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Greenbelt poll questioned

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'I'd like to poll the farmers,' says a University of Guelph professor

by KAREN BRIGGS

Members of Ontario's farm community are questioning the handling of a recent poll conducted on behalf of the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation that shows nine out of 10 Ontarians agree that the Greenbelt is one of the most important contributions to the future of the province.

Just 69, or less than 10 per cent, of the 750 respondents polled within the Greenbelt – 720,000 square hectares of land around the Greater Toronto Area designated in 2005 to limit development and protect agriculture and natural resources – were defined as rural.

"I'm not surprised that Ontarians support the Greenbelt," said Harry Cummings, a professor at the University of Guelph's School of Environmental Design and Rural Development. Cummings has done extensive research on the impact of the Greenbelt on Ontario agriculture. "But I'd like to poll the farmers," he said.

The Greenbelt "is immensely popular and a very important initiative, but we need to find a way to make agriculture viable within the zone, and we haven't done that yet," he said.

According to the poll, enthusiasm for local food initiatives was strong, with 96 per cent of respondents agreeing that locally grown foods support local farmers, and 87 per cent agreeing that the local food movement is environmentally friendly.

Yet only a small proportion of the farmers who work land within the Greenbelt benefit from the local food movement, he noted. Cummings said 51 per cent of the land within the area is farmland.

Dufferin County Federation of Agriculture vice-president, Mark Ostrowski, also remarked on the poll's dearth of opinions from those most affected by the Greenbelt: rural landowners within its borders.

The Greenbelt affects farming residents dramatically, Ostrowski noted, in terms of what can or cannot be done on one's own land. While increasing public awareness of local food initiatives is a positive, the poll, he said, glosses over the compromises being made.

"When they first implemented the Greenbelt, there was a lot of pushback from our members, both because of the increased scrutiny on their farm business practices, and because it was going to negatively affect land values. I don't think that that has improved," Ostrowski said. "And there are a surprising number of city people who think the Greenbelt isn't about agriculture at all. They think it's for them to use as their personal parkland.

"For me, the whole Greenbelt thing was a little ill-conceived."

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Julienne Spence, acting communications director of the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, said that while the selection of the poll respondents was random, it was based on Canada Post's Ontario postal codes. "The city of Hamilton is a good example of how that can skew rural vs. urban numbers," she explained. "The boundaries of Hamilton go way outside the actual city, so some addresses which are actually rural, end up designated urban.

"We do try to ensure that we cover both rural and urban areas in our polling," she said. **BF**

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