

Area poised to become 'Canada's Horse Country'

By Mark Pavilons

Local residents are keenly aware of the importance of the equine industry in this region. It's much more than a sport or a hobby. Led by a passionate and talented group of equine experts, Headwaters Horse Country is poised to become nationally significant, with a goal of becoming Canada's Horse Country.

That was the message delivered by several industry leaders, speaking at the first Headwaters Horse Country Excellence Awards Gala, sponsored by Terra Cotta Financial Group. A packed house at Orangeville's Best Western paid tribute to the accomplishments and success stories of local leaders, sharing in the passion that has become an economic driver.

The efforts are propelled by the Headwaters Equine Leadership Group (HELG), a collaborative group of volunteers working to make this region the centre of the horse world.

MC?James Boyd introduced 'Sir Headwaters,' the newest addition to the colourful, life-size horse statues that made their debut prior to last year's Pan Am Games. The group's refined vision and bold new initiatives are aimed at increasing local economic development.

Caledon's Bruce Moffat, CEO and president of Terra Cotta Financial Group, said a strong, focused economic development plan is essential to the future sustainability of Headwaters Horse Country.

Keynote speaker Bill Duron, former CEO of Tourism Toronto, pointed out the equine industry is a powerful lifestyle driver for the entire region. Headwaters has evolved into an identified premier equine community in North America. Horse farms in the region actually outperform all others and affluent landowners help boost local economies.

This feather in the local caps is a great marketing tool, Duron pointed out, noting it's a great way to entice businesses to locate to the area.

An urban area, surrounded by 'horse country' has its distinct advantages.

'The whole community has to embrace it,' he stressed.

The numbers show that Headwaters really stacks up against any North American rivals, with more than 23,000 horses and 2,000 horse farms. The economic impact of the equine sector locally amounts to \$100 million annually in operating costs, and another \$300 million spent on property improvements. Headwaters is also home to four internationally recognized event facilities, two of which hosted the 2015 Pan Am Games.

Duron offered some focused recommendations to establish Headwaters Horse Country as a national force. Those included supporting public policy; employing some full-time staff; support from community leaders, and an injection of some \$5 million to keep the group and its efforts sustainable.

The huge geographic area 'from Erin to King' needs an urban 'anchor,' and Duron said Orangeville is the logical choice. The town needs to 'step up to the plate,' but all areas need to aggressively promote themselves.

Awards

The highlight of the evening was the presentation of four prestigious awards to dedicated and passionate industry leaders.

FEI?judge John Taylor called King's Beth Underhill 'an amazing person' and 'impressive veteran.' This Pan Am medal winner and Olympian was recognized for her commitment to developing meaningful partnerships between youth and the industry. Her award was sponsored by King councillor Linda Pabst and Gryphon Farms.

Underhill has a wealth of experience to share, and she's still an active competitor at the highest level. She is also one of Canada's top coaches for junior/amateur riders, through to grand prix athletes.

She has been chef d'equipe for the North American Young Riders Team, part of the selection committee for Canada's future team riders, and a member of the High Performance Committee that selects riders for international and major games. She's been on the Jump?Canada board for the past eight years and in 2015 she was appointed Jump Canada's Young Rider Development Program Advisor.

'She's a consummate professional who's highly respected by her peers,' Taylor said.

'Beth is a Canadian show jumping icon who is committed to mentoring and developing the next generation of equestrians,' said Ross Millar, HELG?chair.

Underhill said she's deeply touched by the honour and she's fortunate to live her passion for the sport. She stressed it's important that young riders learn from the expertise passed on by mentors, and she's thrilled to help develop this new talent.

Millar himself was awarded the Leadership in Equine Business, sponsored by Seneca College. He's recognized for his impact on the growth and development of the industry in this region.

The Ross Millar Group created and developed Canada's most marketed rodeo tour.



Caledon's Sue Grange (top, centre) and Charles Armstrong (represented by wife Lenore, front left) were among the award winners at the first Headwaters Horse Country Excellence Awards Gala.

He is not only a key supporter of tourism, but he also sits on the board of Headwaters Tourism.

"I really fully believe we've become leaders in the rodeo industry," he said. "I'm proud to be involved in something so very Canada, and one of Canada's oldest sports. The whole Headwaters area is so rich in the horse industry . . . People don't realize the number of champions we have here."

Jump?Canada Hall of Famer Terrance "Torchy"?Millar said the event was the epitome of good sport, good friends and good commerce.

He introduced Sue Grange of Caledon's Lothlorien Farms, as the recipient of "Leadership in Promoting the Equine Sport" award. The award was given to Grange in recognition of her long service and dedication to the ongoing growth and development of the sport.

Grange is an accomplished rider, breeder and trainer, with a very long list of awards to her credit. One of her most famous horses was Ian Millar's mount In Style, who jumped to silver at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Lothlorien is also home to some of the best standardbreds in the world. To her credit, the farm has produced RockNRoll Hanover and Well Said, who won the Little Brown Jug and North American Cup in 2009.

Grange admitted she was honoured and surprised by the award. "I'm very proud to be part of the equine community," she said.

There could be no better recipient of the Leadership in Industry Building than Caledon's H. Charles Armstrong. He was honoured for his significant contributions, demonstrating leadership, dedication and life-long service.

He's been a true icon in the Ontario and North American horse industry for more than 70 years and was integral in shaping Ontario's horse racing landscape. The family operation has become the second largest standardbred breeding facility in North America.

Armro was ever-present in the winner's circle of prestigious races for both trotters and pacers, producing such champions as Armro Flight, Armro Feather, Armro Omaha and hundreds of others.

Armstrong was director of the Ontario Jockey Club and was a Wall of Fame honouree for the Little Brown Jug in 1999. He received the Van Bussell Award in 2003 and was inducted into the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame in 2015.

Unable to attend the ceremony, his wife Lenore said Charlie would have been "deeply humbled" by the award. In his life, he has thoroughly enjoyed every fact of the horse world, she said.