

Producing Prosperity – an election priority

Presentation by Keith Currie to the OFA 2017 Annual General Meeting

Good morning delegates, PAC members, Directors, and guests.

As you can see, our theme this year for our Annual General Meeting is Producing Prosperity. Unlike previous years, this theme is not limited to the discussions over the next couple days but instead reflects the messages OFA and its members will be taking into the upcoming provincial election – in June, 2018.

Our message to the four parties and each of their candidates is that rural Ontario and Ontario's agri- food sector can spearhead future prosperity for this province. To do so requires a government led plan of distributed economic development.

This might seem like a bit of a departure for OFA but bear with me.

Economic development is not an obvious part of our mission statement. In fact, our mission is clearly focused on farms and food production. It is a bold statement that reminds us that sustainable production is not only a goal, it is a necessity to ensure our futures. Farms and food forever tells us that we need to sustain our food system with each decision. We need to be environmentally smart and we need to be financially viable now and in the future.

That is what OFA has been focused on and that is what OFA will continue to be focused on – the sustainability of our farms including our soil, our water, our air and our businesses.

So why is OFA talking about distributed economic development? There are two reasons, and they are closely tied.

First, for farming to remain profitable, we need strong and vibrant communities to ensure services are there for our businesses. We need reliable internet, dependable roads, and access to all the input services we need to operate our businesses. We also need community services for our families like hospitals and schools.

But we've all seen these services decline in recent years. We see our children spending way too much time on buses as local schools close. Many areas across the province still lack reliable high-speed internet – a service that the CRTC has pronounced as essential. The local input suppliers seem to get farther away each year as do the opportunities for our children, taking them away from our communities.

Our municipal leaders, meanwhile, struggle to balance the local books and are feeling compelled to increase property taxes on farmland to do so. This cycle simply makes us less competitive.

The second reason we are pursuing a message of distributed economic development is because farming is becoming a foreign concept to politicians and the public at large. That probably doesn't surprise many of us here today. There is no question that we hear about

support from our political leaders. Later on our agenda we will hear from each of the four parties that farming is vitally important to our economy and way of life. We will hear that Ontario agriculture represents \$56 billion in economic activity and that the agri-food system creates one in eight jobs in this province.

All that is true, but although the agri-food sector is an economic powerhouse we struggle to secure strong and bold public policy that recognizes and builds on our strength.

However, there has been some good news, and optimistic messages from government in the last 12 months concerning the agri-food sector.

The federal finance minister's Advisory Council on Economic Growth, chaired by Dominic Barton, was tasked with identifying sectors with a strong endowment, untapped potential, and significant global growth prospects. Agriculture made the list. In fact, it was identified as the **number 1** opportunity for Canada to experience economic growth.

Barton's Report calls on government to remove major obstacles to growth and set bold ambitions and aspirations in collaboration with the private sector. It also requires *us* in Ontario - representing one-quarter of all farms in Canada, growing over 200 commodities, leading in technology and innovation and generating over \$15.1 billion in gross farm receipts – to recognize this potential, seize this opportunity, and develop public policy that can achieve Barton's vision of agri-food as Canada's economic powerhouse.

When we look at our successes across the farming sector and when we hear Mr. Barton speak about our limitless potential we realize that we need to take a different approach.

Ladies and gentlemen, realistically speaking, the majority of Ontarians concentrated in our urban centres are generally "food comfortable". Although food access remains a problem in this province, the average voter, and therefore, politician, does not need to concern themselves with our food supply.

They are much more interested in surviving traffic congestion, finding affordable housing, raising their families in a safe community, and keeping their jobs. Food just happens.

So, our challenge and opportunity in the coming months, with an election on the horizon, is to communicate the benefits our industry and rural Ontario has to offer – the benefits we have to offer all Ontarians beyond just the food on their tables.

We believe that we need to appeal to basic human nature – what's in it for me? This is not a critical or cynical perspective – it is a practical one. What message can we bring to urban voters that will resonate with them? Simply put, we need to appeal to their own self-interests and food is not top-of-mind.

When we look at our successes across the farming sector and when we hear Mr. Barton speak about our limitless potential we realize that we need to take a bigger approach.

We need to advocate for distributing economic development across Ontario to address our agri-food needs and to specifically address the very real issues faced by our urban centres.

Our agri-food sector is the solution and the future of Ontario's economy and quality of life.

For these two reasons OFA is proposing that the next government pursue a policy of distributed economic development. We are advocating that public investment in infrastructure be made to support our agri-food industry and our rural communities.

With good schools, good health care, good internet, good roads and other amenities, our farm businesses will be more sustainable. Other investment will follow. More job opportunities will be available across the province, alleviating the pressure on urban centres and creating economic growth in rural Ontario.

With this in mind, we have identified 5 primary outcomes when a government embraces the concept of distributed economic development. These outcomes are:

- Economic development
- Job creation
- Affordable housing
- Increased food security; and
- Environmental stewardship

As mentioned earlier, one of the primary reasons rural Ontario has been struggling is the lack of government investment – specifically infrastructure. When municipalities aren't growing or are shrinking, the cost of providing services becomes a heavy burden. We want to reverse that trend and see that communities across Ontario can begin to thrive and prosper.

With good schools, good health care, good internet, good roads and other amenities, our farm businesses will be more sustainable. New investment will follow. More job opportunities will be available across the province, alleviating the pressure on urban centers and creating economic growth in rural Ontario.

One of OFA's priorities is a commitment to public investment in natural gas expansion. Imagine what \$1 billion in new disposable income each year could do for rural Ontario? Would it attract merchants back to our towns? Would it cause new jobs to be created? Yes it would.

That new money is available in energy cost savings alone if Ontario invests in providing natural gas across rural Ontario. The return on investment is staggering and only one example of how focused public policy can make a huge contribution to economic growth.

With a commitment to distributed economic development, a future Ontario will benefit from increased job creation, not only in the agri-food sector, but in other businesses as well. If industry has the opportunity and incentive to build in smaller communities, where land is less expensive, new jobs will be spread around.

With a commitment to support our industry, and allow Ontario to do its part to support the ambitious plans laid out in the Barton report, more jobs will be created for all Ontarians.

Job creation works lock-step with the availability of skilled workers. If we are successful in attracting investment to rural Ontario we will also be successful at attracting new families to our communities. With good jobs come families looking for affordable housing. A recent OFA survey within the GTA shows that access to good paying jobs and access to good health care

are the key concerns of people considering a move to a small Ontario community. The vast majority also believe that rural schools do not provide as good an education as those in cities.

These are their perceptions, but they are also the reality. When we change those realities, we will build our communities, fill our schools, keep our hospitals, and further strengthen our economy.

I mentioned earlier that the average voter, and therefore, politician, does not concern themselves too much with our food supply. Ontarians worry about prices but they are food comfortable because we – the OFA, the commodity organizations, the people in this room and on the side roads take great care to ensure a sustainable food supply. That can only be strengthened if we are a strong farm sector working in strong communities with a progressive food processing and distribution system.

Our plan is to ensure that happens. Food affordability and food safety are consumer concerns. We cannot address those concerns with isolated and underserved communities.

Although they may not consider it a priority and may not even recognize it as a serious issue, food security will be a real and significant outcome of sound public investment in rural Ontario.

There are no better stewards of the land than farmers. We were green before it was fashionable. But, there are critics of modern farming, so we need to continue to advocate and educate on what we do – reminding consumers that a healthy environment, healthy soil and clean water is our livelihood.

We know that farmland conservation and preservation are critical issues.

Let me pause here and be very clear that distributed economic development does **not** mean OFA is advocating for unchecked development across our farmland. We are **not** opening the doors to massive development or the expansion of the urban sprawl.

Our call for distributed economic development comes with conditions.

The fundamental condition – and in fact, a prerequisite – is that farmland is protected even better than it currently is. Strong rules must be in place so that our rural communities respect hard boundaries. The brownfields that are now so evident in our shrinking communities must be used first for our commercial, industrial, and residential growth.

Our other condition is that our distributed economic development is planned. It cannot be hit and miss. Not everything will work in all areas. We need to collectively work across economic development offices, with the business community and governments to identify and pursue the best form of development for our own communities.

So, what are the net effects of going down this road?

Simply put, we provide economic growth to rural Ontario communities, for the benefit of our farm businesses and the Ontario economy while dealing straight on with a practical means of addressing the urban crisis we hear about every day.

Ladies and gentlemen, OFA is about farming and about food production. We are here to help you our members enjoy a better business environment and a better quality of life for your families.

With less than 7 months before the next election we see a unique opportunity in front of us. We believe with the right plan and the right approach we can begin to move the needle of public and government support towards our industry. Our campaign of Producing Prosperity will speak directly to the needs of our businesses and families while providing real opportunities to help alleviate the accelerating pressures our urban friends face every day.

In order for this campaign to be successful we need to work together. We will be working with partners across rural Ontario to spread this message including municipalities, Wardens, economic development officers, academia and chambers of commerce. We plan to arm you, our members and leading advocates with the necessary information and tools so that you help us communicate these messages with clarity and consistency as we approach the next provincial election

We look forward to working with all of you.