

Conservative aggregate summit causes concern across province



Written By **MARNI WALSH**

A rumble reverberated through North Dufferin and echoed across the Province last week in reaction to the Ford Government's announcement that they will be holding a summit with 'major industry stakeholders' on how to 'cut red tape' within the aggregate industry.

This latest move by the PC government follows quickly on the heels of their proposed Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing Planning Act changes in Bill 66 in December.

That proposal would allow Municipalities to pass 'Open For Business' bylaws permitting them to exclude requirements for public notice or public meetings and exempts compliance with portions of the Clean Water Act, Greenbelt Act, the Planning Act, Lake Simcoe Protection Act, Great Lakes Protection Act, the Provincial Policy Statement, key sections of the Planning Act and other environmental legislation implemented over the last 30 years.?

Now, in a press release February 20th, John Yakabuski, Progressive Conservative Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry, announced a Summit on Aggregate Reform would be held on March 29th.

'Our government is committed to creating the conditions that will help unleash the resource sector's potential,' said Minister Yakabuski, who made the announcement to Aggregate industry leaders at the Ontario Stone, Sand and Gravel Association's Conference and Annual General Meeting in Toronto. 'We want to work with industry leaders on how we can tear down barriers to create an environment for growth and a sustainable resource sector,' he said.

The PC Provincial press release stated that Ontario's aggregate industry contributes almost \$1.4 billion to Ontario's economy and supports almost 20,000 direct and indirect jobs. MMAH Minister Clark, who will join Yakabuski at the Summit in March, stated in the press release, 'We simply couldn't build a better province for Ontarians without a strong resource sector.?'

However, in his January submission for public input on Bill 66, the President of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) stated that according to 2017 data, 'Ontario's family farm and food processing businesses contributed \$39.5 billion and supported 822,483 jobs. Agriculture and agri-food processors are the number one economic contributor to Ontario's overall economy.?' Clearly, Agriculture, a non-renewable resource which literally feeds the province, should trump the interests of Aggregate Industry leaders on the basis' of economics alone. But it does not.

Interestingly, a recent CBC news report states that new documents reveal, Ontario Proud, a group credited with helping Doug Ford's Progressive Conservatives win the provincial election, received nearly \$460,000 in corporate donations to fund its campaign efforts. Development companies and construction firms contributed the bulk of Ontario Proud's election campaign funding, according to the group's newly submitted report to Elections Ontario? (www.cbc.canada.)

Newly appointed Chair of the North Dufferin Agricultural and Community Taskforce (NDACT,) Karren Wallace told the Free Press, the Conservative Provincial government under Doug Ford ?is focused on developers. They are a powerful lobby group.? Wallace said, ?Considering the flurry of legislative amendments this government has introduced in the past few months this is not surprising.?

A grassroots organization formed in 2009 by local farmers and residents to defend Melancthon's prime farmland at the Headwaters of five rivers from a proposed mega-quarry, NDACT continues to fight for food and water sustainability across the province.

In a prepared statement, the NDACT Board stated the organization was ?extremely concerned with the Aggregate Summit announcement, given the government's recent attempts to open the Greenbelt to development under Schedule D of Bill 66 and the introduction of a review of the Growth Plan with a view to reducing density targets. Chair Wallace says, ?Reducing density levels adds to urban sprawl meaning more aggregate will be required for roads and housing. These proposals clearly favour the development industry in their push for more land on which to develop.?

Ms. Wallace stresses that NDACT is not against aggregate, ?We understand aggregates are the raw materials that help build our schools, hospitals and bridges. Aggregate however is also required in paving over farmland for developers to build houses, of which there is ample supply. A recent study by the Neptis Foundation shows ?only 10,800 hectares of the 56,200 hectares available for housing and employment outside the existing urbanized area of the region's cities and towns was developed between 2006 and 2016 - leaving 80% of land still available to accommodate another 15 years' worth of growth to 2031 and possibly beyond.?

NDACT insists, ?Paving over farmland for business parks and manufacturing, when there is an ample supply of available land now, does not make economic sense. Growth intensification targets (which the Ford government may consider reducing) over the past 10 years have led to a reduction in the loss of farmland. Within the last five years the rate of farmland being lost to development has decreased from 375 acres a day to 150 acres, but even at 150 acres, this is not sustainable. If this continues within 100 years there will be no prime farmland left in Ontario.?

A review of Ontario's Aggregate Resources Act in 2013 resulted in a report with 38 recommendations on various aspects of the Act. The following year, the provincial government's response to the report recognized that the recommendations represented the consensus of an All-Party Committee. Dufferin-Caledon's Progressive Conservative MPP Sylvia Jones sat on that committee. NDACT urges MPP Jones and the Ontario PC Party ?to review the recommendations in the report and to act on them.?