
NORTH PERTH AGRICULTURAL EXCELLENCE PROJECT



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INTRODUCTION

All too often agriculture is an invisible asset in municipalities across the province.

All too often, success in rural communities means moving away to cities and finding success outside of agriculture.

And, ironically, the agriculture and agri-food sector is often the core foundation for prosperity and business success in those communities.

But perhaps most importantly, the potential for extraordinary and exciting transformation in the sector represents the cornerstone of a sustainable and prosperous future in communities big and small.

This is true of the Municipality of North Perth.

It is in this context – to get to that future – that the municipality is reviewing its role in supporting the sector.

A key feature of building for economic prosperity with agriculture at the core involves bringing back pride to how the community collectively thinks and acts in regards to that sector.

It means thinking about agriculture and the savvy business ecosystem built around it as a core cluster for future success, and leveraging those strengths with purpose.

What follows is an examination of the challenges and opportunities in North Perth with a view to building on past successes in the agriculture and food space.

This report details that landscape and makes recommendations for moving forward... specifically implementing a *North Perth Farm and Food Forward* vision.

We at MK&A would like to thank all those who participated in this process. Your contributions were insightful and your community passion inspiring.

That said, any errors, omissions or bad ideas herein are the sole responsibility of MK&A.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The Municipality of North Perth retained MK&A to develop a vision and action plan for advancing “Excellence in Agriculture” that would put North Perth on “the map” – that is to say, a vision and action plan for North Perth that would leverage and build on its inherent sector strengths.

To do so, MK&A focused on gaining insights into the agriculture and related agri-businesses in the region to identify defining or distinguishing characteristics of the sector in North Perth compared to other regions.

With this in mind, the specific objectives of this project were to:

- identify opportunities with the potential for municipal engagement of the agricultural and agri-food sectors in the region,
- consider implementation options for enhancing the visibility of the agriculture and agri-food sectors in municipal government practice,
- offer a realistic road-map for implementation, and
- identify and align opportunities and options with potentially available public funding programs.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Municipality of North Perth retained MK&A to develop of a vision and action plan for advancing “Excellence in agriculture” that would leverage and build on the inherent strengths of the sector in the region.

Consultations with stakeholders and community leaders revealed the following themes:

- Respondents were very passionate about their community and optimistic about the prospects for agriculture and agri-foods sectors.
- Respondents exhibited a strong willingness towards collaboration and “doing things differently”.
- The agriculture and agri-business sectors in North Perth tends to be business savvy and forward thinking in applying innovations and technologies to maximize efficiencies and sustainability.
- The agriculture and agri-business sectors and the municipality currently enjoy a largely positively working relationship.

Noteworthy was the strong sense of pride reflected by respondents – pride in their farm or agri-business operation, pride in the food being produced...and above all, **pride of place**.

A vision, entitled *North Perth Farm and Food Forward*, is intended to elevate the visibility and prominence of agriculture and agri-business in North Perth municipal activities and to enhance the relationship between the sector and the community.

The vision is comprised of three areas of opportunity:

- (1) *Positioning for Success*,
- (2) *Agriculture 4.0*, and
- (3) *Capacity Building*.



These areas represent pathways to acknowledging agriculture and agri-business as the backbone of regional economic success, celebrating ‘pride of place’ and reinforcing and strengthening sector and community pride.

The objective under *Positioning for Success* is to enhance the visibility and voice of the agriculture and agri-business sectors in municipal planning, policy and regulatory deliberations through strengthened collaboration, connection and opportunities for input. It involves a shift in municipal approach, where agriculture and agri-business interests are elevated as core considerations in community direction and priorities.

The objective under *Agriculture 4.0* is to dispel dated perspectives of agriculture and agri-business operations through education and demonstration of the current realities of the sector, such as data driven precision agriculture and other technology innovations, that underlie modern sector successes. There is an opportunity to better demonstrate what the sector is and can be, both in terms of operational application and also regional, provincial and global impact.

The objective under the *Capacity Building* arm is to expand the local toolbox to facilitate successful implementation of the *Farm and Food Forward* vision. The vision cannot succeed without sufficient talent and resourcing, ensuring that the underlying capacity exists to enable implementation.

Four recommendations are tabled addressing sector engagement, wayfinding services, showcasing sector innovation, and regional capacity building. It is acknowledged that sufficiently resourcing these initiatives (and the process involved in securing these resources) and coordination and collaboration with third parties – other levels of government, local agriculture stakeholder groups, relevant institutions and organizations – add an indeterminable factor to the timetable for implementation.

There are elements of the four recommendations offered that could form an **early action plan** towards implementation, as follows:

- Continue with efforts to refine the workings of the North Perth Economic Development Advisory Committee, and task the committee to advise on design, resource requirements and implementation of centralized business investment wayfinding services;
- Establish the proposed agriculture and agri-business advisory forum with a mandate to provide recommendations on developing a sector specific PR campaign showcasing technological innovation and regional impact, and linking local production and processing to local food offerings through a series of celebratory events;
- Work with sector leaders to organize an annual farm tour and roundtable event between County agriculture stakeholder groups and Council; and,
- Review the Set 7 Skills and Technology North Perth and Region Learning Hub project to consider inclusion of needed agriculture and agri-business skills training and development components.

These early initiatives by the municipality, working with stakeholder partners in agriculture and other levels of government, would encompass the first steps in an ongoing effort to build upon and celebrate North Perth's strongest asset... pride of place.

2. MACRO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The Canadian Agri-food Policy Institute (CAPI) recently released an intriguing report on the future of agri-food in Canada. Entitled *Creating Prosperity from Chaos* (CAPI 2021), the report makes that case for prioritizing agriculture and food as a priority national strategic asset. Its conclusion:

“The Canadian agri-food system has great potential and the capacity to contribute to sustainable food production, global food security and climate change solutions while improving its competitive advantage. The biggest and relatively untapped opportunity is in our ability to use multidisciplinary knowledge to create solutions”.

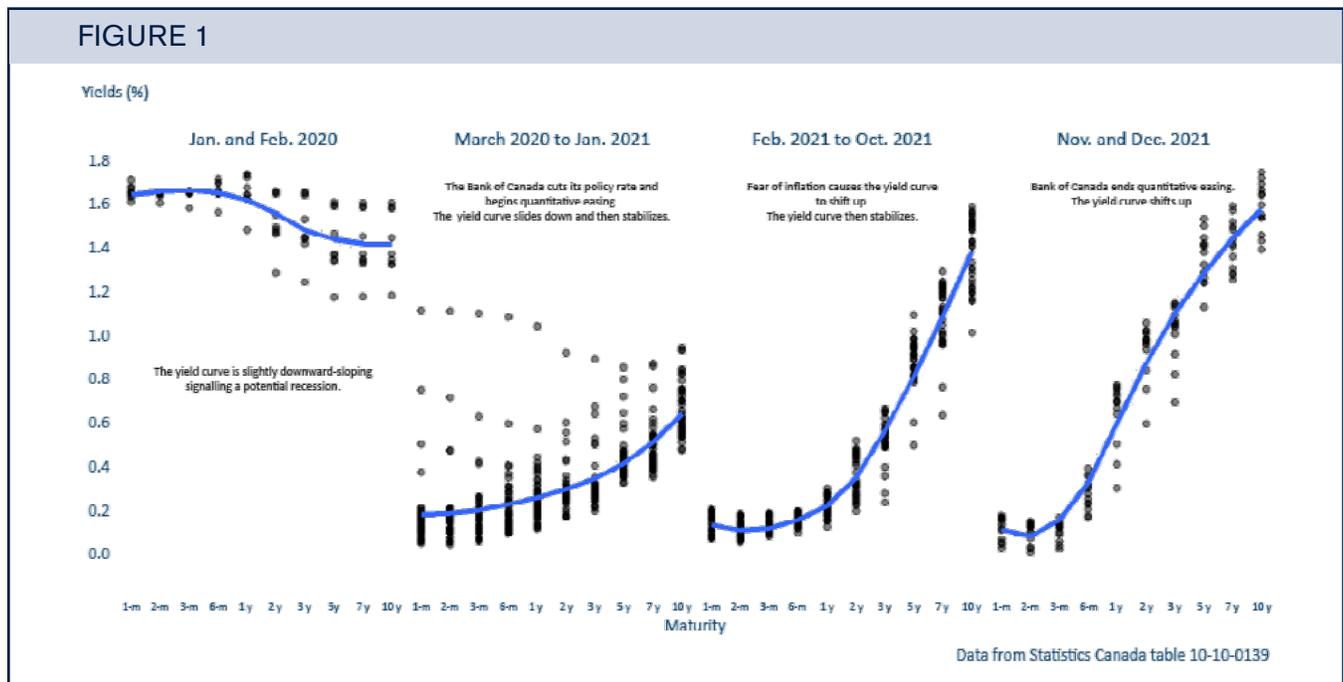
The report looks at a number of key areas for enhancing the sector’s capacity to seize this opportunity, including:

- Sustainable intensification for future growth and food security,
- Enhanced and sustainable domestic agri-food supply chains for resilient domestic food security,

- Climate change mitigation and adaptation, and
- A balanced business environment to encourage innovation commercialization and enhanced value-added activities.

In short, the challenges and opportunities in front of the sector require a global outlook with aggressive domestic activities that are supported from the community level to the national level, involving all stakeholders in between.

Nevertheless, the challenges in front of the sector are significant. There is a myriad of challenges to wrestle with... from inflation (Figure 1), to international trade challenges and massive supply chain disruption, to continued upward pressure on land values, to a seemingly endless shortage of labour, to ongoing shifts in consumer preference and the need for adaptation. All of these have been exacerbated by the global pandemic and war in central Europe.



Tracking inflation: changes in the yield curve reflect economic volatility produced by COVID ([FCC 2022](#))

Closer to home, we know that key business costs such as labour, energy and other inputs continue to rise in line with national and international trends. This on top of the already high costs associated with production in Ontario.

Canada's 2021 Census of Agriculture reinforces this “story about the transformation of the agriculture industry and adaptiveness of Canadian farmers.”

And yet, the opportunities remain substantial. The need for Canadian food and agri-food products is significant. The Financial Post (FP 2021) went so far as to declare food the new oil (!), which puts Canada in the driver's seat, strategically speaking.

How then to square the circle of so much promise and opportunity in the face of so many challenges? Is there a fit for North Perth in all this churn?

We believe there is. If the world needs more of Canada (paraphrasing the overwhelming economic forecast of this country's place in feeding growing global food demand)... then Canada needs more North Perth.

3. UNDERSTANDING THE REGIONAL ECO-SYSTEM

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

Over Q2 of 2022, MK&A undertook an environmental and market scan of the agriculture and agri-business sector in North Perth and the surrounding region. This initial scan yielded the following summary observations:

- The agriculture sector is not monolithic – there are many different business models, commodities, sub-sectors and related or supporting industries.
- In many ways North Perth is not a unique region – with a diversity of commodity production and supporting businesses, the region is similar to many other intensive agriculture regions in the province.
- The region struggles with many of the same challenges endemic to the sector across the country: labour shortages, challenging economics for a local processing business case, infrastructure challenges including broadband access.
- And yet, the North Perth region is a living example of a successful agriculture business ecosystem that has business ingenuity, diversity and a wealth of well-managed, forward looking farms.
- The region has examined the concept of a “science centre” and has struck a board of directors to “flesh out” the concept and implementation of the facility. The facility is assumed to have a link to the agriculture and food sector.

Opportunities for advancing agriculture excellence in the region include:

- Agriculture leadership – developing policy and regulatory positions and/or pilot programs to:
 - *advance smart growth policies and projects (e.g. land use intensification for production; for animal and human use);*
 - *housing and labour solutions in rural and small urban areas;*
 - *regulatory, planning and permitting innovation.*
- Domestic supply chain re-shoring investments, including:
 - *Meat processing capacity*
 - *Differentiated or specialty grain processing*
- Labour and housing projects to look at accessibility, affordability and ensuring an enduring environment for sustainable live, work and play communities.

At this stage, the prominent question emerged: what was the appropriate role of the municipality in establishing and furthering a vision for agriculture excellence?

4. OUTREACH AND CONSULTATION FINDINGS

To arrive at a better sense of regional sector perspectives, MK&A undertook an early round of outreach and stakeholder engagements, followed by a series of more in-depth consultation sessions with key stakeholders in the region. The outreach and consultations involved conversations with select producers, farm group representatives, agri-business representatives, and relevant community organization leaders in the municipality and surrounding region.

These conversations raised some important and distinguishing themes:

- All respondents were very passionate about their community and were optimistic about the long-term prospects for agriculture and agri-foods in the region.
- The respondents exhibited a strong willingness towards collaboration and working together, creating partnerships, and “doing things differently”.
- Those respondents working in agriculture and agri-business sectors demonstrated business savvy, with success borne on a willingness to apply the latest thinking and technologies to maximize efficiencies and sustainability. It is not a community stuck in conventional thinking.
- Agriculture and agri-business respondents spoke positively about the relationship with the municipality and acknowledged that the municipality was good at listening to and championing sector concerns and priorities.

The consultations on a proposed vision for maximizing sector visibility revolved around participant perspectives on regional advantages, sector issues, the potential role of the municipality in helping to resolve sector challenges, and possible opportunities for moving forward.

PROMINENT ISSUES

The issues prominently raised during consultations were as follows:

- *Maintaining the capacity to grow and process food locally* – consider strategies that would keep economic activity local rather than rely on imported goods or imported technology/ know-how (particularly food processing infrastructure).
- *Access and retention of both non-skilled and skilled labour* – recruitment, training, retention of skilled and non-skilled labour to address shortage, along with augmenting municipal service and support amenities to accommodate a permanent influx of labour – e.g., affordable housing, high-speed internet, power and natural gas infrastructure, tax incentives and investment attraction.
- *Farmland preservation* – long-term strategies that consider competing interests of population growth, commercial and industrial development, and preservation of farmland (e.g., greater priority to developing brownfields, vacant factory lots, density development, etc.).
- *Guidance through the morass of agri-business regulations* – need for augmented wayfinding services to help navigate a complex and multi-layered government system of regulations affecting everything from development to marketing.
- *Planning for the future* – municipal planning and commercial zoning specifically must consider future needs and impacts, with particular attention to ensuring a buffer between residential development and commercial operations.

OFFERED SOLUTIONS

Recurring potential solutions raised by respondents are listed below:

- *Engagement*: ongoing and meaningful engagement by the municipality with agriculture and agri-food stakeholders – e.g., creation of agriculture and agri-business roundtable or re-constituting the economic development advisory committee to ensure an active agriculture and agri-business community voice in municipality planning, policy and regulatory processes.
- *Wayfinding*: dedicated, one-window concierge guidance through government (municipal, provincial and federal) regulations and requirements affecting producers and agri-businesses. Similar wayfinding services could also target foreign workers to help with housing, health care, ESL training, and immigration challenges.
- *Connection*: ensuring a cross-appreciation and understanding of rural and urban interests and priorities. This could be accomplished through an exchange between sector leaders and municipal decision-makers – e.g., annual farm tour hosted by Perth County for municipal councillors/staff.
- *Education*: multi-faceted objectives of sharing agriculture's historic and economic value to community, expanding agriculture and agri-food career awareness amongst youth, and establishing opportunities for skills development – e.g., hands-on features at proposed Agriculture Science Centre, perhaps inclusion of a skills training component or virtual tour to demonstrate technological and innovative advancements in farm and agri-business operations.

A summary table of the responses received at the various consultation sessions is provided below, in accordance with questions posed on regional advantages, prominent sector issues, the municipality's role in finding solutions, and potential near-term opportunities.

SUMMARY OF CONSULTATION RESPONSES

REGIONAL ADVANTAGES

Proximity to production hub, with concentration in animal farming
 Business ingenuity and savvy – able to see bigger picture (mind-set)
 Strong propensity towards industry collaboration
 Deep sense of community

AGRICULTURE ISSUES

Labour
 Housing
 Rural/urban relationship
 Farmland protection/development
 Mental health

AGRI-BUSINESS ISSUES

Costs
 Ease of business (red tape)
 Mental health
 Processing capacity
 Land use planning - commercial/residential buffer

ROLE OF MUNICIPALITY

Way-finding and guidance – ease of business
 Collaboration with other regional governments
 Foundational infrastructure (land-use and development; housing; cell and broadband; support programs - e.g. immigration/TFW; ESL services; mental health, etc)
 Support industry in doing differently
 Support and develop leaders
 Collaborate with industry (make invisible, visible) – more purposeful integration into economic development; support engagement with other levels of government
 Relationship with public (general public “trust”; specific e.g. encroachment)

OPPORTUNITIES

Green energy; green waste facility
 Science centre + (rural-urban; kids and careers; pride)
 Processing facility
 Other re-shoring opportunities (e.g. domestic fertilizer)
 Pilot programs in labour attraction and retention (housing; support programs (HPIS)
 Pilot program in way-finding / collaborative advocacy
 Pilot program on integrated economic development strategy + implementation (building for the future)

One forceful take-away from these consultations deserves highlighting. Respondents framed the narrative regarding the economic impact of the regional agriculture sector in the context of farming being as much a lifestyle as a business, a dynamic felt often lost in the dialogue. Farmers want to be recognized as business people, but also as fiercely community-minded and community-centric.

This speaks to the strong sense of pride that resides in the agriculture sector – **pride in the farm or agri-business operation, pride in the food being produced...and above all, pride of place.** An intense pride in community was reflected by all the respondents.

5. VISION

North Perth is unquestionably an agriculture hub with a diverse, successful farm base. This already puts the region at a strong footing. It is an agriculture and agri-business industry with business savvy and success borne on a willingness to adopt the latest thinking and technologies to maximize efficiencies and sustainability. Agriculture and agri-business are important assets to the region that merit specific attention.

That the importance of the sector is recognized by the municipality is a further step in the right direction.

Also noteworthy is the positive rapport that exists between the municipality and the local agricultural community. This positive relationship sets a foundation for ongoing collaboration and exchange, which are necessary to create the conditions for future regional success and shared prosperity.

The stand-out takeaway from our conversations with regional stakeholders, community leaders, and municipal decision-makers is that farming and agri-food businesses are more than commercial enterprises – they are built on pride. Pride in the history of farming that built the community, pride in individual farm or agri-business operations, pride in the food being produced. Above all, this translates into pride in the community.

While the strength of community pride is recognized, perhaps somewhat lost in a community in transition is the integral and intertwined element of pride in agriculture. This is deserving of restoration as a prominent feature in the community's DNA, helping to define the North Perth identity.

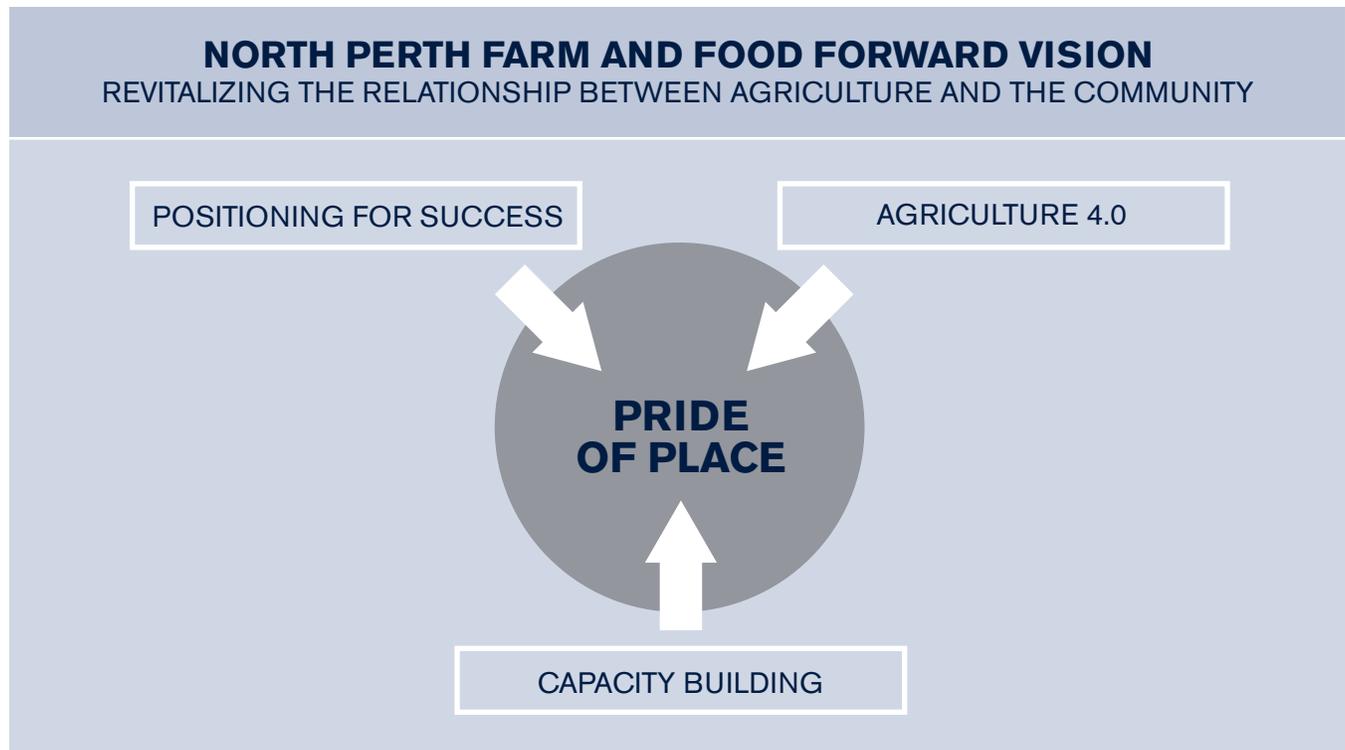
These elements – a successful, savvy agriculture and agribusiness industry, healthy working relations between the agriculture sector and municipal leaders, and strong community pride – establish a compelling foundation upon which an ambitious vision for economic growth and prosperity can be built, with agriculture and agri-food at the core.

NORTH PERTH FARM AND FOOD FORWARD MK&A is advancing the following vision for elevating the visibility and prominence of agriculture and agri-business in North Perth municipal affairs: *North Perth Farm and Food Forward*. Derived from the series of outreach and consultations undertaken, the vision is founded on the following premises:

- North Perth is a regional agriculture hub with a diverse, successful farm base that forms a core element of the region's future economic success.
- North Perth is distinguished by a high level of sector collaboration and a positive working relationship between the sector and the municipality. These are features that merit strengthening and promoting.
- Reinforcing the connection between agriculture and the community is critical to the region's future success and shared prosperity, and ensures that North Perth is well positioned to help address future global food challenges.
- At the core of the vision is restoring to prominence a pride that exists in the industry – pride in its farming history, individual pride in local farm or agri-business operations, pride in the local foods being produced and marketed. All this culminates into a strengthened pride in the community.

The *North Perth Farm and Food Forward* vision is comprised of three areas of opportunity: (1) *Positioning for Future Success*, (2) *Agriculture 4.0*, and (3) *Capacity Building*. These areas are intertwined and reinforce each other...and represent pathways to reclaiming 'pride in the industry' by restoring its prominence...and thereby reinforcing and strengthening community pride.

A schematic of the *North Perth Farm and Food Forward* vision is outlined below.



1. POSITIONING FOR SUCCESS

Positioning for Success involves enhancing the visibility and voice of the agriculture and agri-food sector in municipal planning, policy and regulatory deliberations through strengthened collaboration, connection and opportunity for input.

The focus here would be to reinforce the positive working relationship that already exists between the farm and agri-business community and the municipality, acknowledging that the agriculture and agri-food industry in North Perth is already uniquely successful, business savvy, and forward thinking. These facets can be built up by ensuring that municipal policy, planning and regulation consider agricultural and agri-business perspectives in early deliberations, particularly on such issues as housing, labour, land use planning, etc.

It also envisions the municipality offering

enhanced ways of helping farm and agri-business entrepreneurs navigate the layers of by-laws, regulations, licences and related requirements that make business start-up, innovation and transition arduous. Rules and regulations are easier to negotiate if the roadmap to arrive at an intended destination is clear; frustration results when hidden bumps and barriers blindside any progress to achieve that end destination. Establishing a dedicated wayfinding or concierge service for farm and agri-business entrepreneurs would help to create a more business-friendly environment.

The lead for establishing an enhanced business environment rests largely with the municipality. It involves a cultural shift in how the municipality operates to ensure that the policy and regulatory environment of North Perth is structured to enable the business success of regional producers and agri-businesses.

2. AGRICULTURE 4.0

Agriculture 4.0 involves showcasing agriculture as 'cool and critical'. The objective here is to dispel dated perspectives of agriculture and agri-business operations with the reality of the present and the future. There is an opportunity and need to better demonstrate what the sector is and can be, both in terms of operational application and also regional, provincial and global impact.

Precision agriculture, automation, robotics, sensor monitoring, aerial imagery...agriculture and agri-business today is more about innovation, technology, and adaptation – the 'cool' factor.

It is these advances in innovation and technology that generate greater efficiencies and higher yields and outputs, which are important factors in ensuring sustainability, profitability and regional economic success, but also contribute to the sector's relevance and importance in combating the global challenges of safe and adequate food supply, climate change, etc. – the 'critical' factor.

Again, if the world needs more of Canada, then Canada needs more North Perth. Promoting Agriculture 4.0 supports the ongoing success of the agriculture and agri-business sectors in the region and enables the continued transition to an innovation-based and knowledge-based economy.

The lead for initiatives that showcase industry advances and sophistication rests largely with the industry, drawing on the existing sector embrace of collaboration and 'doing different'.

3. CAPACITY BUILDING

Capacity Building is about ensuring the right talent and tools are in place to advance the connection features of Positioning for Success activities, as well as the precision farming and technological adaptation features involved in *Agriculture 4.0* above.

In terms of forging meaningful ties with regional agriculture and agri-business interests, this means arriving at the right the advisory structure(s), ensuring that those structures are adequately resourced, and linking the deliberations and outputs of those structures to ongoing municipal business. The advisory structures should be provided the capacity to consider and make recommendations on improving the strategic investment and economic growth ecosystem. This contributes to a feeling of worthwhile engagement, which in turn helps to attract the membership being sought, to promote active participation by members, and to maximize the benefit of these structures to Council.

Since attracting specific representation on these municipal advisory structures is key, it will be important to cultivate sector leaders that are forward thinking, business-oriented and community engaged. Ideally, the sector voices being attracted for advisory positions would be relevant (forward thinking), business-minded and solution-oriented. Agri-business thought leadership will be important in finding that sweet spot between the varied interests of a fast expanding community and agriculture and agri-business sustainability and success. However, representatives that can bring this kind of sector visioning to the table requires nurturing.

Labour attraction, retention and succession planning are long-standing issues for farm and agri-business operations, made more challenging by the increasing technical skills required. Showcasing viable career paths in agriculture and agri-businesses, ensuring local youth have greater exposure to career potential in the sector, increasing the opportunities for local skills development, and establishing more streamlined processes for matching available skills with job demand – all would contribute to boosting regional labour capacity.

Realizing the various components of *Capacity Building* will necessitate forging partnerships and collaborations between and with community/industry leaders and organizations. The municipality can play

a facilitating role to ensure these partnerships and collaborations come to fruition, and more direct role in structuring the capacities of the advisory mechanisms it decides to establish.

The North Perth Farm and Food Forward vision is summarized in the following table.

SUMMARY: NORTH PERTH FARM AND FOOD FORWARD			
OPPORTUNITY	LEAD	DESCRIPTION	PARTNERS
Positioning for Success	Municipality	Supporting agriculture and agri-business success as a core component of municipal governance.	Consider focused relationship between industry and municipalities in other regions – eg. Hamilton & steel industry.
Agriculture 4.0	Industry and private sector, facilitated by Municipality	Showcasing technological advances and innovations in agriculture and agri-business, and relevance to solving global food and environmental challenges.	The Grove, London North Perth Ag Society Agriculture Science Centre
Capacity Building	Industry and private sector, facilitated by Municipality	Enhancing capacities with respect to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • committee function, • sector leadership, • career awareness, skills development and job match. 	AgScape, OMAFRA BO – Taste Your Future UofG / OAC

6. RECOMMENDATIONS ON IMPLEMENTATION

So where to from here? A cornerstone of the region's economic success, both historical and future, is feeling invisible or at least marginalized and taken for granted. How to elevate agriculture and agri-business considerations within today's fast-paced and complicated community architecture?

We feel this begins with meaningful connection and engagement, focused on reinforcing community pride... pride of place.

GENERAL REFLECTIONS ON IMPLEMENTATION

The *North Perth Farm and Food Forward* vision is ambitious, calling for a cultural shift in municipality operations to lend greater focus to agriculture and agri-business considerations in planning, policy and regulatory deliberations. The vision is underpinned by enhanced connections, sector collaboration, and working relations between the agriculture and agri-business interests and the municipality – a revitalization of the relationship between agriculture and the community.

Any implementation strategy should foremost be realistic, keeping in mind capacity, feasibility and level of community support. First testing the landscape (ie., through pilot projects and feasibility analysis) will assist in laying the groundwork for informed decision-making, generating added community support and participation, and potentially attracting private and government investment interest.

Changing the mindset, altering operations, applying resources as contemplated under the *North Perth Farm and Food Forward* vision cannot happen overnight. Strategic reflection is required regarding what is doable, with specific emphasis on early action items that are low risk, visible, and if successful inspire escalating community support around full implementation of the vision. Implementation should be considered in phases, targeting early actionable items focusing on areas that build on existing strengths and regional advantages, align with regional priorities, and are

within municipal purview to advance or facilitate.

Subsequent implementation phases would be informed by the successes and momentum gained from early initiatives, optimizing existing assets and building out regional capacities.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS UNDER EACH AREA OF OPPORTUNITY

Following a path of incremental steps, initially the implementation of *North Perth Farm and Food Forward* would involve consideration of actionable items that advanced each of the three areas of opportunity: (1) enhanced municipality and sector collaboration, connection and opportunity for input; (2) showcasing sector sophistication, regional economic impact, and global importance; and (3) enriching regional capacity, promoting skills development and building up sector leadership capacity.

Potential early action items under each of these three areas of opportunity are discussed further below.

1. Positioning for Success

The objective under *Positioning for Success* is to enhance the visibility and voice of the agriculture and agri-food sector in municipal planning, policy and regulatory deliberations through strengthened collaboration, connection and opportunity for input. It involves a nuanced shift in municipal approach, where agriculture and agri-business interests are elevated and adopted as core considerations in community decisions regarding direction and priorities.

For example, the municipality is moving forward with a much needed Set 7 Skills and Technology North Perth and Region Learning Hub (Set 7 Learning Hub), with a focus on the development of trades skills. Given the existing gap in advanced skills training for technology-driven agriculture and agri-business positions, the Set 7 Learning Hub initiative on its face has potential synergies for

addressing regional sector demand, yet advanced agri-technology is not mentioned in the project's mandate.

It is nuance, but to put the vision into effect will require that all municipal planning and investment initiatives be considered for cross-over potential to advance all core economic attributes in the region, including the agriculture and agri-business sectors. It requires a holistic approach (and less silo-ed) to making these connections throughout municipal processes.

Engagement and Connection

The options for realizing enhanced sector visibility and engagement lie within municipal purview. However, arriving at the appropriate medium for operationalizing elevated sector engagement in municipal decision-making processes can be challenging.

There was considerable discussion during the consultations regarding the need for ongoing and meaningful opportunities for sector engagement. It should be noted that the municipality has already demonstrated an acknowledgement of the importance of including agriculture and agri-business interests in its deliberations. Currently, the municipality has constituted a North Perth Economic Development Advisory Committee (NPEDAC) that includes agriculture and agri-business representation along with other business interests. Moreover, Council has approved a terms of reference for establishing an agriculture advisory committee.

These existing initiatives provide a commendable foundation for enhancing municipal engagement with the sector – by engaging local agri-business voices through the economic development committee and an agriculture-specific task force, and reaching out to local agriculture commodity group leaders.

Each of these initiatives are analysed in further detail below as potential steps for enhancing the municipality's engagement of the agriculture and agri-business community.

Step 1. Recalibrating the North Perth Economic Development Advisory Committee (NPEDAC)

The importance of this initiative was tempered by an acknowledgement that the functioning of the committee could be improved. Respondents suggested that committee proceedings could be more visionary and open-ended in discussing current and future challenges facing businesses, both in the downtown and throughout the municipality. Municipal staff report that efforts have been made apply changes and allow the committee agenda to be more membership driven.

Tasked as the business advisory arm of Council, it is fair to say that the committee has yet to reach its full potential. The original mandate of the NPEDAC is broadly stated as follows:

Providing advice and recommendations to Council on policy matters affecting employment, land requirements (commercial and industrial), infrastructure, transportation, utility services, tax implications, development charges, land sale policies and other issues relative to economic development and referred to the NPEDAC by Council or any other matter as directed by Council.¹

The NPEDAC mandate contemplates deliberations on a wide range of policy issues affecting business investment and economic development. There is nothing in the mandate to suggest that downtown issues be given prominence. All matters affecting business opportunities within the municipality fall under the committee's scope.

¹ North Perth Committee Procedural By-law, Schedule "A", Economic Development Advisory Committee Terms of Reference

The membership of the committee is also broadly constituted to allow representation from various sectors, including agriculture and agri-business interests. Although each sector may be affected by business challenges in varying degrees of severity, often those challenges are common threads that run through each sector. The committee's multi-sector approach to addressing municipal business development and investment issues from the source – i.e., sector business representatives – is commendable.

The challenge is to make NPEDAC participation meaningful, and to better situate the committee to meet its mandate as a business advisory arm of Council. It is understood that municipal staff are addressing the matter and that this is still a work in progress.

Attaining committee effectiveness is beyond the scope of this report. The sustainability of any committee depends on its perceived value-add. Ideally, the forum would consider key issues through a variety of lenses (as per the various perspectives represented at the table), generating constructive debate and resulting in helpful recommendations or advice for Council's consideration. Committee effectiveness (or dysfunction) can be attributable to shortfalls in leadership, clarity of purpose, agenda setting, membership recruitment, and accountability or report-back requirements. As suggested, municipal staff are currently working on arriving at the right mix to recalibrate the NPEDAC and ensure that attains its full advisory potential.

One suggestion to perhaps reinforce the value of committee participation would be to link the wayfinding operations (discussed further below) to the NPEDAC agenda. A forum of community business representatives could be an ideal resource for reflecting upon the design, resourcing, launch and fine tuning of services established to help local

business start-ups or expansions deal with the layers of government rules and requirements that such investments often attract.

Increasing the effectiveness of the NPEDAC is an important first step in implementing the overall *North Perth Farm and Food Forward* vision, given that conceptually the committee is an important opportunity to table challenges in municipal agriculture and agri-business investment pursuits before a multi-sectoral forum that is directly linked to Council. As mentioned earlier, while still looking for its sweet spot, having already established this forum is an essential foundational piece.

Step 2. Establishing a dedicated agriculture and agri-business advisory forum

Beyond the investment and economic development deliberations of the NPEDAC, there is room for dedicated forum consideration of municipal agriculture and agri-business issues as these relate to municipal business. Council has already approved a terms of reference for an agriculture and agri-technology advisory committee to undertake the following:

- provide recommendations to Council on matters that will foster and enhance a strong and stable economy, ultimately allowing businesses to prosper, grow, and create jobs in the Municipality of North Perth; and
- support promotion of North Perth as a key centre for agriculture, agri-tourism and agri-technology.²

A consultative forum dedicated to agriculture and agri-business interests would help to drive the connections and engagement considerations of the *North Perth Farm and Food Forward* vision. However, establishing another consultative forum is not without cost. Public resources are finite, so

² Agriculture and Agri-Technology Advisory Committee Terms of Reference, By-law No. 150-2018, North Perth Committee Procedural By-law, pg 30.

any new initiative that seeks municipal commitment should be meaningful both in terms of participation and output. To help enhance the value proposition of this initiative, we offer the following suggestions on construct, membership and purview.

Although Council has laid the groundwork for an agriculture and agri-technology advisory committee, establishing an additional committee is not necessarily the best fit in the current context. The NPEDAC is still being perfected. The addition of an agriculture and agri-business forum could instead take the form of a task force providing advice and recommendations to Council.

The frequency of convening such a task force could be calibrated to reduce the obligation of participation. Holding monthly meetings translates into a significant time commitment for member participants and supporting municipal staff; meeting quarterly obviously less so.

We feel that membership will be key to the success of this forum. Participants with strong local business orientation would be preferable for the successful functioning of the proposed task force – as opposed to traditional sector representation, where the voices between the various commodity groups tend to be fragmented and each beholden to the policy positions of their respective provincial parent groups. Ideally, the forum would include both forward thinking and business-oriented producer and agri-business interests, as the one is often the supply source or client pool for the other.

Attracting business representation is always a challenge, irrespective of sector. Lowering the frequency of meetings may be helpful in reducing time obligations. Equally important will be crystallizing the purpose and function of the task force in promoting agriculture, agri-tourism and agri-technology in North Perth in step with the business and economic growth agenda of municipality.

To this end, involving an agriculture and agri-business advisory task force in discussions to develop a sector-specific PR campaign and mapping out a sustainable pathway for advancing the proposed Agriculture Science Centre, may help to develop forum purpose and value-add. These suggestions are discussed in further detail in the Capacity Building section below.

Step 3. Work with the Perth County Federation of Agriculture (PCFA) to establish an annual agriculture roundtable

The discussion above is not meant to discount the voice of traditional farm groups. On the contrary, the importance of the regional farm groups to the success of the *North Perth Farm and Food Forward* vision is obvious, but it is essential to consider an engagement forum where participation is meaningful.

Given the envisioned membership of the proposed agriculture and agri-business advisory task force, annual engagement of Perth County agriculture stakeholder groups could prove complementary. The PCFA could be asked to take the lead on organizing such an event, which would ideally involve several farm tours followed by a roundtable session between local farm group representatives and municipal councillors. The annual event would allow for consistent, ongoing regional sector connection and engagement.

As envisioned, an annual farm tour and roundtable session hosted by the PCFA would not substantively add to the municipality's committee obligations, but would offer an important opportunity for local engagement and exchange between agriculture sector leaders and municipal decision-makers. It is further acknowledged that farm operations are rightly sensitive to contamination, animal welfare and safety issues with respect to tours and property encroachment – the PCFA is best situated to consider and work out the relevant challenges (which the OFA has successfully navigated in other jurisdictions).

I. Recommendation on Engagement

It is recommended that the municipality enhance the opportunity for meaningful sector connection and perspective exchange by implementing the following three steps:

Step 1: continue with efforts to recalibrate the North Perth Economic Development Advisory Committee for effectiveness and upgrade its advisory function on related policy matters;

Step 2: establish an agriculture and agri-business advisory forum to engage on sector and community growth challenges and advance municipal agriculture, agri-tourism and agri-technology interests; and,

Step 3: work with the PCFA to establish an annual farm tour and roundtable event involving municipal council and regional farm organization representatives

Wayfinding

Businesses are often critical of government red tape as often indecipherable barriers to start-up or expansion efforts – this is neither new or specific to North Perth. Although less red tape is always the preferred option, entrepreneurs often request help in navigating the relevant government rules and regulations. The problem is that this network of rules and regulations involves at least three layers of government – municipal, provincial and federal – and effective centralized navigation involves understanding and coordination between these three layers. To accomplish this involves dedicated resources tasked with establishing ongoing, centralizing, streamlined business and investment services.

While the initiative lies within the municipality purview, another challenge is the necessary resource commitment. Establishing wayfinding or concierge business or investment services is not a one-time endeavour. There is the creation of an office with staff responding to local business queries

supported by a website acting as virtual sherpa. But once created, there is an ongoing need to update and refresh the supporting database and knowledge set in order to stay relevant and effective.

Other jurisdictions have looked to adopt dedicated, centralized concierge services to help guide entrepreneurs through the tangle of various layers of government (municipal, provincial and federal) regulations and requirements.³ There is strong demand for such services, but ensuring ongoing relevance and effectiveness – which will drive perceived benefit and usage – requires adequate application of resources.

Similar centralized wayfinding services would be beneficial to foreign workers, who are frequently challenged with housing, health care, ESL training, and immigration issues. Again, this would require coordination with the various levels of government, especially the federal government as the lead jurisdiction with respect to the Temporary Foreign Worker program and associated immigration issues.

³ See <https://www.investstratford.com/services>. InvestStratford seeks to establish a progressive pro-business climate to better support new and existing businesses through a range of services, including site selection services and business development supports.

Also see <https://www.investkelowna.com/how-we-help/local-business-support/agriculture-agri-tourism-support/>. InvestKelowna includes a specific agriculture and agri-tourism service that provides existing and aspiring farmers and agriculture businesses with one-on-one expertise and support.

II. Recommendation on Wayfinding

It is recommended that the municipality consider:

- *Applying the necessary resources towards establishment of centralized business and investment concierge service, with particular but not exclusive attention to assisting farm and agri-business entrepreneurs navigate the relevant regulatory requirements; and,*
- *Linking the design, implementation and fine tuning of these services to the mandate of the North Perth Economic Development Advisory Committee.*

2. Agriculture 4.0

The objective under the *Agriculture 4.0* arm of the vision is to showcase the innovations, technological advancements and adaptations of modern precision agriculture and agri-business. Further, the intent is to overtly make the connection between these technological advances and enhanced sector sustainability, profitability and regional economic success, which in turn contributes to addressing global challenges in food supply, the environment, and climate change.

Sector PR Campaign

Active promotion of *Agriculture 4.0* is key to realizing the mindset and perception shift called for under the *Farm and Food Forward* vision, to raise awareness amongst urban audiences. A possible first step in this direction would be to develop a dedicated sector PR campaign showcasing precision agriculture, advanced technological innovations in farming and agri-business (ie., the “cool” factor), as well as highlighting the economic impact and importance of the regional sector (ie., the “critical” factor). Besides developing glossy literature and a web info-site, agri-innovation could be showcased through focused business profiles and virtual tours demonstrating agri-business adaptations of advanced technologies.

Aside from education, there may be room to consider highlighting a “connection” aspect to the sector PR campaign, with an emphasis on tying together local production, technological adaptations,

and food through celebratory events – eg., field-to-table dinner events, specific food days to showcase local production (perhaps a downtown BBQ day, or a maple syrup cooking event, etc.)

This sector PR campaign falls within the mandate of the proposed agriculture and agri-business advisory task force (discussed above), and could be a standing consideration on the forum’s agenda given the inherent education and agri-tourism components. It is also an initiative that would generate greater municipal collaboration with local agriculture and agri-business leaders.

Finding Synergies in Proposed Municipal Projects

There are several municipal projects in the works which are potentially relevant to *Agriculture 4.0* and the *Farm and Food Forward* vision. As indicated earlier in this report, the planned Set 7 Learning Hub should be reviewed for potential synergies with the *Farm and Food Forward* vision, since on its face it seems the project could play an important (and early) role in expanding hands-on technical skill offerings and experiences with respect to jobs in the agriculture and agri-business fields. Pilot demonstration projects and virtual tours showcasing farm and agri-business advanced technology adaptation could be incorporated as part of the Set 7 Learning Hub initiative.

Likewise, the proposed Agriculture Science Centre may include potential synergies for advancing regional agriculture and agri-business interests.

However, this is difficult to determine since the project is in need of a more focused mandate that better complements and amplifies the *Farm and Food Forward* vision. As it currently stands, the feasibility study notwithstanding, there exists within the community a broad range of perceptions in what the Centre stands for, what it should provide, and what it should accomplish. This suggests that the mission and mandate of the project remains unclear.

There is also no apparent tangible funding pathway for implementation of the Centre, save for hopeful suggestions of public investment. Public dollars can be fickle in that governments are transient depending on election outcomes, as can be said

of government priorities. Today's government priorities for funding allocation are not necessarily tomorrow's. All this to say that predominant reliance on government funding – particularly for ongoing operational needs – is not a sustainable business model for any initiative aspiring for longevity. Private funding sources are key to fiscal sustainability.⁴

Both projects are examples where the proposed agriculture and agri-business advisory task force could assist in applying a *Farm and Food Forward* lens to consider upcoming municipal initiatives and projects for potential synergies.

III. Recommendation on Showcasing Sector Innovation

It is recommended that the municipality facilitate the following:

- *Work with the industry to develop a dedicated sector PR campaign to showcase advanced technological innovations in farming and agri-business, profile regional agri-business successes, and demonstrate economic impact and regional importance; and,*
- *Task the proposed agriculture and agri-business advisory committee to consider how upcoming municipal initiatives could complement and amplify the Farm and Food Forward vision, including projects such as the Set 7 Skills and Technology North Perth and Region Learning Hub and the proposed Agriculture Science Centre.*

⁴ See <https://www.thegroviewfd.com>. Based in London's Western Fair District, The Grove drew on internal funding resources and private sector collaborations to help attract federal and provincial investments and finance its launch. It is now celebrating its second year as a successful regional agri-business hub assisting local entrepreneurs to realize business innovation and growth objectives.

3. Capacity Building

The objective of *Capacity Building* is to expand the local toolbox to facilitate successful implementation of the two other arms of the *Farm and Food Forward* vision. The vision alone cannot succeed without sufficient resourcing and ensuring that the underlying capacity exists to enable implementation.

Advisory Forum Capacity

For instance, both the municipal consultative forums referenced above – the NPEDAC and the agriculture and agri-business advisory task force – should be resourced to support sector investment and economic growth. To realize their maximum benefit to council, both committees should be provided the capacity to proactively pursue sector opportunities. This would include linking those committees to centralized wayfinding services to ensure timely adaptations and responses as needed, as well as linking the committees as an additional vetting resource for future municipal investment initiatives to consider potential synergies with the *Farm and Food Forward* vision.

Moreover, meaningful sector engagement initiatives will rely on connecting with local sector thought leaders. In particular, membership on the proposed agriculture and agri-business advisory task force requires individuals who are forward thinking, business-oriented and strongly and widely community engaged. Business savvy, with a demonstrated commitment to modern agriculture and agri-business, and deep roots in the community are membership traits that would elevate the value of this advisory forum.

These qualities – somewhat distinct from the conventional farm group voice – need nurturing. Successful business people often do not have the time to invest in pursuits not aimed at profitability and long-term sustainability. Participation in committee proceedings must be demonstrated to be worthwhile for both specific individual business success as well as broader sector

success. Municipal committee and subcommittee membership that can be shown to lead to action and at times resolution of specific issues is key. As discussed earlier, clear purpose, the frequency of meetings, agenda setting, and report-back features will all have a bearing on recruitment and the quality of participation.

Nurturing and recruiting the right representation, irrespective of sector, is challenging for any jurisdiction. Part of capacity building is connection, and the municipality will need to consider how best to build-up the talent pool in collaboration with local business organizations, perhaps through formal or informal mentorship, creating opportunities for subcommittee work, etc.

Attracting the right representation will also involve ensuring a focused purpose for any advisory forum, and linking deliberations to relevant municipal activities. Maximizing the effectiveness of advisory forum membership and ensuring meaningful participation goes hand-in-hand with ensuring that the output – the advice or recommendations given – is of value to Council.

Promoting Sector Career Paths

Promoting farm and agri-business entrepreneurship, getting youth interested in the sector as a viable career choice, developing and matching skills with available jobs – these are ongoing, prominent sector challenges voiced during project consultations. Showcasing viable career paths in agriculture and agri-businesses, enhancing exposure for youth in sector career offerings, increasing the opportunities for local skills development, and establishing more streamlined processes for matching available skills with job demand – all such initiatives would contribute to boosting local interest and skills capacity. Enhancing local skills capacity would be a step towards alleviating some of the labour gaps currently experienced by local farm and agri-business operations.

Early efforts to establishing skills development and job matching initiatives could be realized by incorporating these under the Set 7 Learning Hub mandate. Moreover, such efforts would benefit from collaboration with existing provincial resources, such as OMAFRA's AgScape, the Ontario Agriculture College at the University of Guelph, and Food and Beverage Ontario's Taste Your Future initiative.

IV. Recommendation on Capacity Building

It is recommended that the municipality work with local industry to undertake the following:

- Mentor business savvy, forward-thinking sector representatives with an eye to potential recruitment on municipal advisory forums;*
- Adopt an integrated approach to municipal policy considerations and future project initiatives by tasking municipal advisory forums to consider and make recommendations on potential synergies with the North Perth Farm and Food Forward vision; and,*
- Review the mandate of the Set 7 Skills and Technology North Perth and Region Learning Hub and proposed the Agriculture Science Centre project to include skills development, educational outreach, mentoring and career matching features, in collaboration with local businesses and relevant provincial institutions and organizations.*

7. ACTION PLAN

The action items outlined in the four recommendations above – on engagement, wayfinding, showcasing sector innovation, and capacity building – are initiatives that largely lie within the municipalities purview to move forward on. Resourcing these initiatives and coordination and collaboration with third parties – other levels of government, local agriculture stakeholder groups, relevant institutions and organizations – will add an indeterminable factor to the timetable for implementation.

It is worth re-emphasizing that implementation of the *North Perth Farm and Food Forward* vision will involve not only a culture shift, but application of sufficient resourcing. This is an important consideration.

For instance, additional FTE's may be required for added administrative support if an additional advisory forum is struck as proposed. Likewise, establishment of centralized wayfinding business and investment attraction services, along with development of a sector-specific PR campaign, will require both staff and operational resourcing.

Initial efforts on skill development need not involve new investments in brick and mortar. Initial steps could look to adopt virtual approaches, find synergies within near-term projects like the Set 7 Learning Hub, and opening conversations regarding potential collaborations and partnerships with relevant provincial organizations and institutions.

There are elements of the recommendations that may be more “low hanging fruit” than others, in that they fall within municipal control and would achieve early visibility to adoption of an integrated approach to applying the *North Perth Farm and Food Forward* vision to municipal planning, policy and regulatory processes.

Initiatives that could form an early action plan towards implementation include:

- Continue with efforts to refine the workings of the North Perth Economic Development Advisory Committee, and task the committee to advise on design, resource requirements and implementation of centralized business investment wayfinding services;
- Establish the proposed agriculture and agri-business advisory forum with a mandate to provide recommendations on developing a sector specific PR campaign showcasing technological innovation and regional impact, and linking local production and processing to local food offerings through a series of celebratory events;
- Work with sector leaders to organize an annual farm tour and roundtable event between County agriculture stakeholder groups and Council; and,
- Review the Set 7 Skills and Technology North Perth and Region Learning Hub project to consider inclusion of needed agriculture and agri-business skills training and development components.

These early initiatives would help set the groundwork for transformation and full implementation of the *North Perth Farm and Food Forward* vision, encompassing an action plan representing the first steps towards embracing and celebrating North Perth's strongest asset...pride of place.

8. APPENDICES

8.1 AGGREGATED RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Recommendation on Engagement

It is recommended that the municipality enhance the opportunity for meaningful sector connection and perspective exchange by implementing the following three steps:

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Step 2: establish an agriculture and agri-business advisory forum to engage on sector and community growth challenges and advance municipal agriculture, agri-tourism and agri-technology interests; and,

Step 3: work with the PCFA to establish an annual farm tour and roundtable event involving municipal council and regional farm organization representatives

II. Recommendation on Wayfinding

It is recommended that the municipality consider:

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- *Task the proposed agriculture and agri-business advisory committee to consider how upcoming municipal initiatives could complement and amplify the Farm and Food Forward vision, including projects such as the Set 7 Skills and Technology North Perth and Region Learning Hub and the proposed Agriculture Science Centre.*

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- *Review the mandate of the Set 7 Skills and Technology North Perth and Region Learning Hub and proposed the Agriculture Science Centre project to include skills development, educational outreach, mentoring and career matching features, in collaboration with local businesses and relevant provincial institutions and organizations.*

8.2. RELEVANT GOVERNMENT RESOURCES

PROVINCIAL

The provincial government released a “budget” just prior to calling the June election, which is a useful guide to the priorities and policy direction of a provincial PC government. The 2022 Budget, entitled *Ontario's Plan to Build*, is essentially a post-pandemic restoration and recovery blueprint focusing on infrastructure investments, skills training and job growth, reinforcements to health care infrastructure, and inflationary relief.

The specific agriculture and agri-food related commitments made in the 2022 Budget that complement the *North Perth Farm and Food Forward* vision include the following:

Establish a provincial food security and supply chain stability strategy: develop a strategy as a roadmap to boost domestic agri-food production capacity and strengthen Ontario's future food supply, addressing ongoing agri-food sector vulnerabilities to support supply chain stability, increase resilience and fuel economic growth in the agri-food sector for the long term.

Establish a provincial agri-food innovation and technology strategy: develop a strategy to prioritize attracting and developing agri-food talent, including targeted investments into research and development to boost innovation adoption and driving commercialization to increase competitiveness and productivity.

Supporting agri-food supply and processing capacity: supporting food processing capacity and increasing the resiliency of supply chains as well as access to locally grown foods through the following new investments:

- investing \$10m. in 2022–23 to establish a Food Security and Supply Chain Fund to strengthen provincial food supply, including addressing barriers to recruitment, attraction and retention of domestic workers, closing sector skill gaps, and supporting the well-being of workers;
- providing \$10m. in 2022–23 for ongoing support and expansion of the Enhanced Agri-Food Workplace Protection Program to help farms and agri-food operations take additional measures to support the health and safety of agri-food workers;
- allocating \$5m. in 2022–23 for emergency support initiatives to help livestock producers overcome emergency processing disruptions (eg., the beef set-aside programs to help deal with increased costs related to market delays); and,
- a \$2.6m. investment to expand the health and safety protections for incoming international agricultural workers, including additional vaccination clinics.

Attracting investment across Ontario's regions: over the next year, Invest Ontario will engage municipalities, local, regional and federal agencies, the private sector, higher education as well as industry for a coordinated, all-of-Ontario approach to investment attraction.

Investing in regional economic development: to continue to support regional development across the province, in January 2022, the government launched a \$40 million Advanced Manufacturing and Innovation Competitiveness Stream under the Regional Development Program. This province-wide stream provides complementary services and funding to companies to invest in the equipment, advanced technologies and the skilled workforce needed to improve competitiveness, productivity and growth.

Accelerating community infrastructure

and housing: introduction of a Community Infrastructure and Housing Accelerator to streamline approvals that regulate the use of land and the location, use, height, size and spacing of buildings and structures, to help municipalities speed up approvals for housing and community infrastructure.

FEDERAL

FedDev Ontario has two program streams that may be applicable:

Community Economic Development and

Diversification: Funding under this stream aims to generate sustainable, inclusive growth and help small and rural communities in southern Ontario to fully participate in, and benefit from economic opportunities.

Regional Innovation Ecosystem: Funding under this stream helps to create, grow and develop strong and inclusive regional networks that support business growth and innovation, as well as the entrepreneurial environment necessary for more innovative regional economies.