

Quebec's agricultural preserve a pattern to follow

By Rick DeGraaf

Maybe it's time to rethink the process for preserving farmland in Ontario. Maybe it's time we learn from Quebec.

Consider what our provincial neighbours did to preserve farmland with the introduction of their Bill 23. The entire province below the 50th parallel was declared an agriculture preserve — and when the bill took effect, even the city of Montreal had to appeal for a “nonconforming” use. The city had to apply to a special tribunal set up for that purpose — the Commission de protection du territoire agricole du Québec. Quebec ensured that they put an agency in place with the “teeth” to act.

In Ontario, in contrast, tension has developed in many regions through the implementation of the Greenbelt and the push to expand it. On two occasions I had the privilege of presenting a brief to Brant regional council as it wrestled with the proposed criteria and listened to delegations from developers, homeowners, farm organizations and other land resource preservation activists like myself. I appreciated the democratic process and honour those who have been elected, yet I also felt the tension even within the audience and the mayor and his council.

From the perspective of the Christian

Farmers Federation of Ontario, we believe all Class 1, 2 and 3 land needs to be zoned for agriculture — period. Exceptions need to be as few as possible. In some areas of the province we would even argue for a further expansion of the classification beyond the top 3. In today's climate of increasing grain prices and declining oil reserves, the pressure is on for agriculture to provide food and energy — and that takes land.

We should consider declaring all land in Ontario as greenbelt. Piecemeal attempts at trying to resolve who's in or out of the greenbelt at the municipal level isn't the way to go. It results in sharp distinctions in property values that are hard for people to stomach.

Such an approach would require that all non-agricultural activity obtain permission for a nonconforming use.

Let factories, secondary industry, housing and other uses be relegated to land of less value to farming and so protect our land resource. Let us use our land classification system to guide our planning.

Quebec did it to preserve the province's agricultural sovereignty. In Ontario, we should do likewise. We cannot depend on the boats from Brazil or anywhere else to supply our needs.

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