

The Niagara District Council of Women

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To The Niagara Regional Council

Comments on PDS 17-2022 Niagara Regional Official Plan Recommendation Report

June 23rd, 2022

-Gracia Janes , Past-President NDCW

I have submitted briefs regarding the new Regional Niagara Official Plan on behalf of the Niagara District Council of Women several times over the last two years, the most recent being at the April 28th Regional Council Official Public meeting under the Planning Act, and the Regional Planning and Economic Development meeting on June 16th. Nevertheless, given the significance of this 2022 proposed Niagara Official Plan, and that questions and comments of Councillors, and staff responses further clarified some of the key issues to the Committee, but not the whole Council, I am once again presenting NDCW's updated, final, views on this very important planning document to Regional Councillors.

By approving the new Regional Official Plan , Council will most certainly be making a leap thirty years into the future, following a Plan that favors unneeded development, based on the "market demand – sprawl " formula approach rather than strong protection of Carolinian ecosystems, prime farmlands and proven climatically – favoured tender potential fruit and grape lands , in this very unique part of Canada

To begin , we thank the Regional Niagara planners for adjusting the plan to ensure wider buffers between prime farmland and urban development, and agreeing with Port Colborne's use of some planned community development lands at the front end of the 30year planning period.

However, regarding the designation of 3,692 acres of Rural lands across the Region as "Prime Agricultural Lands" , to replace currently designated and zoned prime farm lands lost, it is clear that in the main, these rural lands are probably not owned by full time farmers. And although there is the potential for rural estate lot owners to rent lands out to farmers , this is not a panacea , when stacked up against the prime farm land planned for development, the number of farms and prime farm land incrementally being lost for other reasons , and the urban stresses on farmland and farmers, as noted in a May 5th article in the 'Rural Life' Column of the Wellington Advertiser News by the

President of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture and in earlier Niagara Federation of Agriculture e mail comments to Niagara Regional planners..

We note that the current Niagara Official Plan favours the preservation of tender fruit and grape lands and prime agricultural lands, southerly -directed growth, housing intensification, and a balanced approach to economic growth and agriculture, the latter being a significant employment driver, second to General motors and its spin-off jobs at one time . This in turn, was intended to support farmers with the ability to help provide healthy food locally and to close- by urban markets , and further afield to the East Coast, and even west to Regina.

In stark contrast, the proposed new Official Plan is built on priority slogans, such as “a *Healthy and Vibrant Community, Responsible Growth and Infrastructure Planning, and Sustainable and Engaging Government-e.g. successful relationships between all levels of government*, and as one Regional Councillor noted, fails to strongly promote the Agriculture Industry and the farmers who make it succeed.

For those taking the time to sit through multiple Regional Planning Department meetings over 3 years, read through ever -changing planning reports, staff recommendations and public comments on the proposed New Regional Official Plan , it is clear that quite a few were from lawyers representing developers who praised the OP’s “*market-based*” approach, a large number of individuals who made lot-specific development requests ; and, a considerable number of individuals and some public interest groups representing urban and rural interests opposed to unneeded development on our prime farmlands, fruit land and natural heritage lands , with many making notable precautionary comments .

For example, in an e mail to Regional planners the Niagara Federation of Agriculture , said that it “*feels that this is a large, cumulative amount of farmlands loss that will occur within a single policy decision, contrary to several provincial policies focused on protecting prime agricultural areas. Other alternatives for development should be considered in alignment with applicable policies.* “....

..*”This land is finite and non-renewable-great care should be taken to make sure we have this resource for generations of farmers to come.,” As well, NFA supports fixed settlement area boundaries and supports this ambitious approach to intensification . It is unclear , however, why, or how similar ambitious targets could be directed to slow or stop the absolute loss of farmland, or how the loss of farmland could not be further prevented with these ambitious intensification targets.”... “ Urban intensification and farmland protection are ‘two sides of the same coin-ambitious targets to intensify should translate to ambitious protection of farmland.’*”

For their part, Niagara Home Builders said “ *This policy will allow a municipality to put all its intensification in the strategic worth areas and eliminate or virtually eliminate intensification in the built up area. This is not consistent with the PPS or a place to grow.* And long-time Councillor Heit, said, “ *Don’t allow for urban expansion if it is not for food*”; South Niagara farmer and member of the Regional Niagara Agricultural Policy and Action Committee Joe Schonberger, commented that “ *It is noted that Prime agricultural land was sacrificed to accommodate settlement boundary expansions*”; and, the National Farm Union -Ontario (NFU-O) in response to Staff Reports PDS 41-2021 and PDS 42-2021 urged “ *Regional Staff to oppose any urban boundary expansion that would result in the loss of prime farmland and to reimagine population growth through responsible densification rather than urban boundary expansion.*”

These precautionary warnings and others in the Region’s recorded comments, are echoed in a May 5th 2022 news article by Drew Spoelstra, President of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. He wrote. “ *The OFA supports the goal of building more homes to accommodate a growing population*” ... “ *As we continue the trend of losing acreage every day, I think it’s time we asked ourselves ‘ How do we plan on producing safe, sustainable food for a growing population if our farmers are losing the finite resources needed to grow and produce these commodities.? ‘* To back this up, he noted as other participants in the Regional Official Plan meetings have, “ *less than 5% of Ontario’s land base can support agricultural production ..and “New research also shows southwestern Ontario lost 72,000 acres of prime agricultural land to urban development between 1996 and 2016, the equivalent of 175 acres a day*”.

In Niagara our tender fruit lands (being, along with the Okanagan in BC and a small acreage in Essex County, less than .0004% of Canada’s land mass) have been reduced by urbanization from 36,000 acres in 1974 to about 10,000 potential acres, with about 7,600 in production. And grape lands have been reduced to about 15,000 acres from 36,000 acres in 1974. More recently fruit farmers are finding it increasingly difficult to find land to buy or even rent, and established wineries and individual farms are being impacted by non-farm rural uses, such as Barn events, so much so that the Golden Horseshoe Alliance is working on regulations that could stem the tide .

Conclusion

As noted in our initial brief, the Niagara District Council of Women for many years has been supportive of protecting this very special place in Canada, as it is part of the Carolinian zone, has the best and most economically viable fruit lands in Canada, as well as wonderfully productive prime farmlands, and of course, the many attributes of the Niagara Escarpment, which is a foundation for increased eco tourism. Niagara is favored by its potential to better withstand rapidly changing and increased weather

events and produce healthy food close to urban markets. Our farm lands also are strong employment and tourism related economic drivers . Therefore we must place far more emphasis on farmland and natural heritage area protections now and in the years to come.

.It is for these reasons, that we are disappointed that at its meeting on June 15th the Regional Planning and Economic Development Committee, by approving the newly proposed 2022 Regional Niagara Official Plan overwhelmingly rejected our recommendations that the Region :

- * accept the Provincial Population target of 674,000 residents,

- * retain, as recommended by Niagara Falls Planners, the current urban boundary in Niagara Falls , and thus the potential for a review of the Niagara Falls twice proven , climatically favoured tender fruit lands and an expansion of the Greenbelt there .

- *accept the Niagara Falls planners, and Council- approved plan for intensification and improved transit which better serves much needed affordable housing , rather than the market-based urban sprawl, which, as housing advocates have noted, suits the high-end homes.

- * reduce the population projection for West Lincoln to a reasonable amount ; protect the prime farmlands and karst formations there ; and only expand the urban boundary, if necessary through a five year review and Municipal and Regional Official Plan amendments .

- * plan for more housing and employment land development in Welland, Thorold and Port Colborne if needed.

We are of the opinion, that when presented with a Regional plan having the original Provincial population target, plus a very decent intensification goal, the Province could well consider such a progressive plan with its reasonable population target, increased density goal, well protected prime farm lands and urban and rural ecosystems, and the potential to add more fruit lands, very favorably. .The Region could then move quickly forward to finalize the Plan, and local Municipalities could as well.

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