

The 'steaks' are high for Dufferin County to grow agricultural stability

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Dufferin County is looking to beef up the local meat supply in 2022 through its first-ever meat processing plant, and is seeking the support of local farmers.

The plan to establish a meat processing plant within the county is part of an effort to bring Dufferin's farm-to-table system closer to home and create a more sustainable agricultural sector.

Karisa Downey, manager of economic development for Dufferin County, said the project was born out of the numerous concerns and challenges the County was hearing from local farmers about processing meat, especially during the pandemic.

"We started hearing more and more from our farming community that meat processing was getting to be more of a challenge, in that farmers were struggling to get animals booked in to be processed with timelines being extremely long in some cases a year, and they were having to drive long distances," said Downey. "Our local producers have said they're having trouble expanding their existing operations because they simply can't obtain the meat processing capacity required to grow."

To make the plant, Dufferin County needs at least 50 local farmers to commit to utilizing and investing in the new producer-owned facility before March 2022.

Downey said while they don't have any formal commitments, there are 10 farmers who have already shown interest in moving forward as investors.

Bill McCutcheon, president of the Dufferin Federation of Agriculture (DFA), had been farming on his own in the community since 1986, working primarily with sheep, and is a supporter of the meat processing plant initiative.

"It just makes more sense we having something a little more local and predictable, that we could respond to our customers in a timely fashion," said McCutcheon. "We're really doing a pretty poor job of capturing local demand that is there because we can't respond fast enough. It's a pretty poor business model."

While COVID-19 had partly fueled the problems farmers in the community are seeing now, McCutcheon says the struggles have been growing over the last 10 years.

"We've seen how vulnerable our meat processing system could be if there was a problem," he said.

McCutcheon added that a meat processing facility would connect the local identity of producers with consumers.

"There's a demand out there from consumers to know where their food comes from, to have a relationship with a local producer. At this point it's difficult to do, I mean it's still possible, but the producer has to do a lot of work to make that happen because there's nothing local to help."

Dufferin County, after hearing the troubles from farmers, shifted a project they were working on with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA), to focus on the concern. A feasibility study was completed to determine if a processing facility would be beneficial to the community. The final report completed in spring of 2021, supported the need for the facility.

From the report it was recommended that the facility be located within an urban center. If built in an existing industrial building, Downey said the rough estimate cost is around \$1 million. The meat processing facility would not be a kill facility.

What is unique about the meat processing plant is that the majority of it would be owned by local-producers.

?The producers are able to take ownership of it and run it in a way that works for them and is suitable and to the advantage of their own business. It's providing them with an opportunity to take the lead on this and create a facility that meet their goals,? said Downey. ?It's also another potential income and revenue source for our local farmers.?

Another aspect that is being looked into at the facility is a retail component for farmers to sell their meat directly to consumers.

Downey said bringing the facility to Dufferin County would require eight people to run it, and would be creating eight good paying jobs in the local economy.

McCutcheon also noted that bringing a facility to the community could draw business from outside of the county.

Dufferin County will be hosting a public meeting for more information on the project on Dec. 15 at 1 p.m. at the Grand Valley and District Community Centre.