



YORK REGION

FEDERATION OF AGRICULTURE

SERVING THE FARM COMMUNITY SINCE 1940

June 10, 2021

Regional Municipality of York
17250 Yonge Street
Newmarket, Ontario
L3Y 6Z1

Attention: Chair Emmerson and Regional Council

Dear Sir/Madam:

**Re: Regional Official Plan Update
Policy Directions Report (June 10, 2021 - Agenda Item H.2.4)**

The York Region Federation of Agriculture, a non-profit organization which has been in operation for 80 years. At present, it represents 650 registered farm business in York Region that are members of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. The OFA is the largest general farm organization in Ontario, representing 38,000 farm families across the province. A farmer-led organization based in Guelph, the OFA works to represent and champion the interests of Ontario farmers through government relations, farm policy recommendations, research, lobby efforts, community representation, media relations and more. As the local voice for agriculture, the York Region Federation of Agriculture advocates on behalf of the agriculture industry and on issues, legislation and regulations as well as decisions that will affect agriculture in the future.

We understand that urban growth and development matters. It's important for economic growth and prosperity. The agricultural industry also contributes to economic growth and prosperity. Where our food comes from matters. If we weren't aware of it before, the COVID-19 pandemic certainly has highlighted the necessity and demand for local food production. Consumers, now more than ever before, are looking for locally grown produce.

York Region Federation of Agriculture has been monitoring the Region's Municipal Comprehensive Review process and the related update reports submitted for Council's consideration; the latest of which being on today's agenda. YRFA specifically draws attention to Map 1A of Attachment 2 to this report. We recognize that this mapping is considered "Draft for Consultation", however, we are surprised that it indicates some blanket down-designation of Prime Agricultural lands. In specific, it identifies lands which are proposed to be redesignated from Agriculture Area to Rural Area in the Greenbelt. We note that such proposed redesignation has not been completely vetted. We are concerned that there is no discussion about this blanket redesignation within the Analysis section of this report. We are aware that an application has been submitted for a Regional Official Plan Amendment relating to some of these lands and that the December 3, 2020 Policy Directions Report states that,

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“..staff are proposing Rural or equivalent designation with permitted uses in line with and conforming to those permitted within the protected countryside of the Greenbelt Plan.”

This type of down-designation should not be considered lightly and must be subject to complete and detailed analysis such as an agriculture impact study and consultation with appropriate public and agencies. We are concerned that this has not taken place and that this “draft” mapping could be construed as being the position of staff and Region Council in absence of such vetting.

According to the Land Needs Assessment Report of March 18, 2021, approximately 3,400 ac most of which is agricultural land in the Whitebelt will be used for urban development by 2051. YRFA is very concerned about this loss of agricultural land. If York Region wants to ensure that food supply for its current and future residents is protected, then Regional Council should be very concerned about the loss of agricultural land as well. Just as an example the ROPA 7 proposal currently before the Region, if approved, would end up removing 176 ac or 71 ha of Prime Agriculture land. That Represents only a portion of the Greenbelt Fingers. YRFA would like to know how many additional acres of Prime Agricultural land are being proposed to be redesignated to rural in the Greenbelt fingers as shown in the mapping of todays Report?

The Provincial Policy Statement specifically refers to the protection of Prime Agricultural Areas for long-term use for agriculture. We note that the PPS specifically speaks to the designation of prime agricultural areas and retaining such designations to ensure that agricultural activities are sustained. The vision of the Greenbelt Plan is to protect quality agricultural areas, provide flexibility for appropriate farm uses, strengthen the agricultural system by considering the impacts of development on agricultural areas and planning for local food and near-urban agricultural uses. The proposed down-designation would not reflect any of these objectives.

To truly support and promote agriculture, it must go beyond just words in policies and translate into action taken to protect the agricultural land base into the future. Blanket redesignation of Prime Agricultural areas is precedent setting and therefore would result in the depletion of the significant natural resource afforded to us in the form of rich agricultural soils not only here in York, but could see other Regions repeating this action across the entire Greenbelt.

It is a stated objective in the current York Region Official Plan to protect Agricultural and Holland Marsh Specialty Crop Areas for the future to ensure a sustainable agricultural industry. The York Region Agriculture and Agri-Food Sector Strategy states, a crucial element that drives prosperity across the agri-food sector is access to prime agricultural lands.

The York Region Edge Planning Background Report speaks to the importance of farmland not only for the production of food and its direct economic benefits but also its benefits to surrounding urban residents in the form of such things as water filtration, carbon sequestration, pollination, and on-site farmers markets. Farmland that supports food production is a finite and shrinking resource.

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Only 5% of Ontario's landscape can support the growth of food for human consumption. With an ever-growing population, that means farmers are having to produce more food and a declining land base. The agri-food sector depends on farmland to effectively produce food, fibre and fuel. Farmland preservation is vital to ensure the next generation has a strong, reliable food supply. Once it's paved over, it's gone forever.

We continue to take the position that to truly protect for agriculture into the future, the designation of prime agricultural areas in the Greenbelt needs to remain.

Yours truly,

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