

Agriculture valued in township

ORO-MEDONTE

Posted By THE PACKET AND TIMES

Posted June 18, 2010

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Gary MacPhail, part owner of Ego's Nurseries, Garden Centre and Farm Market, was pleased with the recognition of the agricultural sector in Oro Medonte Township's tourism and economic development work plan on Thursday.

"People don't realize (farmers) produce a lot of the food in the area and if they take away our land for something more lucrative to someone else, it's a problem," MacPhail said.

MacPhail attended a public meeting at the Oro-Medonte arena to hear the results of surveys and community consultation sessions on the topic of tourism and economic development in the township.

The goal of the report and ongoing study is to develop a long-term working plan for council to strengthen and foster tourism and economic development in Oro-Medonte.

One of the themes identified as being a priority in the report was engaging the agricultural sector. Suggestions included developing marginal farmland and not Class A farmland, encouraging the expansion of organic farms and local farmers' markets, and strengthening the relationship with Simcoe County Farm Fresh, a group dedicated to raising awareness of locally grown food.

In terms of agriculture, MacPhail said his major concern is that farmland is being sold to house more lucrative ventures, such as solar panel farms or subdivisions.

"We're not against solar farms, we just don't want good agricultural land to be used," he said, recognizing that farming isn't always a cash cow. "Class A farmland shouldn't be developed. It shouldn't be used for anything else (but farming.)"

He also appreciated the report's recognition of the importance of groups such as Simcoe County Farm Fresh and the expansion of farmers' markets.

With minimum wage going up, MacPhail said the cost of farming has also gone way up, making it more expensive for grocery stores to stock local produce. He added that farmers' markets, such as the one in Orillia, are "great" because it's their only other outlet to sell their produce and flowers.

Another theme identified as being a priority in the report was developing a strong tourism component within the economic development strategy.

Jennifer Whitley, marketing co-ordinator for Ontario's Lake Country, a not-for-profit organization that promotes and markets tourism in the areas of Orillia, Oro-Medonte, Rama, Ramara and Severn, was also encouraged by the outcome of the report.

"I think it's great for our business. We want to work with the businesses of Oro-Medonte to move tourism forward. This will help us ... in our planning for what we can do for them," Whitley said.

In the area of tourism, the report suggested developing strong relationships with recognized tourism brands within the township, developing tactics to encourage visitors to spend more money in Oro-Medonte -- thus stimulating the growth of all township businesses -- and encouraging more travellers to get off the highway.

Whitley said the suggestions were in-tune with Ontario's Lake Country mandate, which is to lure people to the area and have them stay here. She also agreed with reviewing tourism-related sign bylaws in co-operation with tourism businesses in the township, particularly waterfront and trail signage.

Other suggestions included in the report were: be specific about how and where development occurs and doesn't in the township, such as focusing industrial development in acceptable area not rural ones; encourage regular communication between businesses, residents and council regarding economic development activities, such as encouraging local media coverage of council meetings and implementing a shop local campaign; and improve the aesthetics on major roadways and township entrances, such as investigating opportunities to improve property standards on Highway 11.

The feedback from Thursday's two public meetings will be compiled by staff from the Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs, who also drafted the initial report, into a more detailed long-term development plan that will aid council in setting future goals for tourism and economic development within Oro- Medonte.

The complete tourism and economic development work plan can be found on the township's website at www.oromedonte.ca.

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Article ID# 2629103