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Town to support Food & Water First

Shelburne has become a ?Food & Water First community? and, as such, supports the campaign's aims of protecting Class 1 farmland and water resources.

Those aims would include a ban on aggregate extraction below the water table, according to Shirley Boxem of NDACT and the contents of a lengthy motion drafted by Councillor Walter Benotto.

Food & Water First is a North Dufferin Agricultural and Community Taskforce initiative which began following NDACT's long and successful battle against the Melancthon mega-quarry, the Highland Companies proposal that would have excavated about 2,400 acres to a depth of more than 200 feet.

Ms. Boxem said the campaign is not opposed to mining aggregates per se, but only opposed to the destruction of the dwindling supply of Class 1 farmland and to the threat posed to source water. ?Our mission is to protect food land and water? by raising public awareness and building a ?critical mass? through partnerships with municipalities and businesses.

She said the public generally is not aware of the scarcity of Class 1 farmland or of the economic value of agriculture or, perhaps more importantly, that the best farmland is steadily being lost.

According to the figures Ms. Boxem presented, only five per cent of Ontario's land is suitable for farming and only one-half of one per cent of the total land mass is Class 1.

Ontario, she said, has 56% of Canada's total Class 1 farmland. But, between 1976 and 1996, fully 18% of that was lost.

How important is agriculture? In a nutshell, one NDACT member said, simply, ?you can't eat aggregates.? Economically, though, it supports 164,400 Ontario jobs with wages and salaries totalling $7-billion, according to Ms. Boxem's figures.

As well, 70% of Ontario's farm production is purchased by Ontario food processors, and that sector has a value of $33-billion.

In Ontario, ?water is not protected? by the Provincial Policy Statement or the Aggregate Resources Act. ?The government has said ?no' to protection of water. It means they don't understand (the risks). The Government and the public need to be educated,? she said.

?If people knew (the statistics) they would be concerned. How many people know that, within our lifetime, food will have to be imported??

Ms. Boxem's presentation almost coincided with a New York Times report that a leaked United Nations study found that worldwide food production is declining at a rate of two per cent every decade.

Class 1 farmland is a ?finite non-renewable resource,? NDACT says, and it cannot be rehabilitated to Class 1 after extraction, according to some experts.

By Wes Keller