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PROPOSED GTA AGRICULTURAL ACTION PLAN

(Regional Council at its meeting on January 22, 2004, amended the foregoing Clause to include the following:

Staff be requested to prepare a report to Planning and Economic Development Committee, addressing what land is owned by third parties in the rural community.)

The Planning and Economic Development Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report, December 16, 2003, from the Commissioner of Planning and Development Services:

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. The Proposed GTA Agricultural Action Plan (*Attachment #1*) be endorsed in principle.
2. The Federal and Provincial Ministers of Agriculture be asked to be major sponsors of the implementation phase of the plan.
3. Staff be directed to begin working with partners to implement the plan, incorporating the ideas that came out of the symposium, including the following:
 - The preparation of a business plan to define potential costs and identify alternate sources of funding should be included as a first priority of implementation.
 - Action Items should be prioritized, identifying those actions that can be easily completed at little or no cost.
 - Clear timetables for implementation need to be assigned to the Action Items.
 - Measures of success should be defined for each item.
4. The implementation of action items affecting the Region be the subject of separate reports to Committee and Council.
5. The Region support the early formation of a GTA Agricultural Action Committee.
6. The Regional Chair be authorized to appoint York Region representatives as may be required.
7. A copy of the report and the Proposed GTA Agricultural Action Plan be forwarded by the Regional Clerk to the Agricultural Liaison Group and the nine local municipalities for information.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to:

- Provide an update on the GTA Agricultural Action Plan initiative.
- Give an overview of the Proposed GTA Agricultural Action Plan.
- Seek endorsement of the Plan from Regional Council subject to a list of suggested refinements.

3. BACKGROUND

Section 5.6 of the Region's Official Plan has the stated objective "To support a healthy and viable agricultural industry as a essential element of the Region's economy." To that end, the Regional Planning Commissioners of Ontario - GTA Caucus (Regions of Durham, Halton, Peel and York and the City of Toronto) and the GTA Federations of Agriculture have been working together to promote agriculture in the GTA through the development of an Action Plan for Agriculture in the GTA.

3.1 GTA Agricultural Workshop

A facilitated Workshop was held on Saturday, March 29, 2003, with over forty invited agricultural leaders to examine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to GTA agriculture. Members of York Region's farming community from the Agriculture Liaison Group and Federation of Agriculture as well as Regional staff were in attendance. The goal of the Workshop was to discuss ways of keeping the GTA agricultural industry competitive given the pressures faced by farmers.

3.2 Draft Action Plan and Focus Groups

Based on the discussions at the workshop, four themes or boxes were identified that were crafted into a draft Action Plan. The four themes were:

- Economic Development
- Education/Marketing
- Land Use Policy
- Accountability and Responsibility

Within each of the four themes, specific action items were developed to bring shape and direction to the Action Plan. Focus groups were assembled, with representatives from all levels of government, farmers, processors, media, educational institutions and from interest groups in and around the industry.

The task of the focus groups was to reflect on and test each of the four themes, scrutinize the action items and identify the group or agency that should be taking the responsibility and accountability to ensure that the item is completed. The focus groups also identified key stakeholders that could assist in completing each item.

3.1 Proposed Action Plan and Symposium

The feedback from the focus groups was gathered and revisions made to the Action Plan. The revised Proposed GTA Agricultural Action Plan was presented at a symposium held on November 22, 2003 in Halton Region. Over 120 people representing all levels of government, farmers, financial and educational institutions, community groups, processors and distributors engaged in dialogue about the proposed plan. The participants were supportive of the Proposed Plan and suggested the following refinements:

- A business plan should be completed that defines potential costs and identifies alternate sources of funding.
- Action items should be prioritized, identifying those actions that can be easily completed at little or no cost.
- Clear timetables for implementation need to be assigned to the Action Items.
- Measures of success should be defined for each item.
- Commitment from the senior levels of government is required for the success of the plan.

The Proposed GTA Agricultural Action Plan is included as Attachment #1 to this report. An overview of the plan is discussed in Section 4 below. York Region staff have played a leadership role in the initiative including the writing of the Action Plan and planning the March workshop and November symposium.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

The Proposed GTA Agricultural Action Plan (attached as Appendix A) is a road map to maintain and support a healthy GTA agricultural industry. The Plan is a product of extensive discussion and involvement from a wide spectrum of agencies and individuals in and around the agricultural industry. It contains 34 specific action items, which are grouped in the four sections or themes described in Section 3.3. Each action item, in turn, lists a suggested lead for the initiative as well as suggested participants.

4.1 Economic Development

Farms in the GTA contribute significantly to the local economy (1.3 Billion in gross farm receipts, 35,000 jobs). If agriculture is to survive and thrive, an economic strategy that capitalizes on the area's competitiveness and opportunities, addresses policies that deter agriculture, and attracts new business, investment and farmers must be implemented. The economic health of the industry is a shared responsibility of farmers, farm groups, and the federal, provincial and municipal governments, working co-operatively for success.

As the agricultural industry changes over time, new opportunities need to be defined and promoted in a co-ordinated fashion. The industry will require economic and business support as it evolves with changing market forces and consumer preferences. A comprehensive economic development program should address:

- changing consumer demand
- diversification options
- new technology
- business management skill
- tax policy
- production and processing quality and efficiency
- education and market development/promotion methods
- training and labour options
- overall co-ordination between producers, research and development organizations

Action items in the Economic Development Section are grouped into strategic directions:

- Defining and promoting new opportunities for products and processes in the GTA.
- Coordinating existing economic development initiatives.
- Addressing taxation fairness issues.

A key action item (number 7) recommends the establishment of a GTA Agricultural Action Committee to provide a co-ordinating function for agriculture in the GTA, share information, raise awareness of issues, act as liaison with the three levels of government and encourage innovation and diversification within the industry. Representation on the Action Committee would be a blend of individuals from the farming community, government agencies as well as value added private sector participants. This body, in collaboration with other partners, would carry the largest responsibility for implementing the Plan. It is recommended that Regional Council support the early establishment of the GTA Agricultural Action Committee and authorize the Regional Chair to appoint representatives to the Committee from York Region as required.

4.2 Education and Marketing

Theme area number two, Education and Marketing, captures the need to broaden the traditional audiences for agricultural issues. The aims of an education and marketing strategy are to:

- Raise awareness of the contribution of agriculture to the economy, environment and local and regional character of life in the GTA.
- Communicate the importance of preserving agricultural practices and land to allow the industry to remain viable.
- Promote local farm products as well as recreation, entertainment and education opportunities, as a means of expanding the markets for GTA agriculture.
- Recognize and support the role of urban gardens in supplying food and serving as an education tool for broader agricultural practices.
- Identify and build on existing marketing and education programs.
- Assess the impact and opportunities of the GTA's changing cultural diversity on the agriculture industry.

The action items were grouped around the following strategic directions:

- Identification of the key decision makers and influencers around agricultural issues.
- Co-ordination of existing education and marketing initiatives.

- Understanding the impacts of the evolving cultural diversity of the GTA marketplace.

4.3 Land Use Policy

There are two strategic directions for the Land Use Policy section of the Plan: 1) Protecting the agricultural land base; and 2) Complementary initiatives to keep farmers on GTA farms. The 12 action items that comprise the two strategic directions reflect the importance of having a continuum of supportive agricultural policy from the Provincial Policy Statement to Regional Official Plan to Local Official plan and finally to the local zoning by-law. Key action items include:

- Promoting compact urban form and firm urban boundaries.
- Strengthen the Provincial Policy Statement to protect the agricultural land base
- Investigate and evaluate new ways of protecting agricultural land such as land trusts
- Apply incentive based approaches to encourage farmers to protect natural areas
- Allow secondary uses on the farm, such as value-added processing or agri-tourism, to improve economic viability
- Adopt consistent transportation policies and programs for regional local roads to ensure safe movement of farm vehicles

An important component of the land use policy continuum involves the Region's work on Centres and Corridors. One of the most effective ways of protecting the agricultural land base is to create a framework through policy, programs, infrastructure and financial tools that reinforces an urban structure based on a series of centres connected by regional corridors served by higher order transit. Applying this type of framework as the foundation of effective growth management changes the pattern of growth from a greenfield based, expansion philosophy of growth to a city-building philosophy that promotes the efficient use of land and infrastructure.

York Region is well advanced to achieving these objectives through the "Making it Happen" Centres and Corridors strategy and Regional Council's commitment to seeing rapid transit in the Regional Corridors.

4.4 Accountability and Responsibility

A key challenge in identifying implementable directions to keep the GTA agricultural industry competitive is to define who is accountable and responsible. Currently, there are many government and non-government agencies, in addition to farmers themselves, with some involvement in advocating for agricultural interests.

To sustain agriculture as an industry in the GTA, co-operative working partnerships need to be built between government, agencies and the agricultural industry. The proposed Action Plan provides a framework that will lead to success by creating a sense of co-ownership among the many stakeholders involved in protection of the agricultural economy. Stakeholders in the industry will share the responsibility, decision-making and accountability for implementing the Agricultural Action Plan.

The structure of the Proposed Action Plan defines accountability and responsibility by identifying a lead agency and participants for each specific action item. Attaching

timeframes for delivery would strengthen accountability. Some action items may require funding in order to be delivered. Commitment to these action items should be conditional upon securing appropriate funding.

4.5 Summary

The agricultural industry contributes significantly to the GTA economy. The Proposed GTA Agricultural Action Plan represents a road map to maintain a healthy agricultural industry. Success of the Plan will be dependent on:

- Defining clear accountability.
- Establishing cooperative working partnerships.
- Drafting a clear framework for action.
- Delivering a sense of ownership amongst stakeholders.
- Raising awareness and understanding on a much broader public scale.

Refining the Proposed Plan to include the feedback from the November 22nd symposium would add value to the process. We agree with the suggested refinements and it is proposed that staff begin working with partners to implement the plan, incorporating the ideas that came out of the symposium, including the following:

- The preparation of a business plan to define potential costs and identify alternate sources of funding should be included as a first priority of implementation.
- Action Items should be prioritized, identifying those actions that can be easily completed at little or no cost.
- Clear timetables for implementation need to be assigned to the Action Items.
- Measures of success should be defined for each item.

4.6 Relationship to Vision 2026

Enhanced Environment, Heritage and Culture goal area of Vision 2026 identifies "Sustaining Our Agricultural Base" as an action area. The Agricultural Action Plan is a key strategic initiative to meet the objectives of this Vision 2026 goal.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

It is proposed that support of the Proposed Action Plan be conditional upon the development of a business plan for the action plan. It is recommended that staff begin to work with partners, as outlined in the Plan, to implement actions that involve in kind contributions such as staff time or that can be accommodated within the existing approved budget. It is expected that much of the plan that involves Regional participation falls within these parameters. Any action item that may require additional funds, as identified through the business plan, would be subject to separate approval from Regional Council.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

Local staff from across the GTA have participated in the development of the Action Plan and continued support is needed to implement certain action items in the Plan. It is

recommended that the Action Plan be circulated to all the local municipalities to solicit their support.

7. CONCLUSION

The Proposed GTA Agricultural Action Plan is the product of extensive collaboration and consultation. The Plan defines 34 implementable action items assigning lead agencies and participants for each. The success of the plan will depend on all the partners taking ownership of the Plan and accepting responsibility to deliver their parts of the Plan.

The Plan is a good road map for maintaining a healthy agricultural industry.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.

(A copy of the attachment referred to in the foregoing is included with this report and is also on file in the Office of the Regional Clerk.)