

Lori Stahlbrand
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I'm Lori Stahlbrand, the President and founder of Local Food Plus, also known as LFP, and I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to speak in support of the Markham Foodbelt proposal.

Local Food Plus is an award-winning non-profit organization that nurtures regional food economies by certifying farmers and processors for local sustainable food production, and helping them connect with buyers of all types and sizes. In particular we have pioneered working with institutional purchasers on long-term food service contracts that support local sustainable food systems. LFP Certified Local Sustainable farmers and processors reduce and eliminate pesticide use, treat their animals well, conserve soil and water, protect wildlife habitat, provide safe and fair working conditions, reduce-energy use, and sell locally wherever possible. We currently have 200 certified farmers and processors in Ontario, and more than 70 partners – universities, municipalities, schools, retailers, restaurants, caterers, etc., across southern and central Ontario. Our largest partner is the University of Toronto, where last year 20% of the food on the St. George Campus was from LFP Certified Local Sustainable farmers.

In 2008, the Town of Markham made history by becoming the first municipality in Canada to commit to a local sustainable procurement program for its own food purchases. In Year 1 of the program, 15% of the food purchased came from local sustainable farmers and processors certified by LFP.

I've come here tonight on behalf of the Local Food Plus Board of Directors, which has passed a motion of support for the Markham food belt proposal. This proposal is totally consistent with the leadership role that Markham has already assumed. Protecting this farmland is essential to ensure a sustainable food system for the people of this region today and in the decades to come.

A sustainable food system means that the resources of the future are not diminished by our action today, as food system writer Michael Pollan has written. A sustainable food system is one that is resilient and equitable for all stakeholders. Farmland is key to a sustainable food system. It is clearly in the public interest to protect the best farmland and ensure that we do not foreclose options for feeding ourselves in the future. It is particularly shortsighted to destroy prime farmland as we head into a period of global uncertainty. Our ever increasing reliance on imported foods makes us vulnerable to disruptions in supply due to environmental factors, border closings and swings in global markets. Two thirds of Canada's remaining Class 1 farmland is in Southern Ontario, and almost all of it is under threat. Protecting this land is a food security issue.

Your link for local sustainable food

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It is also an economic issue. A sustainable economy starts with a sustainable food system. Food can become a centerpiece of a new green economy. The food industry is the second largest manufacturing industry in Ontario after the auto industry, employing more than 700,000 people. Many of those jobs are in this region, which is one of North America's centres for food processing. By focusing on a local sustainable food sector system, we can stimulate green economic development and healthy local jobs, while ensuring that there will be quality farmland producing food generations to come. This will become increasingly important as we head into a period of peak oil and climate change, when food from distant sources may become unreliable due to drought and extreme climate conditions.

We owe it to our farmers to ensure that they can make a decent living farming. Farmers, unfortunately, have become one of the most disadvantaged groups in this country. Farmers are leaving farming and their children are not becoming farmers because it is increasingly difficult to make a living. Yet this occupation is critical to the well-being of every one of us.

We must support our farmers by paying a fair price for our food, something we are not doing right now. Canada has the lowest food prices in the world. On average, we spend 10% of our income on food. In Western Europe and Japan, other advanced nations with high standards of living, food represents between 15 and 30% of the average income. We must protect people on low income, but not on the backs of farmers, who themselves are often impoverished. Protecting farmland is the first step. Ensuring the economic liability of our farmers is the critical next step.

But we can't support farmers, including younger generations of farmers who need land to purchase to farm. Farmers, in the peri-urban areas in particular, often wear two hats – as food producers and as land speculators. It is in the public interest to support and defend them as food producers and ensure that they can make a decent living farming, and that is the central mandate of Local Food Plus. But it is not in the public interest to support them when they don their hats as land speculators.

Nor is it good business. Studies have shown when the cost of servicing suburban developments is factored in – the additional roads and garbage pick-up and schools and other infrastructure – municipalities earn less tax revenue from subdivisions than from agricultural land. A decision to allow this land to be developed will be a revenue drain on the Town of Markham for the years to come.

This is a critical issue. On behalf of the Board of Directors of Local Food Plus, I urge you to support the Markham Foodbelt proposal and help to ensure food security for yourselves, your children, and your grandchildren.

Thank you.



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