Leeds & Grenville Federations of Agriculture Breakfast meeting with Leeds-Grenville-Thousand Islands-Rideau Lakes MP Micha Barrett and MPP Steve Clark

Date: Friday April 12, 2024

Location: JJ’s Country Diner, Athens

Time: 7:30 – 9:30 a.m.

Attendance:

MP Michael Barrett

MPP Steve Clark

Leeds Federation of Agriculture: Cornelia Danis, Eleanor Renaud, Jonny de Matos & Al Whitlam

Grenville Federation of Agriculture: Lance Stephenson & Clint Camerson (OFA board member)

OFA staff: Ruth Vogel

MP staff: Randy Hopkins

Leeds Federation of Agriculture President Cornelia Danis welcomed everyone and asked everyone to introduce themselves. Michael and Steve asked more details from some of the members they didn’t know (ie. Jonny and his bee operation).

Some topics discussed:

1. Announcement of the National School Food program – request was to make a requirement of the program is to use Canadian and locally grown produce to support local and Canadian Agriculture. Michael stated the details are very scarce. A lot of funds have been committed to the program but no idea how it will be implemented, how many children it will benefit, etc. The concept is good but lacking in details.
2. Question, was asked why the province is cancelling water testing for private wells. Steve mentioned that the government is NOT cancelling the program. Unfortunately, there is miscommunication circulating around the province. A few years ago (I think 2017) the Auditor General made a recommendation to consolidate/streamline health units and due to the covid pandemic it was parked. Now this program has resurfaced. The provincial government has NOT accepted the report. The Minister has not made any comments nor suggested any changes but rather has remained silent on the issue. Steve has received several calls/emails on this issue.
3. Question, was asked where the government is planning to build all the new houses being proposed. This was a follow-up to the concerns at the recent Rural Economic Development Round table (REDR) held recently in Smiths Falls. Steve mentioned that it will be up to municipalities and their official plans as to where the new homes will be built. Municipalities still have the authority for building planning. Question, was asked about township planners as it was noted that York, Peel and Halton have removed their regional planners. Another related question about prime agricultural land mapping under the United Counties of Leeds Grenville Agricultural Area Review and some of the incorrect labelling of agricultural lands. It is up to the County to decide what is considered agricultural land and it is up to the land owner to check the mapping and relay their concerns to the county. A side note about the recent roundtable (REDR) meeting in Smiths Falls. It was noted that the zoom capabilities were terrible (no one on zoom could hear the proceedings). Steve acknowledged this was a problem. Steve initially wanted to hold the meeting in Lombardy where there was a lot of room so more people could attend and maybe better internet service but was turned down by John Jordan (Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Lisa Thompson).
4. Lots of discussion about importance of Line 5 and the establishment of more Natural Gas lines. The Port of Prescott would like to use Natural Gas to dry grain as using other options like a heat pump is too expensive. As well, having a back-up heat source like natural gas is ideal to have if the power goes out. Both Michael and Steve spoke on this issue. There is a movement by some groups (anti fossil fuel movement) to ban Natural Gas. Steve mentioned that he has received several calls/emails to get rid of Natural Gas and for the government not to support any grants or programs for the expansion of natural gas. Steve mentioned that the City of Kingston passed a motion to not allow any future Natural Gas expansion. Michael stated that the Liberal government is not working hard enough with regard to trade negotiations (NAFTA) with regard to Line 5 and having lines putting in additional lines for Natural Gas. Some issues which are holding back expansion for Natural Gas is the number of trees (some of which are protected) along the route for the lines between Michigan and Canada. As well, Enbridge needs time to get these lines built.
5. Alternative Biofuels – why isn’t the government working to allow more renewable energy resources or expansion of some existing ones like biodiesel (canola). There should be a push towards increasing processing capacity and increase canola acreage in the western provinces like Saskatchewan and Northern areas to make Canade less reliant on imported energy resources. Unfortunately, establishing renewal energy resources are heavily dependent on government subsidies. More work needs to be done in the green tech sector. Michael mentioned that their government does not have a formal position on this issue but will reach out to the John Barlow (Shadow Minister for Agriculture, Agri-Food and Food Security) for their position. Michael indicated that there are probably good initiatives are not being acted upon and are being tossed out.
6. Discussion on Agricultural Labour (namely the temporary foreign worker (TFW) program). Foreign labourer’s s are facing more restrictions coming to Canada to work. Foreign workers are particularly important to the fruit and vegetable agriculture sector for a couple of reasons (they know what they are doing (more specialized), have a good work ethic, don’t mind the work and they want to work to support their families back home in their native country. It was mentioned that it is unfortunate that some Canadians do not want to this type of laborious work which is one of the reason’s the TFW is so important especially in the perishable fruit and vegetable . Michael indicated the feeling is that these workers are being “used and taken advantage of by their employers” and are not treated fairly. Michael also indicated that the current government has made a mess with this and other programs. The Current government has stated that they want to bring in 500,000 people in Canada (students, immigrants, refugees, etc.) but are not able to track this influx of people coming into Canada. Comment was made that some urban politicians are not concerned where their food comes from – they can purchase it from the grocery store. It was mentioned that Farm and Food Care has some excellent videos available on Canadian/Ontario food production and these links should be sent to urban MP’s.
7. Question on why the abattoir in Joyceville is still not operational. There is a large shortage of local abattoirs and reopening the Joyceville abattoir would be helpful to the local community and help alleviate the back log at other facilities. Michael stated that the Minister of Public Safety was not receptive to reopening the facility. The thought was that the prisoners at the Joyceville Institution are being forced to work in the abattoir. He noted that Kingston and the Islands are also against opening this abattoir. Michael noted that his government is in favor of opening this facility as well as establishing other ones.
8. Question was asked why we need both Federal and Provincial Meat inspectors and why couldn’t we have one set of rules for all meat inspection or allow each meat inspector (federal and provincial) to inspect each other’s jurisdictions. This was brought up at the Round table session with Minister Thompson and she explained the different roles of each inspector. Federal inspections are for exported meat and Provincial inspectors are for local consumption. If we want to allow provincial inspectors to inspect large export bound meat and visa versa, the province would need to ask the federal government to provide contracts and training to allow them to inspect this meat. Michael had indicated that this will not be easy as the feds will be very protective of their “fiefdom” and would not be willing to work together with the provinces.
9. Questions was asked about the budget – there were only 5 lines in the provincial budget dedicated to Agriculture. It seems when there are budget cuts – Agriculture is the first ministry to be affected with reductions. Extension services are being reduced. Jonny mentioned that the bee inspectors have been fired. So, applying for permits for bee exportation is more complicated and takes longer. Jonny ships bees across Canada and I believe in the US as well. Steve mentioned that when someone retires sometimes their position isn’t replaced. So, the comment was made that the government isn’t any forward thinking nor do they identify upcoming problems or issues or make succession plans within their own governments. A satisfactory solution/answer was not given.
10. The Round table meeting with Lisa Thompson about the creation of a Rural Economic Development Strategy was discussed again. This meeting wasn’t what people who attended expected the round table meeting to be. Thought was it was going to be more about what is required to expand businesses in the rural community. Steve told the group that he only received the questions shortly prior to the meeting itself and was caught off guard as well. Question was asked whether an actual Rural Economic development meeting could be held in order to discuss how to develop rural businesses. Steve stated that with John Jordan being the PA for Lisa Thompson that Leeds and Grenville should work with Lanark and the three corresponding local economic development offices to hold a round table meeting to discuss this issue.
11. Question, was asked about how to provide young farmers with grants and/or resources to start farming similar to some commodity groups who provide new entrant and young farmer programs (and maybe some other provinces help their young farmers with programs). This is a concern as the average age of farmers is approaching 60 years of age and the cost of starting a farm business can be prohibitive. Young farmers are more likely to find jobs off the farm where the labour may not be as intensive, and the pay may be much better. Steve reiterated that this would be a topic to work with MPP John Jordan as he is the PA to Lisa Thompson
12. Al Whitlam brought up the Wiltse Creek issue. Steve mentioned that the Ministry of Environment is willing to look at the issue but the farmers affected by this issue, the local council and the Conservation Authority need to present a plan for the Minister to look at.

The group in attendance kept their comments very civilized and were not confrontational. We try to keep the atmosphere friendly as the saying goes “you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar” and our group has a good relationship with both our members (MP and MPP). Both Steve and Michael thanked the group for the opportunity to network with them. Michael had to leave early as he was called back to Ottawa unexpectantly, and Steve gave us 2 hours of his time which was also greatly appreciated.

I took 6 pages of notes from the meeting. Lots of excellent discussion.