional Planning Commissioners of Ontario (RPCO) and the GTA Countryside Mayors Alliance. Recognizing the document is still in draft format, we received some very favourable comments from the groups with suggestions on how to bring the plan forward to the municipalities for buy-in.

One of my big lessons as Chair is that communications is key to a healthy, productive organization. It is more than writing a bi-weekly letter and more than attending the multitude of meetings that I have as the Chair of the GTAAAC. Communications is as much about listening as it is about talking. It is a two-way process that will help us all move towards our common goals.

Respectfully,  
Nick Ferri, Chair, GTAAAC

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