

Talks focus on retaining youth in rural Ontario

By Peter Richardson

Bradford-West Gwillimbury was host Monday to a Rural Roundtable this week, with the Ontario Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Jeff Leal.

The topic was 'Attracting and Retaining Youth to Rural Ontario' and was attended by local mayors and youth leaders from many surrounding communities.

The topic will also be that of the upcoming, Rural Ontario Summit on June 29 in Stratford.

Minister Leal opened the Roundtable with a few pertinent facts before opening the floor to those in attendance.

The purpose of these roundtables is to enable youth to influence public policy and provide input, as to how to retain youth in, as well as encourage them to return to rural communities.

Agriculture and agri-business is now the second largest contributor to the provincial economy, second by only half a percent, to the auto industry.

Ontario's agricultural future is bright and the aim of public policy initiatives is to maintain opportunities locally.

Climate change and the advent of new technologies are combining to make the Great Lakes basin the new breadbasket of Canada and perhaps the world. The two largest concerns for the future will be fresh water and sustainable food supplies, according to Leal.

Members of the roundtable included not only political leaders, but students and young farmers and many of the ideas and suggestions presented were similar to many urban priorities.

Faster and more reliable internet was a high priority, not only for the obvious social reasons, but as an important farm business tool as well.

Farming is no longer a low tech endeavour and being able to instantly check on such things as, climate predictions and commodity prices, are critical to today's farmers being able to determine, which crops to plant and when to do so, and when to harvest.

In addition, better infrastructure is also crucial to productivity and delivery.

Quinton Woods of King Township recounted how the farm he worked for was unable to increase production and it's labour force because there simply was not enough Hydro power available to them, despite being less than six kilometres from an adequate source.

To avail that source would require an outlay of \$600,000.

Emily, from a family dairy farm near Alliston, brought up the importance of 4H programmes to the farming community and the fact that they strongly encouraged youth participation and pride in rural activities.

Another of her points, was the loss of the rural summer jobs programmes. These allowed farmers to affordably hire young people, to work on the farms, providing jobs that would otherwise not exist because of the cost factor, for the farmer.

These jobs gave young people an insight into the rural lifestyle, while providing the farmers with extra help at affordable wages.

Avia Eek, a King Township councillor, brought up the subject of water resources for agriculture and the importance of balancing urban and rural water management needs.

Several others stressed the need to protect lands, such as the Holland Marsh, from potential development, or loss of nutrients and water due to development surrounding the area.

Vegetable growing land is vastly different to regular crop land and must be preserved if we expect to have sustainable fresh produce.

Vegetable farms as small as 20 acres are viable in rich soils like the Holland Marsh. It is here that technologies, such as GPS and laser guided planting are allowing plant rows to be precisely regulated to within +/- one inch, for maximum yield and profitability.

The Minister added, that within five years, Ontario will have a new soil map, replacing, the over 40-year-old model, now being used to evaluate soil for farming in the province.

Bradford Mayor Rob Keffer, and two student from Aurora, Elizabeth White and Heba Shahaed all noted the importance of listening to the youth and implementing those changes and directions that they were most interested in.

Both students were also adamant about the need for better higher education opportunities in rural settings. With most of the colleges and universities being located in large urban areas, students have to leave home to finish schooling and then do not necessarily want to return to their rural roots.

Better opportunities closer to home would help to counteract this drain.

One of the final points, to be raised, was the high cost of living, even in rural areas.

It was thought that the very definition of affordable was too high and that this alone made choosing a rural lifestyle less desirable. With all of the opportunities and sources of leisure activities, available in the cities and urban areas, why stay in a rural community that costs as much as the city?

A final suggestion from the Minister, was that perhaps the province needs to re-visit moving Provincial government jobs to less populated areas again, thus stimulating rural economies and providing employment incentives to relocating in our rural communities.