

2018 Middlesex County Agriculture Forum

Summary Report on What We Heard

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Overview

Within Middlesex County, agri-business represents more than one quarter of all enterprises; providing employment, prosperity, and sustainable opportunities for its residents.

Acknowledging the importance of agriculture in Middlesex County, Annual Agriculture Forums are held as an opportunity to assess the current state of agricultural enterprises within Middlesex County. These forums provide elected officials and staff representing Middlesex County, along with stakeholders within the community, the opportunity to engage in dialogue regarding what is working well, what could be done better, and to map a vision for the future of agri-business within Middlesex County.

Format of Forum

Approximately forty participants gathered on April 18th, 2018, to discuss five key areas regarding agri-business in Middlesex County. These topics of inquiry included workforce and training, land use planning, logistics and infrastructure, agri-tourism development, and public outreach and marketing. Based on these five topics, participants were asked questions in order to prompt discussion to understand their perspectives on the state of agri-business in Middlesex County and what they saw as strategies for moving forward. The questions that were asked are as followed:

1. What advantages exist for Middlesex County agri-business with respect to the discussed topic?
2. What challenges exist for Middlesex County agri-business with respect to the discussed topic?
3. What strategies could help mitigate or reduce these challenges for the ag sector in Middlesex County?
4. What role do you feel Middlesex County staff should play in engaging in these noted strategies?
5. What role do you feel Middlesex County elected officials should play in engaging in these noted strategies?

As a result of the discussions that took place, general themes emerged across the five topic areas, highlighting shared experiences in regards to agri-business in Middlesex County. Specific and unique perspectives also emerged as participants of the forum represented a variety of different stakeholder groups including:

- Businesses and organizations representing local agricultural related production or distribution;
- Government agencies with a focus on agriculture and food;
- Institutions providing agricultural related learning opportunities; and
- Service organizations that support agricultural related business.

Strategic Direction

The Agriculture Forum is a tool intended to invite dialogue between stakeholders within Middlesex County in order to understand the various perspectives in agri-business. This understanding is intended to provide an insight into the strengths, opportunities, and areas for improvements which includes developing strategies and ideas that can be shared for improving agri-business in Middlesex County. Finding ways to improve agri-business is consistent and aligns with the strategic direction highlighted in the 2015 County of Middlesex Agriculture Strategy Report.

Summary on What We Heard

The following summarizes strategies that were captured through the facilitated discussions at the April 18th, 2018 Agriculture Forum. The following strategies are intended to highlight the opportunities that those involved in agri-business can find to work collaboratively to improve the sector holistically within Middlesex County.

Workforce and Training

Attract investment and employment in agri-business through outreach and education

Advantages

- It was noted that it is advantageous that Middlesex County has, and is in close proximity to, a large population and post-secondary educational institutions which provides an opportunity to employ a local workforce
- Middlesex County has substantial existing investment in agri-business which contributes to providing an



- array of employment opportunities that support different demographics and lifestyles such as part-time, casual, seasonal, professional, or managerial employment
- With the large amount of agri-business within Middlesex County, there exists opportunities for those

in involved in the agricultural workforce to pursue career advancements

- It was identified that support exists from the public sector to increase the agricultural workforce

Challenges

- The proximity to post-secondary education institutions was viewed as being beneficial although it was identified that challenges exist in the ability to attract and retain responsible and skilled local talent
- Similarly, while there exists a large populous and a workforce to hire from, there is a lack of awareness of the opportunities that exist in the agri-business sector

Strategies

- In order to better attract workers to the agri-business sector in Middlesex County, there is a desire to explore solutions for public transportation within the County
- Generally speaking, social media has played a positive and influential role in being able to attract employment. This was an identified means to continue to improve the image of agri-business in Middlesex County. Participants highlighted that there was a desire to improve public communications of employment opportunities through websites, social media, and job posting boards
- In terms of employment and tourism within the agri-business sector, participants identified that education and outreach with youth should be an area of focus to enhance the opportunities that exist and to provide sustainable opportunities for growth. Ways to engage youth that were identified were presenting at high schools, and finding ways to offer incentives for students to get involved in agriculturally related projects
- In regards to employment, there was interest in finding solutions to ensure employers have reliable employment by engaging in opportunities to screen employees up front as well as to look to best practices for hiring in order to minimize risks for employers
- In order to encourage employment within the agricultural sector, an identified solution as to lobby governments for tax reform, i.e. providing tax relief on lower income levels to encourage employment within the industry
- Stakeholders identified that there was a desire to find strategies to attract newcomers in Canada to reside in rural areas such as

Middlesex County in order to enhance agricultural employment opportunities. A specific opportunity that was discussed was engaging in programming or partnership opportunities with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to encourage and promote agri-business

- There was a desire for training opportunities to be provided for entrepreneurs to attract new populations to consider the agricultural sector for employment
- In order to improve transparency and communication within the

County, it was identified that businesses and industries would like to be engaged in decision making. In addition, when public engagement does occur, that listening and valuing the public interest is significant for improving transparency and trust.

- In pursuing efforts to attract workers, there was a desire for the County to consider more income based housing opportunities, i.e. affordable housing, low-income housing, and social support services within rural settings

Land Use Planning

Find ways to improve communication and processes for development applications

Advantages

- The ability for investors to have the opportunity to meet with local Mayors, elected officials, and County staff prior to making investments is beneficial
- It was noted that it is significant that the County permits surplus farm dwelling consent which provides the flexibility for those engaged in agri-business the opportunity to consider



severance, expansion, and amalgamation of agricultural property

- In regards to the ease of land use planning, there exists a relatively low parcel fragmentation in Middlesex County which is conducive to being able to have larger livestock and cash crop opportunities

Challenges

- There were concerns raised in regards to the use of agricultural land. A variety of concerns arose including pressure experienced due to urban sprawl in order facilitate urban development on valuable agricultural land, agricultural assets being underutilized, and pressure regarding resource extraction; specifically, gravel
- Stakeholders highlighted concerns associated with processes relating to land use planning including timelines and a lack of consistency between different levels of government including varying objectives between departments, municipalities, and conservation authorities
- Participants also voiced concerns associated with the restrictions that exist when it comes to industrial and commercial uses on agricultural zoning
- It was highlighted that there is a perceived lack of agricultural representation among elected officials

Strategies

- It was identified that a road map or fact sheet would be a valuable tool to better understand the expectations, timelines, and processes for a proponent. There was an expressed desire to find solutions to improve communication and transparency, such as pre-consultation meetings to understand the requirements and concerns relating to development applications at the beginning of the process
- Participants suggested that additional resources would be useful as well as to have the capacity for staff to conduct site visits to better understand the context of proposed development applications.
- There was a desire expressed for the County to develop an agricultural advisory committee including a municipal point person to assist in agricultural land use planning applications
- Ensure transportation design standards are consistent with modern agriculture practices
- It was suggested to review the County and regional growth strategies to ensure they are aligned with the current status of development and that mixed use development is considered logistically
- It was identified that agricultural land should be valued and considered for the ecosystem services that they provide

Logistics and Infrastructure

Ensure services and opportunities are still located within rural communities

Advantages

- Geographically, Middlesex County is well serviced in terms of its regional connectivity and assets such as having major transportation corridors, railways, close proximity to an international border crossing, and significant water bodies which all support agri-business to some extent
- Within Middlesex County, infrastructure is viewed as supporting local connectivity through the county road systems, the



- diversity of elevators for grain storage, cooperatives, and grain shippers
- Middlesex County's agri-business sector has the ability to reach global markets and attract economic development as diverse assets are present in the County such as competitive land prices, and through partnerships like South Central Ontario Region (SCOR) Economic Development Corporation

Challenges

- Ongoing complications exist with the lack of quality internet services in certain areas of Middlesex County
- Middlesex County is involved in international competition and challenges exist as there is an assumption that it is easiest to work

- within the market of the United States
- Generally speaking, the migration from rural to urban, has impacted rural communities in terms of reduced services and opportunities available outside of the major urban centers, such as London

Strategies

- Stakeholders voiced optimism regarding the implementation of SWIFT and the possibilities it will provide in modernizing agri-business in the area allowing new

- opportunities to become more competitive in service offerings
- It was highlighted that it would be valuable if Middlesex County

considered supporting the Clean Water Programs

- It was identified that there is a desire to continue to attract and promote businesses and populations to rural environments. A solution identified was to work to lobby various levels of governments for services and infrastructure as well as to seek opportunities for funding and grants

for community revitalization and development

- Continue to provide support service and partnerships with existing regional partners, i.e. SCOR, Western Ontario Warden's Caucus, etc. to better understand the challenges of the region and to engage in creative strategies and solutions

Agri-Tourism

Continue to support coordinated brand strategies for advertising local amenities

Advantages

- The location and population of Middlesex County as well as the supporting infrastructure is seen as being favorable for agri-tourism.
- Major transportation routes create opportunities to attract travelers passing through the County providing the ability to attract people to rural attractions as investors, visitors, or workers
- The ability to preserve, protect, and restore environmental assets and features by groups such as Alternative Land Use Services Canada (ALUS) was seen as beneficial for supporting agri-tourism
- The diversity in seasonality, weather patterns, soil types etc., all provide diverse opportunities for agri-business such as livestock and crops. This correlates with the multitude of agri-tourism options, limiting the



amount of competition that exists as niche businesses are supported

- It was noted that there are a growing number of small businesses that are helpful to attracting agri-tourism
- Local agri-business tours have been viewed as being a success
- Middlesex County has a unique local history and there are opportunities to showcase diverse local culture through agri-tourism and off-farm opportunities such as existing museums
- The Middlesex-London local food guide, "Get Fresh...Eat Local", has been helpful for attracting tourism
- There exists the ability to build brand equity for agri-tourism providers

- Resources and services exist which help in supporting the promotion of businesses and events

- The flexibility in municipal planning has permitted diversified practices and operations to take place in agricultural areas such as agri-tourism

Challenges

- It was noted that businesses provide a variety of tourist attractions that are not a single asset or feature. This diversity contributes to a lack of a unified voice for tourism
- It was identified that there is a disconnect with neighboring Indigenous communities

- Grassroutes signage was identified as being unclear at times
- Stakeholders identified that there is a general lack of knowledge by residents in the County to the existing amenities available

Strategies

- Positive feedback was delivered in regards to the local food map as well as the Grassroutes signage initiative. It was expressed that there is a desire for continued expansion of these programs as well as to explore opportunities for co-branding initiatives
- A brand strategy would be a useful tool to provide a unified voice for tourism
- Developing relationships and partnerships could be a valuable opportunity specifically with neighboring Indigenous communities
- The creation of economic development working groups across the County to collaborate and share best practices would be beneficial
- It was identified that there should be an increase in capacity of Middlesex

- County's Economic Development staff and funding resources to dedicate to agri-tourism
- There would be value in increasing communication with tourism providers; supporting hands on learning opportunities, such as community engaged learning projects. Engaging with urban tourism partners would be a means to increase awareness for residents
- Support from the County to act as a liaison for businesses in navigating government processes and information would be a valuable tool as well as helping to provide a voice for businesses to the public as well as to elected officials to effectively communicate needs as well as services provided

- Consider including tourism development in the County's economic development strategic plan along with a dedicated budget to support the strategy
- Participants highlighted a desire for the County to be creative and visionary in considering long range plans

Public Outreach and Marketing

Explore new opportunities and support existing initiatives that increase engagement and knowledge of local food and food production

Advantages

- Engaging in events such as the Annual Agriculture Forum and Ag Tour coordinated by Middlesex County provides opportunities to network with others involved in agri-business and reveals that common ideas emerge among diverse sectors
- Social media, videos, commercials, vignettes, and Fields to Forks programming have all helped in sharing stories with the public and providing the opportunity to put a face to the farm
- There has been a noted growth in participants engaged in 4H
- Facilities such as London's Western Fair are beneficial to supporting agri-business related events
- There are lots of events in the region that increase public outreach which attract a range of audiences from local to international participants, i.e. pork congress, dairy congress, poultry show, Veg Fest, Agri Net, Woodstock's Outdoor Farm Show, etc.
- There has been an increase in initiatives to build relationships in the agri-business sector such as with Chambers of Commerce
- There has been increased recognition of the role that agri-business plays within the area, i.e. the Business Achievement Awards of the London Chamber of Commerce now include an agricultural category



Challenges

- Concerns exist that a lot of the food provided in institutions is not local when opportunities do exist to support local markets
- It was identified that some marketing creates competition where the focus can be more collaborative among local businesses

Strategies

- There is a variety of new initiatives emerging in the County and partnering municipalities and it was identified that there would be value in understanding the role, responsibilities, and opportunities that exist
- There is a desire to expand and support various agricultural related programs including 4H organizations, Fields to Forks, etc., as well as to seek new opportunities for partnerships such as with school boards, learning institutions, and Middlesex-London Health Unit. This could include advocating for agricultural programming within school curriculums or engaging with Middlesex County staff in agricultural tours. Additional programming opportunities exist although roles and responsibilities need to be identified for programs such as food literacy, senior nutrition, community kitchens, adult learning, mix and mingle, master chefs, and the ability to popularize local food events
- Consider providing a dedicated seat on County Council for agriculture

Key Takeaways

- Ensure creativity when visioning for the future of agri-business in Middlesex County
- Improve access for enjoyment and employment by exploring options for public transportation
- Increase investment, employment, and enjoyment of agri-business through education and programming opportunities for diverse populations such as youth, post-secondary students, newcomers to Canada, etc.
- Continuously improve processes and communication between business, County staff, elected officials, and other governmental organizations

Identified Actions

Based on the discussions that occurred and the strategies that were presented by participants in the forum, the following are actions that participants identified that they would like to see either Middlesex County staff or elected officials undertake.

Identified Actions for Middlesex County Staff

- Engage with government and governmental institutions to promote employment and investment within Middlesex County, i.e. through exploring funding, partnerships, etc.
- Find ways to engage and attract youth to the opportunities that exist within the agri-business sectors
- Explore opportunities to provide better connection within Middlesex County such as public transportation
- Find ways to attract and to retain agri-businesses within Middlesex County
- Find ways to support training opportunities within the agri-business sector
- Ensure modern agricultural practices are being considered in reviewing land use planning applications
- Provide a dedicated point person and have staff dedicated to agri-business within Middlesex County
- Develop guidelines, road maps, and consider hosting pre-consultation meetings to improve efficiency and transparency for land use planning applications
- Continue to develop business profile videos
- Encourage creativity when considering new strategies within the agri-business sector
- Act as a champion when advocating for resources from county government to support tourism and economic development
- Help in facilitating the sharing of best practices within the agri-business sector
- Act as a liaison between various partners such as businesses, public services, or government institutions
- Help in communicating the agri-business sector needs
- Consider joining Ag Committee's with nearby County's such as Norfolk County, Lambton County, etc.
- Organize tours of the County for Middlesex County staff and other municipal staff to understand the context of the agri-business sector
- Continue to support the 2015 County of Middlesex Agriculture Strategy Report
- Ensure the conversation outside of the Agriculture Forum is maintained through activities such as the Agri-Business Bus Tour

Identified Actions for Elected Officials

- Ensure transparency and that the public interest is valued in the decision making process
- Consider dedicating a budget that prioritizes the needs of the agri-business sector
- Advocate for income based housing opportunities within Middlesex County
- Lobby government to invest in Middlesex County by providing infrastructure and other supporting services
- Work to develop an agricultural advisory committee
- Ensure creativity and visionary solutions are considered when exploring the future of rural communities
- Recognize the contributions that small local businesses have made in providing prosperity to the economy and community
- Work regionally to break the barriers that exist between local municipal boundaries
- Ensure awareness of Ontario Federation of Agriculture's (OFA) Producing Prosperity program
- Consider dedicating a Council seat for agri-business
- Support the ongoing efforts to bring high speed broadband to Middlesex County through SWIFT
- With ongoing provincial discussions of high-speed rail development, County Council should be responsible for understanding the impact of such development to landowners and businesses in Middlesex

Next Steps

The above strategies listed are not intended to be an exhaustive list as improving agri-business within Middlesex County is intended to be ongoing. Collaborative strategies are suggested solutions and are to be used to continue the conversation.

Questions

If you are interested in continuing the conversation or have feedback on the process or content of this document, please contact Director of Economic Development, Cara Finn at cfinn@middlesex.ca.