



Primary Plus

A SECTION TARGETTED AT FARMER-DIRECTED PROCESSING, RETAILING AND PRODUCT PROMOTION

Haliburton goes big into small-scale agriculture

Farmers here are developing business plans that fit well with a local economic strategy



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Minden- In a land where families pass down the notion that 'you just can't grow food here,' they're growing food here.

It's not the hundred acre fields of beans and corn that monopolize the landscape down south.

Agriculture up here is small scale, so small that the farmers, some of whom happened into growing by chance, are screaming, politely mind you, for two major pieces of infrastructure.

What they want is a mobile abattoir and an egg grading station.

While Haliburton County refines its tourism strategy to include a local culinary component, farmers are coming up with business models that make economic development officer Heather Candler grin.

Candler, who was the keynote speaker at the county's first ever Food and Agriculture Economic Development Forum last week, bubbles with admiration for the businesses that are growing here.

"They've come so far," she says, as she introduces Ontario Farmer to one more business operator that "you just have to meet."

Andrew Graham points out that the county's average 90 frost free days is approximately the length also of its tourism season. His Graham's Farm Market needs about \$90,000 annually in sales, to support his family and pay its bills. Like a few others he grows not just what makes his land happy, but the crops that will entice a visitor to his farm stand to open the cooler to check for eggs, or to come to the farmers market.

OMAFRA chief economist Steve Duff told a sold out crowd of about 80 that it is 112% more expensive to live in rural Ontario, than it is to live in Toronto. A person living in rural Ontario he said, will pay

208 % more per person for heat and hydro than a Torontonians.

"Food is a much bigger issue for many residents due to higher overall living costs and lower average incomes," he said, explaining that the concept of local is really not well defined.

Conceptually he explained, "the ability of a community and its food producers to understand the local balance of food demand and production and the income situation of its residents is vital to maintaining an economically resilient local food system."

It's unlikely Haliburton or any other Ontario municipality is likely to achieve self-sufficiency in balancing food demand and production, he said. The food produced here is "extremely visible but of smaller scale and size than most other parts of Ontario."

Duff said just 25 per cent of Haliburton's farmers work on farm full-time, compared with 49 per cent in the province. Plus he said, 25 per cent work full time off the farm, compared to the provincial average of 27 percent.

Haliburton has proportionally more farms under 60 acres and 72 per cent of its farms have less than \$50,000 in gross farm sales. It comes as no surprise, he said that the "proportionally more are maple, beef and small livestock farms, and less fruit and vegetable."

BUT THIS is a community that solves the problems it can, and Gena Robertson explained that SIRCH Community Services, recognizing the food challenge here has undertaken not only to educate residents, but to train them how to cook on a shoe string, where to purchase local food and is also training periodic classes of as many as 10 to work in food service. SIRCH's Cook It Up class also trains in a restaurant with their meals; about 7,000 annually, donated to the community.

During the hour long "Ignite," session seven business detailed their business plans while another seven organizations explained how they're promoting/supporting agriculture here.

Lila Sweet, an employee at Rhubarb Restaurant, shared not only their journey to local food; but the story of the award



Heather Candler:
Haliburton has come so far.

winning Boshkung Brewing Company which is placing product in LCBOs, grocery stores and licensed establishments around the province. It was winning product awards before it was a year old, she said. Additionally, Rhubarb is the only establishment in the county to achieve an Ontario Culinary Alliance Feast On designation. Rhubarb she said, estimates its local spending averages \$3,000 weekly in county at three to four farms, a coffee roaster, a wild forager, and they attend the farmers market weekly.

Sweet suggested "We need to start a chef's association and create a taste of place and pride of place. We need to have more producers. Growing foods of all types locally. We need innovative approaches to dealing with land, soil, and short growing season such as greenhouses, fish farms, and green industries. We need supportive municipal decision makers who will take a stance on local food and food businesses."

And she added to the list of local infrastructure asks, "some form of cold storage," and "permanent structures at the farmers market locations."

The county's farmers' market manager said Haliburton's farmers market has three locations and expects 50 vendors this year. Its 2018 sales topped \$.5 million and it is a recognized tourist draw.

Haliburton County Farmers Association VP Shane Dykstra explained they are updating their website to share the story of their farmer members. They are handing out pumpkin seeds wherever they go as part of an educational project. People will learn not only on where



Steve Duff: It's more expensive to live in rural Ontario.

their food comes from; but the challenges of growing their food. An autumn pumpkin festival is planned for the fall.

The fair he said features all manner of agricultural endeavor from sheep shearing and goat milking to rope making, and cheese making.

People need these sort of activities, he said, explaining that not only had he had people argue with him that his Highland cows couldn't be heifers because they had horns, but his four year old nephew when invited to learn to milk a goat responded there was "no way I'm touching that goat's penis."

Dykstra said not only does Haliburton need more farms, but it needs a venue to tell people where the farms are and when products can be purchased.

Haliburton's annual garlic festival presented by the Haliburton County Garlic Growers, attracts 1,500 customers and association chairman Deb Barnhart said there is lots of room for the festival to grow in conjunction with other community festivals. She noted that the Haliburton Garlic Growers Association have also studied pest management and developed protocols which have been shared across the province.

Andrew Graham, has grown his business over the past six year, by utilizing proper soil stewardship. He has added sheep and a 5,200 square foot greenhouse which has helped the business "to grow outside the parameters of our typical growing season, which equates to higher yields."

But he said more more businesses need to recognize and promote the benefits of local food.

Also during the Ignite session Randy McDonald of Killara Station explained that four businesses have grown out of his relocation to Haliburton including both horse and dog boarding, dog breeding, a community garden and design studio, a "glamping tent," which they intend to expand and ski trails.

"When we started this business out, I didn't have any financial plans for it other than not to lose any money," he said. Most offshoots of the business, he said, he has fallen into because "somebody walked up my driveway and asked."

Larry Clarke of U-Link detailed some of the 400 community based initiatives which farmers have studied.

Several OMAFRA departments including rural planners, and advisors detailed resources they offer.

It's not that they're complaining, but at the same time one at this food and agriculture economic development forum pointed out that "we're almost forced to be criminals," because of the demand for such product as local eggs and meat.

While their offering is as diverse here as any in this province, producers, restaurants, government, nonprofits are coming to the realization that creating a strategy where they work together just might be the catalyst where they continue to build and strengthen food and agriculture as an economic driver.

Candler said it's the first time they've all been together in one room to look at economic development.

County CAO Mike Rutter explained the county has been working to grow "food tourism," here since 2013.

"We often get asked, 'why does food matter to tourism marketing?'" he said. "But the fact of the matter is we want visitors to stay, play and eat here."

County director of tourism Amanda Virtanen explained they've tried to incorporate local food into the county's 'biggest picnic ever,' event and include local food promotion "throughout all of our tourism marketing efforts."

About 50 people participated in the afternoon break-out sessions brainstorming on ideas for selling and branding local foods, tourism, municipal food planning, and economic development.