

Boosting food processing will benefit farmers, says Wynne

By Brock Weir

As Ontario looks to expand the Greenbelt, farmers "are very much a part of the discussion," according to Premier Kathleen Wynne. Also part of the discussion? Making sure Ontario's produce makes the market it deserves.

Wynne was in Newmarket recently to speak to local students about the Province's Ontario Student Grant. Announced in the 2016 Budget, the program will overhaul several existing Provincial grant programs by the 2017-2018 school year to make post-secondary education free for eligible students in families with an annual income of \$83,300 or less.

The students presented Wynne with a number of hard-hitting questions about how this will affect them, impact students preparing to go to university for the 2016-2017 school year, as well as pressing her for support for young adults grappling with the suicide epidemic in First Nations, particularly Attawapiskat.

"Students always ask the best questions," Wynne said, sitting down with local media following the roundtable for a wide-ranging interview. "My experience going to debates during election campaigns or discussions with students is they cut right to the chase. They are just fantastic."

Cutting to the chase, the discussion shifted to issues immediately before the community, including issues surrounding the Province's Greenbelt and its impact on local businesses.

"Our local food movement and the funding we have put into local food has been very, very important in terms of that wonderful produce that is created in Ontario being prominently displayed and prominently focused on, (but) the other part of this is food processing," Wynne commented. "I think we have much more of a capacity to do food processing in Ontario than we have taken advantage of."

"There would be a greater market for Ontario produce in those food processing plants and that is why we have, as part of our Jobs and Prosperity Fund, carved out for food processing and investment and food processing," she added.

The recent ketchup wars, which has resulted in French's carving out a unique share of the Heinz dominated market, is just one example of that. Wynne cited French's investment in processing tomatoes in Leamington. This highlights the importance of food processing in every corner of Ontario, she contended.

"When I was Minister of Agriculture and Food, I challenged the sectors to create 120,000 new jobs by 2020, putting fruit wine in farmers' markets, for example, allowing farmers' markets on the En Routes along the 401," she said. "We are doing a lot to support farmers, on top of things like risk management funds, so there is recognition that farmers need support depending on what the weather does. They do not have control over all of the factors that have an impact on their crops."

Wynne highlighted farmers on the nearby Holland Marsh, with a particular mention of King Township Councillor Avia Eek, as "some of the greatest advocates for the local food movement" and have pushed Ontario to take action on food processing "so there is a place for our Ontario produce to grow."

"It is about \$34 billion in our GDP, so it is very, very important," she said.

But, it is also important that there is land enough to grow food to be processed, particularly as the rural-urban divide with Toronto narrows.

Next month, municipal politicians from across Ontario will be meeting in Markham for a summit on reforms that should be made at the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB). Spurred by two councillors from Aurora over the issue of an in-fill development of a community golf course surrounded by a long-established community, this is an issue that Wynne said is cropping up all over Ontario, but it is up to municipalities to strike that all-important balance between development and open space.

The Liberal government, she said, has already made "significant changes" as to what can be heard at the OMB, including timelines, there is "a need for another round of review and we are going to undertake that."

"My concern is we have the decisions made around land use planning at the right level of government and in the right places," Wynne added. "We want city councils to be empowered and make good planning decisions and to be able to control the things they should be controlling. For example, there is a large percentage of minor variances that still go to the OMB and I don't think that should happen."

"I think we should find a way to have those very local decisions, when they are very local decisions, made at the council level," she remarked. "When there are broader, more systemic issues where there is a Provincial interest, then I think those are the things that should go to the OMB and we haven't quite got that balance yet and that is what we'll be looking for."

She is not in favour, she added, of abolishing the OMB and that is an option that is off the table as far as the government is concerned, but there is room for improvement.

?I think we need to define better the decisions that should be made at the local level and the decisions that should go to the OMB,? Wynne observed. ?For that, we need councils to really take responsibility for planning decisions. What I think shouldn't happen is decisions (being) referred to the OMB because councils don't want to make those decisions. That is the worst kind of planning process, from my perspective. Since before I got into government, and I was elected in 2003, before that I was already working in my community with advocates and folks who want to make sure the OMB was making decisions that were good for neighbourhoods, but that presupposes that city councils take responsibility for planning decisions.?