

Hello Senator Black et al.,

I am a young farmer working on my family's farm just North of Toronto on the outskirts of the GTA. I saw you speak in the spring at the Ontario Farmland Trust's Farmland Forum and was really interested in the Senate's soil health study. Farming so close to the city, I've had a particular interest in urban growth and planning and what it means for the future of agriculture in Ontario, Canada and North America. It is through this lens that I'm writing to you. I have always felt that the Ontario agricultural community has put a lot of time, money and effort into improving our industry by implementing better management practices, so that we are able to farm more sustainably into the future. While we still have a long way to go, we have learned much about soils and soil health in the last 50 years; in an effort to maintain our farms and soils to be used and enjoyed for generations to come. There is however, an undeniable link between the future of agriculture and urban growth in Ontario. The elephant in the room when it comes to sustainable agriculture in Ontario is that much of our farmland has been, and is still being consumed at tremendous and concerning rates by unsustainable urban growth practices. The latest Census of Agriculture has shown Ontario's self-reported farm acreage to be decreasing at an average rate of 319 acres per day, with two of the greatest contributors to loss being development and aggregate mining. It is, without exaggeration, one of, if not the biggest threat to Ontario's agricultural soil health.

It is the great irony of the lifespan of our farm, that we have been practicing good crop rotation, no-till and cover cropping for decades, vastly improving the soil health in our fields and limiting the environmental impact of our operation, only for that work to be eventually nullified completely by poor land use planning. The vast majority of our land is rented from developers, and will almost undoubtedly be destroyed within the next 50 years, unless something changes in how our society thinks about the worth of land, and how we go about planning for its use. While it is easy to blame developers for the tremendous amount of urban sprawl many communities in North America are facing, as they certainly have lobbied for urban boundary expansions and zoning changes etc., the more complex reality is however that they should share only part blame. The vast majority of their business is directed by, and merely doing what is allowed under law at the time.

While I am no expert, I have listened to many experts on the subject of urban planning. It has become a passion of mine, and I consider myself fairly well self-educated on the subject. I have seen too many farms get turned into subdivisions, roads and big box stores, and have always thought that there must be a better way than what we are doing. Urban development over the last 70 years in Ontario has been characterized by sprawl; low density, car dependent dwellings and shops, separated by considerable distance and rigid zoning bylaws. This style of development has been largely responsible for the incredible consumption of Ontario farmland, some of the best in the world, and was a stark departure from urban planning preceding the 20th century. Sprawl, it should be noted, also plays a role in the housing availability and affordability crisis, as it is expensive, slow to build, resource intensive (from a land and building material perspective), and houses much fewer people compared to other styles of development.

Urban planning of our historic farm towns and larger city centres were done at a human scale- walking and cycling were the standard mode of transportation, as were trains and rail. A range of housing types, heights and affordability were centred on mixed-use neighbourhoods, with stores, shops and employment. These allowed for dense, vibrant, beautiful and economically strong urban areas. With the introduction of the automobile, as well as introduced zoning and building bylaws in the early, mid and late 20th century, we started to spread out, and this sprawl became typified in law. One only has to

compare old neighbourhoods with new to see this stark contrast. A quick look at the difference in average population densities between Vaughan (1,119 people/ km²), built up over the last 70 years, and the early 1900's era Toronto neighborhood of Riverdale (7,149 people/ km²) reveals that stark difference. It should be noted that there are no notable condo high-rises to be had in Riverdale. It is considered an extremely desirable place to live in Toronto for its community and walkability, and does not feel busy, as car traffic is minimized because of its closeness and public transit. A community like that requires almost 7x less space to exist than the more modern developments of Vaughan. Another way to look at it, is Vaughan has bulldozed 7x more farmland than they would have, had they planned better.

We don't need to be consuming anywhere near as much land as we are to build our communities as nice places to live, and allow for growth. The solutions are not new, as, ironically, many of the most desirable, and expensive, places to live in Canada are historic communities offering gentle density, walkability and mixed uses. These are places that people want to live and visit, and they also act to reduce their impact on farming communities and the natural environment. Experts and advocates have been pushing for more sustainable, gentle-density growth practices for some time, but recent unjustified, forced urban boundary expansions in Ontario, removal of protected Greenbelt lands, and continued sprawl in the face of mounting evidence against these building practices are all testament that many levels of government are not getting the message.

So I am wondering if I am able to testify before the Senate on perhaps the largest impactor of soil health in North America: complete ecosystem destruction via widespread, poor land use planning policies. These outdated land use policies must become more adaptable to our current knowledge on ecosystem health and community building. Our current laws and bylaws have created a pattern of development that is too restrictive and inflexible, and is taking a toll on rural and urban communities alike. It is expensive and onerous for developers to fight zoning and bylaws, and what ends up getting built is not necessarily what the public wants or needs in this modern world, or what experts suggest, but what developers are used to, and what zoning had decided on 30 or 50 years ago, during the last regional or municipal official plan review.

The agricultural community often feels, more than other industries, that it is put under an environmental microscope, yet time and again we rise to the task of doing a better job with our practices, when new evidence and information become apparent. It seems, however, pressure from developers and speculators, and our own zoning and building bylaws are operating in direct opposition to what we are trying to achieve, with much less oversight. There are more harmonious and sustainable growth patterns to choose from, and we must act to review and rectify our laws to allow our rural and urban communities to work together to support one another, instead of acting in opposition. We must demand better from our land use policies, our construction industry, our building laws, and our municipal and regional growth plans to plan agriculture INTO instead of OUT OF our communities. We cannot plan for food security and long term soil health without sustainably planning our communities as a whole.

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter, and for the work you have been doing working towards a more sustainable agriculture system,

Sincerely,
Dean Orr, B.Sc.
Farmer
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