

Golden Horseshoe dubbed a food production cluster

Agricultural production and food processing generates \$12.3 billion a year in the region

BY GLENN POWELL
Ontario Farmer

Mississauga - They came from all regions of the Golden Horseshoe - from Durham to Niagara and north to the Holland Marsh; they represented farm organizations, municipal councils and planners, educators, consumers, food processors and grocery retailers.

More than 100 leaders from the agri-food sector gathered here for a one day session to develop an Action Plan that will, during the next 10 years, serve as a platform for profit and progress for all sectors of the food chain.

“Today we begin the first steps toward making sustainability more than just a word – but rather a resolute frame of mind, backed with real actions, real co-operation and real partnerships,” stated Nick Ferri, in his opening address to the workshop participants.

Ferri, a Peel Region fruit grower and chair of the Greater Toronto Area Agricultural Action Committee (GTAAAC), referred to a long history of studies, reports and recommendations that have failed to translate into action. By setting out clear goals, timelines and measures of success in an Action Plan, he is confident that the pitfalls of the past will be avoided.

The goal, Ferri said, is to have “a functional action plan where all participants in the value chain are fully aligned and committed to the success of the food and farming cluster.”

Economic studies completed for the Action Plan point to the overwhelming importance of the agri-food sector in the region:

- Agricultural production and food processing in the GH represent \$12.3 billion and the economic multiplier effect takes that total to \$34.7 billion annually.
- GTA has the second largest food production/processing cluster in North America
- Employment in the food sector far outstrips the auto sector – 55,000 vs 35,000 jobs
- Ranking by gross farm receipts in the region, greenhouse production is number one by a wide margin, followed by poultry and egg,

nursery products, fruit and dairy

Planning consultant Margaret Walton urged the workshop participants to develop an Action Plan that will grow the farm/food sector in the region. “The task is formidable, but the rewards can be great,” she said.

An Action Plan implemented, she suggested, would lead to increased on-farm prosperity, more urban employment opportunities and a sustainable food supply for the region.

Bob Seguin, executive director of the George Morris Centre, recommended “looking

beyond the traditional.”

Market opportunities will not always be world-scale, Seguin said, but will present themselves as regional, or local, niche market openings. “You will need to study the competition and learn from both the successes and the failures,” he told the workshop attendees as they ‘set sail’ to develop the Action Plan.

The ideas, opinions, and views that flowed from the roundtable discussions were as numerous as the participants themselves – perhaps nothing really new put on the table but from the sessions came a wide

range of recommendations designed to ensure the GH a position as a global leader in agri-food innovation.

Among the many ‘Action’ items included were: develop a ‘one window’ regulatory approvals process, attract the best and brightest of agri-food researchers, increase communication and co-operation within the agri-food sector, develop food incubators and commercialization centres, focus on value-added innovation, seek market opportunities in public institution procurement and increase agri-food education in the

school system.

The March 30 stakeholder consultation represented a key step in the development of the GTA Action Plan. From the long list of action items recommended, the consultants will work to consolidate items and establish priorities.

A workshop summary is to be ready by April 30 and stakeholder committee members are to develop partnerships and alliances that will see the ten-year strategy deliver on its goal to significantly increase the economic impact of the Golden Horseshoe agri-food sector.

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