

Local projects help municipal leaders get to know agriculture

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Municipal governments make decisions every day that affect Ontario farms, from roads, bridges and farmland drainage to land use planning, development and local services.

That's why farmers need to know what is happening at their local governments, but we also need to build relationships with the people making those decisions and help them understand agriculture.

Agriculture is a major contributor to Ontario's economy, generating almost \$53 billion for Ontario's economy and supporting more than 854,000 jobs annually, but farmers make up a relatively small share of our population.

But running for office isn't the only way farmers can make sure agriculture is understood at the municipal level.

We also need to create opportunities for councillors, municipal staff and candidates to meet farmers, visit farms and learn about the realities of running a farm business.

Three local federations have taken on projects this year to do just that, including two I represent on the board of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture as a director, Niagara and Hamilton-Wentworth.

Through the OFA's Revive Fund, our 51 local federations can access matching funding for projects that support agriculture and their communities. Since the program began in 2021, OFA, local federations and project partners have invested a combined total of approximately \$1.5 million in community projects.

The Niagara Federation of Agriculture invited councillors and municipal planning and economic development staff onto a bus tour for a first-hand look at agriculture in the region, visiting four agricultural businesses representing dairy, swine, beef, grain production and custom farming, as well as beekeeping and pollination services. Along the way, participants also learned about agricultural landmarks and the region's farming history.

One of the interesting takeaways from the day was that while many participants knew Niagara for its tender fruit industry, they didn't realize how diverse agriculture in the region actually is.

They were also surprised by the size of modern farm equipment and gained a better understanding of why road safety matters when farm machinery and other vehicles share rural roads.

The Middlesex Federation of Agriculture took a different approach, hosting a politician forum last winter that brought together representatives from eight agricultural organizations with local elected officials, including municipal mayors as well as provincial and federal representatives.

Farm leaders talked about what their sectors contribute to the local economy and discussed issues including access to skilled labour, the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, processing capacity, rural infrastructure and trade.

I farm in Binbrook near Hamilton and my local federation in Hamilton-Wentworth will be hosting a social this fall for municipal election candidates. It will give farmers a chance to meet candidates, hear how they plan to work with the agricultural community

and talk directly with them about what farm businesses and rural residents need from their municipality.

Other federations have undertaken similar projects in previous years, such as bus tours in Frontenac and Algoma in 2025, and in Lambton in 2023, or a farmers' breakfast in Arnprior in 2024.

Each project is unique, but they all accomplish something important: bringing agriculture and municipal decision-makers together.

Even in rural Ontario, we can't assume everyone understands agriculture. Councillors and municipal staff come from many different backgrounds, and some may have little direct experience with farming.

That's why these local connections matter. A farm tour, breakfast meeting or conversation with election candidates gives people a chance to ask questions, see how farms operate and better understand why issues like roads, drainage, land use and development matter to farm businesses.

And those relationships are much easier to build before there's a contentious planning application, road project or by-law on the council agenda.

The more our local decision-makers know about agriculture, the better equipped they are to consider its needs when making decisions for their communities. Farmers have an important role to play in helping them get there.