



Possibility grows here.

Housing Needs and Actions for the Agricultural Sector in Rural Greenbelt Communities

OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES



Caldwell Consulting



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720 Bathurst Street, Suite 404 Toronto
Ontario M5R 2S4
Canada
www.greenbelt.ca

ISSN 1912-4171 Greenbelt Foundation Occasional
Paper Series (Print)

ISSN 1912-418X Greenbelt Foundation Occasional
Paper Series (Online)

The Greenbelt Foundation is committed to promoting awareness and education about Ontario's Greenbelt. To this end we occasionally publish research and general interest papers that explore our three program areas: viable agriculture and viticulture; vibrant rural communities; and, a restored and protected natural environment.

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ISBN: 978-1-927075-35-7

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Authors' Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the contributions of many individuals and organizations. We begin by expressing our gratitude to the farmers, municipal planners, and other stakeholders who generously shared their time and expertise during interviews. Their perspectives, drawn from diverse roles such as farm organization representatives, municipal planners, rural economic development experts, and industry professionals in the agri-food and agricultural sectors, were invaluable in shaping the findings and recommendations presented in this report.

We are also grateful to the Advisory Committee for their guidance, feedback, and expertise. Their contributions included advice on key issues, review of draft documents, and sharing their specialized knowledge in agriculture, planning, and rural housing. The Advisory Committee members are:

- Erik Acs, Manager, Community Planning, Niagara Region
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- Anna DeMarchi-Meyers, Agricultural Liaison Office, Halton Region
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A special acknowledgement goes to Sara MacDonald, Senior Research and Policy Analyst at the Greenbelt Foundation. Sara's availability, knowledge, and insights were essential to this project, and her administrative support ensured its smooth execution. We also extend our thanks to Shelley Petrie, Program Director at the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, for her guidance and strategic input.

Land Acknowledgement

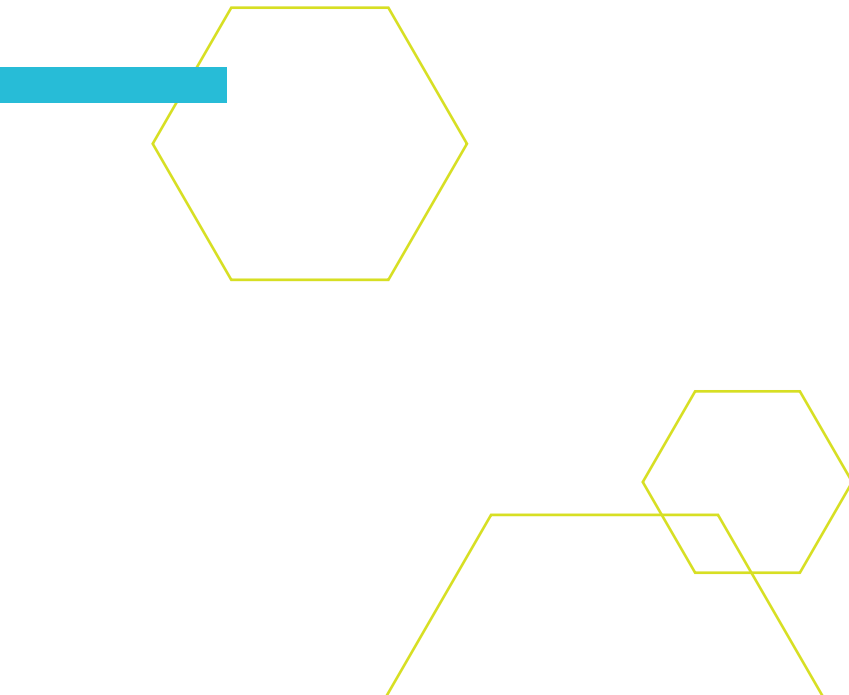
The Greenbelt Foundation acknowledges that the land we meet on and strive to protect is the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat, and is now home to many other diverse First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples.

The area we now call the Greenbelt consists of treaty lands. Such Treaties of Canada include the Niagara Purchase, Between the Lakes Purchase and Collins Purchase, Head of the Lake Treaty, Ajetance Treaty, Toronto Purchase, Gunshot Treaty, Treaty Number 20, Saugeen Treaty, Treaty Number 82, Saugeen Peninsula Treaty, and Lake Simcoe Nottawasaga Treaty. It is important that we learn about the history and continued presence of these treaties because we are all treaty people.

The lakes, rivers, and wetlands, as well as forests, ravines, and healthy farmlands in the Greenbelt have been stewarded and protected by the First Peoples since time immemorial. We are grateful to the First Peoples for their care of the land on Turtle Island, which many of us have come to call home. We respect and are inspired by the deep connection of kinship that Indigenous Peoples have with the land.

We acknowledge and condemn events such as Indian Residential Schools, Indian Day Schools, the Sixties Scoop, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, and many other violent acts committed since European settlers arrived on this land. The vibrant way of life of Indigenous Peoples and their connection to the land has been suppressed due to attempted genocide, colonialization, and assimilation. We acknowledge the truth of these events, continuing effects, and the enduring rights of Indigenous Peoples. We recognize that the Greenbelt is based on a land management plan developed by settlers, and we as a Foundation have a responsibility to ensure the work we do reflects the continued efforts and rights of the First Peoples of this land. As a Foundation, we will continue to support projects that prioritize reconciliation, such as projects that increase awareness of the presence of Indigenous Peoples and their territories; projects that build meaningful relations with Indigenous Peoples to conserve and restore nature in the region; projects that we collaborate with Indigenous Peoples and Communities to improve communications with municipalities in landuse planning.

We will continue to look for ways to align our mandate with the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As we continue to work towards our vision of a protected, prosperous Greenbelt for all, we will seek opportunities to listen to and learn from Indigenous leaders and elders. We will support Indigenous-led initiatives that advance education, understanding, and reconciliation. We will further educate ourselves on Indigenous Knowledge Systems that can inform and support our mandate to sustain the air, lands and waterways in the Greenbelt.



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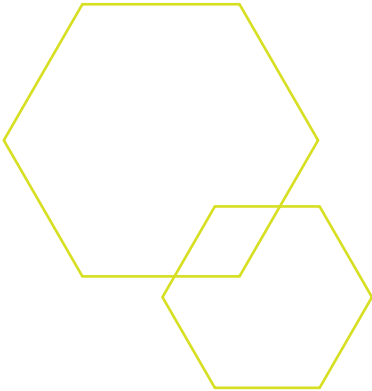
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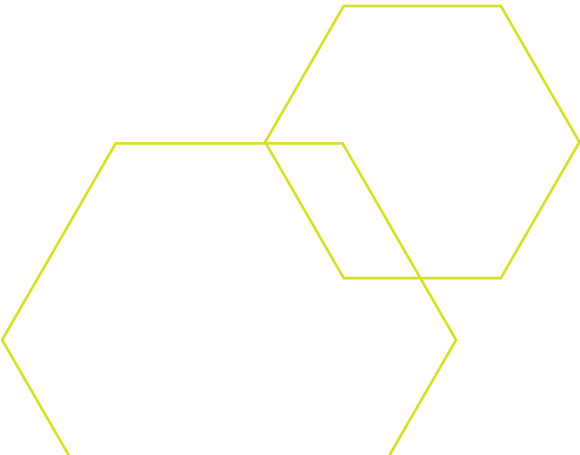
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List of Acronyms

ADU: Additional Dwelling Units

ARU: Additional Residential Unit

CLI: Canada Land Inventory

CMHC: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation

CBO: Chief Building Official

CFFO: Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario

CIPs: Community Improvement Plans

COCS: Cost of Community Services

FLR: Farm Labour Residence

GHFFA: Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance

MDS: Minimum Distance Separation

NFU: National Farmers Union

NOTL: Niagara-on-the-Lake

ORM: Oak Ridges Moraine

OFA: Ontario Federation of Agriculture

OMAFRA: Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs

OMAF: Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness

OPPI: Ontario Professional Planners Institute

PPS: Provincial Policy Statement

PPS 2024: Provincial Planning Statement

ROMA: Rural Ontario Municipal Association

SDUs: Secondary Dwelling Units

TFWs: Temporary Foreign Workers



Executive Summary

As population pressures in Ontario continue, it is critical to ensure actions taken to build housing support important economies and jobs and sustain the natural resources that enable growth and community well-being. Agriculture and agri-food are major economic drivers in the province, contributing nearly \$50 billion to Ontario's GDP annually and employing ten per cent of the workforce. Ontarians also benefit from a safe and secure source of local food with 60 per cent of food produced and consumed locally. To maintain and grow this strong and successful sector in Ontario, housing decisions, particularly in rural communities, must closely align with the needs of farm families, farm workers, and related agribusiness jobs.

This report examines housing solutions for Ontario's agriculture and agri-food sector and considers responses to unique regional pressures by highlighting the Greenbelt. While this sector is the economic cornerstone for many rural economies, strains on municipal capacity can result in sector needs that are overlooked or decisions that impede productivity. Farmers, farm families, farm workers, and employees of agri-food businesses require housing solutions that support their contributions to agricultural productivity. The rising cost of land, urban development pressures, and a lack of flexible housing solutions present ongoing challenges. The report highlights how urban spillover, rising demand for rural properties, and insufficient housing development have intensified housing shortages for farm families, agricultural workers, and rural communities across the province.

Scattered rural development, including the cumulative effects of severances and rules allowing new rural settlement areas, can have additional implications on taxes, servicing demands, and the environment. Consequences include restricting livestock operations, loss of farmland, changing community infrastructure, further increasing land values, and the loss of biodiversity and climate resilience.

Addressing these issues is vital for agriculture, rural economies and food systems. By incorporating an agricultural lens, adequate and affordable local housing solutions can ensure that agriculture viability and economic growth, including food production and related jobs, are recognized as a vital part of planning decisions.

\$50B

Agriculture and agri-food are major economic drivers in the province, contributing nearly \$50 billion to Ontario's GDP annually and employing ten per cent of the workforce.



The Role of the Greenbelt

In Ontario's largest urban region, experiencing high growth pressures, the Greenbelt uniquely addresses the need to protect farmland, support food production and a viable agricultural economy, as well as help shape urban growth. Policies and land use plans related to its three landscapes – Protected Countryside (dominated by agricultural landscapes), Oak Ridges Moraine and Niagara Escarpment, provide insights on managing these multiple priorities. Ensuring the Greenbelt's \$4.1 billion annual agriculture economy continues to thrive also requires addressing the increasing and emerging housing needs of farm families and agriculture and agri-businesses workers. This report presents innovative and flexible housing solutions for agriculture in the Greenbelt and considers adaptations for communities with agricultural families, businesses and economies across the province. The recommendations ensure that agriculture remains an important part of the Greenbelt's and Ontario's future.



Key Insights and Planning Principles

This report draws on a literature review, secondary data analysis and insights from three case studies in Durham Region, Huron County and Niagara Region, each offering unique perspectives on the intersection of housing and agriculture. An Advisory Committee of subject matter experts provided guidance and ensured the recommendations address the needs of various stakeholders.

The research and feedback underlined the importance of meeting housing needs in the agricultural sector as critical for workforce development and sustaining investments to maintain and expand operations. Non-farm residents in Prime Agricultural Areas and Rural Areas can significantly hinder agricultural operations and economic growth and increase competition for land resulting in rising prices for homes and farmland. Rural housing and infrastructure that centres planning on local agricultural economies also supports the financial sustainability of rural communities.

The research has further enhanced understanding of housing in both an agricultural and rural community context:

- Many farm family operations occasionally require additional help, such as an extra driver or harvest workers, but not at a scale that justifies on-farm housing, however, for those with ongoing labour needs, on-farm housing for employees was identified as a priority.
- Large farm operations and specialized operations such as high-volume fruit and vegetable production may have significant farm labour requirements with a corresponding need for housing. Without a reliable workforce, these operations are unlikely to make investments and expand their businesses. This was particularly evident in Niagara.
- It was largely recognized that housing in prime agricultural areas should be limited to housing required in support of the agricultural industry with some recognition that Additional Residential Units (ARUs) could help farm families accommodate family housing needs but needed to be carefully thought through (e.g., impacts on agriculture, private services, municipal servicing, and environmental implications).
- Planners noted opportunities to establish farm worker housing within settlement areas. This perspective captures the challenges agri-food sector workers face finding housing and planners recognize the potential to accommodate this housing within settlement areas, offering a number of ideas.

The following principles provide strategic guidelines to support rural communities in meeting housing needs and recognize the interconnectedness of rural housing, infrastructure and agricultural viability. The principles may also help to enforce and strengthen the policy framework in the Greenbelt and across the province in rural communities with significant agricultural operations and economies.

Summary of 10 Principles

Principle	Explanation
Protect Agricultural Land	The preservation of prime agricultural land is essential to ensuring long-term food security and rural viability. Policies must prioritize the protection of farmland from urban encroachment and non-agricultural development.
Foster Sustainable Agriculture and Balance Growth with Environmental Protection	Sustainability and balanced growth are essential for rural prosperity. This principle emphasizes farming practices that conserve natural resources and reduce environmental impact while promoting compact urban development to protect farmland and support rural communities' long-term viability.
Support Affordable Housing and Recognize the Role of Agri-Food Workers	Affordable and accessible housing is essential for sustaining Ontario's agricultural sector. This principle highlights the need for housing solutions that meet the diverse needs of farm families, agri-food workers, and rural residents, supporting agricultural operations and vibrant rural communities.
Enhance Rural Infrastructure	Effective infrastructure planning is necessary to support rural communities and agriculture. This includes addressing transportation, servicing, and technological needs that align with the unique needs and challenges of rural areas.
Promote Collaboration Between Stakeholders	Collaboration across all levels of government, agricultural organizations, and community stakeholders is essential for developing policies that balance or coordinate rural development and agricultural protection.
Ensure Municipal Capacity for Rural Planning	Municipalities must have the resources and expertise to manage rural development and land-use planning effectively, particularly as it pertains to the unique needs of agricultural communities.
Streamline Planning Processes	Simplified and more efficient planning processes are needed to reduce barriers to housing and development, particularly for farmers and rural residents seeking to build additional housing units.
Incorporate Flexibility in Policy	Policies must be adaptable to the diverse needs of rural communities, providing flexibility in planning and zoning to accommodate different types of agricultural operations and housing solutions.
Prioritize Long-Term Rural Viability	The long-term viability of rural communities should be the ultimate goal of planning and development policies. This principle encourages forward-thinking approaches that account for future needs and challenges.
Support Innovation in Agriculture and Housing	Encouraging innovation in both agricultural practices and rural housing solutions is vital. This principle advocates for policies that support technological advancements and creative approaches to rural development.



Case Studies

The report presents three in-depth case studies examining municipal approaches to addressing agricultural and rural housing needs in various ways through Official Plans and Zoning By-Laws. Examples include areas and policy context in and outside the Greenbelt.

In Niagara, the region has maintained a supportive approach to agriculture-related housing, recognizing the critical role the sector plays in the regional economy amid competing pressures. A significant portion of farms rely on Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs), with around 30% of farms employing individuals in sectors such as fruits, vegetables, and floriculture. The existing policies address housing needs through bunkhouses and mobile structures, however, further provincial guidance is needed to tackle issues such as the appropriate scale of on-farm housing, types of structures allowed, and integration into either the farm or settlement areas. Additionally, on-farm housing impacts transportation and access to services, highlighting the need for coordinated planning.

Durham presents an established policy framework allowing primary and additional dwellings on larger agricultural parcels. Discussions with planners reveal that while there has been some uptake, there are significant barriers, including financing and ownership complexities related to Additional Residential Units (ARUs). Clustering ARUs with the main dwelling is critical for maintaining farm operational integrity, as proximity discourages severance pressures. Moreover, local municipalities need better resources to navigate planning requirements, indicating a gap in support for farmers and staff.

In Huron, awareness of the relationship between agriculture and housing is high, with a strong commitment to farmland protection. The County's policies promote urban housing while preserving agricultural viability, which must continue amid changing provincial directives that pose challenges to this commitment. The emphasis is on ensuring that housing solutions do not compromise the agricultural sector, while innovative communication strategies aim to align community understanding with planning goals.

Together, these case studies underscore the importance of adaptable policies that prioritize both housing and agriculture. They illustrate that while protecting farmland is essential, the needs of farm families, workers, and agri-food business employees must also be considered to foster a robust rural economy.

Recommendations

Report recommendations are organized around five thematic areas, each reflecting the essential connection between housing and agricultural viability. Detailed recommendations also outline supportive actions and expected outcomes. A subset of the full list of recommendations in the report is presented here. These recommendations are presented as high priorities and immediately achievable, while others in the report address longer-term needs, require further coordination, or focus on capacity-building initiatives:

Recommendation 1: Province maintain existing ARU policies for on-farm housing in the Greenbelt Plans and PPS 2024, and consider expanding these policies to agri-businesses.

The Provincial Greenbelt Plan allows one ARU within the main dwelling or an existing accessory building. The PPS 2024 allows up to two ARUs with at least one unit located within or attached to the primary dwelling. Extending these policies to include agri-businesses would meet the growing need to support employees of these businesses, such as processing plants, veterinary clinics, and equipment dealers. Greater consideration is needed to determine impacts on agricultural areas or landscapes including the Greenbelt. As-of-right zoning bylaw updates and a review of development charges can streamline the process for ARUs and lower costs for farmers. Clear policy guidance is needed to prevent residential uses from interfering with agricultural operations or disrupting sensitive hydrological and ecological systems. ARU policies are in addition to the farm worker housing policies permitted as an agricultural use in the plans.

This recommendation is highly feasible and a top priority, particularly given the Greenbelt Plans' 10-Year review in 2025. Integrating ARU policies for both farm housing and agriculture-related businesses can address immediate housing needs without imposing on farmland or sensitive environmental areas.

Recommendation 2: Municipalities and Province collaborate to promote innovative housing solutions for farm workers and agri-food businesses.

The Province and municipalities should collaborate to explore and increase awareness of innovative housing solutions for agriculture. There is a specific need for adaptable housing options, such as modular or tiny homes, ARUs, and temporary worker accommodations, both on-farm and within nearby settlement areas. Current policies should enable these options or identify needed updates to zoning by-laws and policy.

This recommendation is viewed as feasible and a high priority. Housing policies must be responsive to the needs of agriculture and opportunities for economic growth.

Recommendation 8: Municipalities integrate agricultural housing needs into multiple strategies.

Municipal agricultural strategies and housing strategies should both incorporate specific policies and actions that address the housing needs of the agriculture sector and rural communities. This integration will ensure that the housing needs of farm families, farm workers, and agri-food sector employees are recognized and addressed in municipal plans with the goal of enhancing the sustainability of rural and agricultural communities.

This recommendation is considered highly feasible and a high priority, particularly for municipalities with significant agricultural areas. Municipalities will take the lead in preparing these strategies in response to provincial mandates and housing shortages. Engagement with agricultural stakeholders will be critical to ensuring that the strategies address local context and needs.

Recommendation 9: Municipalities develop a rural infrastructure strategy to support agricultural and housing needs.

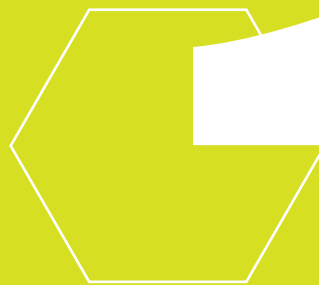
Municipalities, and in particular upper-tier governments, should lead the development of a comprehensive rural infrastructure planning strategy to support rural communities. The strategies should address the infrastructure needs of agricultural housing and ARUs and identify areas suitable for housing, establish clear servicing guidelines, and, where available, align with regional infrastructure master plans to ensure consistency. The Province should provide guidance, resources, and technical support as needed. Guidelines should also consider the use of private services where public infrastructure is unavailable, ensuring water resource protection while discouraging non-agricultural housing outside settlement boundaries.

This recommendation is viewed as highly feasible and a high priority due to the specific housing needs of the agricultural sector. It is suggested that upper-tier municipalities take on responsibility for rural infrastructure planning, given the scale and scope of the infrastructure challenges involved. The increasing costs of water and wastewater treatment facilities pose significant challenges for smaller or slower-growing municipalities. Provincial infrastructure funding support will be critical to ensure these communities can invest in servicing their towns and villages, which is essential for achieving land use efficiency, supporting future density, and reducing development pressure on agricultural land.

Recommendation 10: Municipalities plan for sustainable housing development and complete communities in rural and urban areas.

The Province and municipalities should actively communicate the benefits and cost savings associated with repurposing existing residential and non-residential buildings for housing, implementing as-of-right zoning to support gentle intensification in settlement areas, and investing in infrastructure to enable sustainable housing development. Additionally, municipalities should integrate complete community principles into municipal plans, while the Province should offer financial programs and incentives to direct growth toward existing settlement areas, supporting rural and agricultural viability.

The feasibility of this recommendation is high, as it provides sustainable, cost-effective solutions to housing needs through intensification, renovation, and infrastructure upgrades. These initiatives support the agricultural sector by preserving farmland, while creating resilient rural and urban communities. Implementation requires collaboration between municipalities, the Province, and agricultural organizations, with an immediate focus on areas with existing infrastructure and longer-term investments for broader capacity-building.



Introduction

The demand for affordable housing in Ontario is becoming increasingly urgent. While much of the analysis and discussion by governments focuses on the supply and affordability of housing in urban areas, the issue extends beyond cities to rural communities, especially those within the Greenbelt, which surrounds the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) region and is experiencing rapid population growth and high housing pressures. Factors such as urban spillover, higher demand for rural properties, and insufficient new housing development have intensified housing shortages for farm families, agricultural workers, and rural communities throughout the province.

For towns, villages, and agricultural areas within Ontario's Greenbelt—home to some of the country's most productive agricultural lands—understanding the housing challenges facing rural communities within this protected region is essential for sustaining the long-term viability of agriculture, the agri-food economy, and related jobs. This report highlights how the agricultural sector is uniquely impacted by current housing challenges and development pressures. It focuses on housing solutions in both agricultural and rural areas—within and outside rural settlement areas—while ensuring the protection and conservation of farmland. Safeguarding the Greenbelt's agri-food economies and fostering growth opportunities in the sector hinges on providing accessible and affordable housing options not only for farm families and agricultural workers but also for other workers and their families who support the broader agricultural sector and help sustain vibrant rural communities.

The research examines current policies, needs, and challenges related to addressing the housing needs of rural communities and the agricultural sector. While the Province plays a critical role in setting policy directions and addressing systemic issues, municipalities are also key to implementing housing strategies and land use planning within the Greenbelt. Housing needs in rural communities and the relationship of housing policies to Ontario's important agricultural sector is not well understood. It is well-established that the agricultural economy is vital to rural communities and key industries in the province, including Canada's largest agri-food and food beverage processing sector. A critical component of protecting these economies and realizing growth opportunities is ensuring the right mix of housing in rural areas that aligns with the needs of agriculture and rural communities.

This study draws on a combination of secondary data analysis and interviews with key informants to provide a comprehensive understanding of these issues and offers recommendations for addressing them. Insights and data from reports, such as the Greenbelt Foundation's *Enhancing Municipal Capacity to Address Housing Needs in the Greenbelt* (2021) are used to reinforce the findings and identify opportunities for both provincial and municipal action to better support rural housing needs. Although the report primarily focuses on the Greenbelt, many lessons and recommendations are applicable to other rural areas in Ontario where the agricultural sector is prominent.

Safeguarding the Greenbelt's agri-food economies and fostering growth opportunities in the sector hinges on providing accessible and affordable housing options ...

Background

Ontario's Greenbelt was established in 2005 to help shape urban growth and complete communities, preserve farmland and critical natural systems, and support the development of vibrant, livable rural communities within its protected areas.

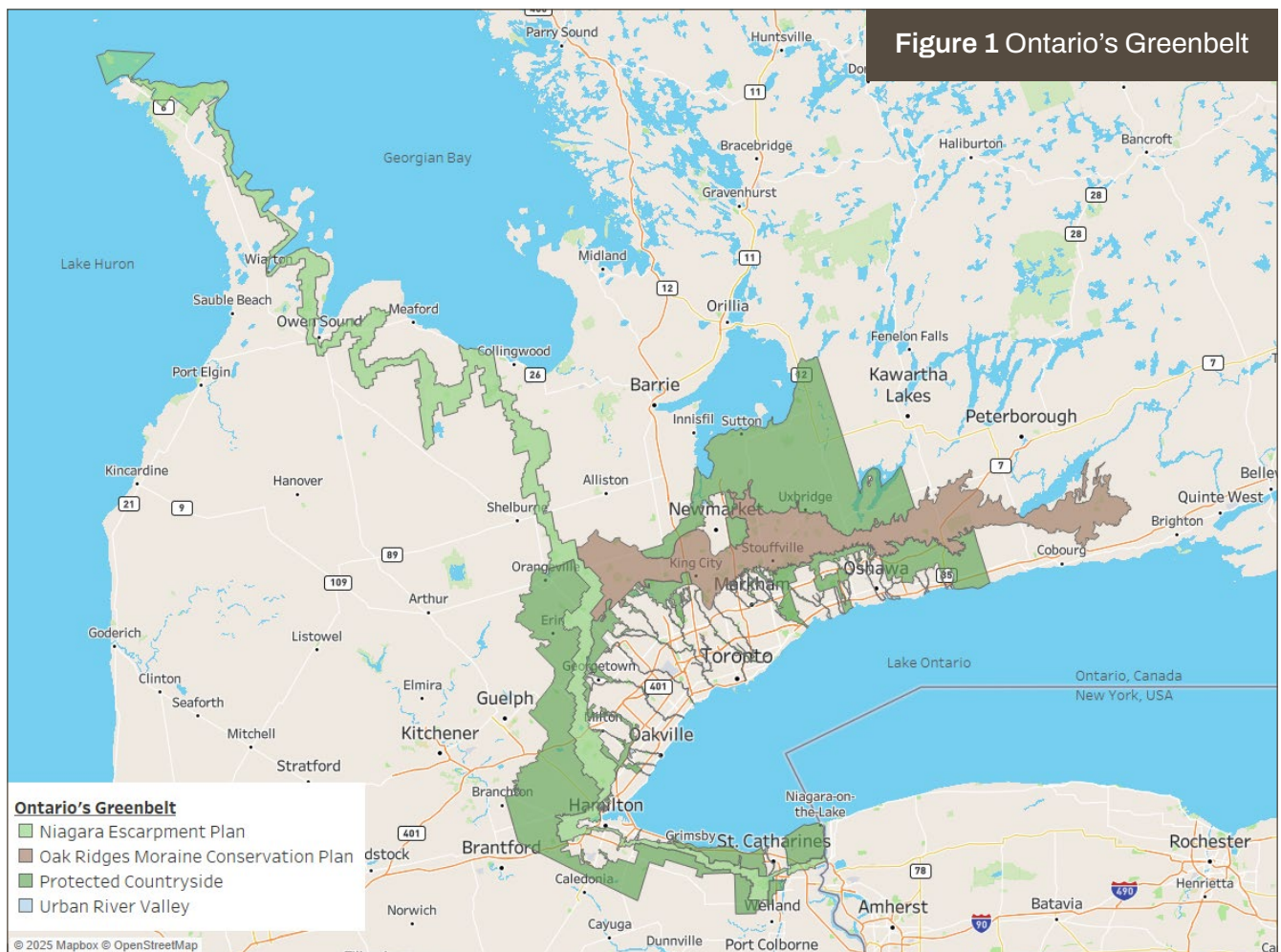
From 1996 to 2021, population growth in the GGH increased dramatically.¹ Although the GGH accounts for only about 3% of Ontario's total land area, it is home to over 10 million people—nearly 70% of the provincial population and over one-quarter of Canada's total population. This number is expected to increase by 48% to 14.8 million by 2051, further intensifying development pressures. The region is also a vital economic hub and contains some of the country's most productive farmland. In 2020, the Greenbelt's two million acres included 4,000 farms, contributing an estimated \$4.1 billion to GDP and providing nearly 59,000 jobs.²

The *Enhancing Municipal Capacity to Support Agriculture in the Greenbelt* report highlights that many municipalities face significant resource constraints in their planning departments, limiting their ability to effectively manage housing needs and land use. Recent legislative changes in the GGH, which impact the role of upper-tier municipal planning authorities, may further create challenges. These issues emphasize the need for collaborative efforts between the Province and municipalities to strengthen planning capacity and support rural housing strategies.³

As development pressures continue to grow, the Greenbelt's role in balancing or coordinating housing needs with the protection of farmland and natural resources becomes increasingly critical. These pressures have broader implications for food security, workforce stability, and the sustainability of rural economies. Addressing the housing needs of agricultural communities is vital for supporting the Greenbelt and ensuring a resilient rural economy. By understanding these challenges, Ontario can ensure that the Greenbelt continues to sustain a thriving agricultural sector while fostering complete communities that integrate housing, services, and economic opportunities.

This research aligns with broader objectives focused on supporting rural economic development, enhancing agricultural competitiveness, and promoting sustainable rural communities. By addressing housing needs within the agricultural sector in the Greenbelt and beyond, the study contributes to efforts aimed at strengthening rural economies, ensuring a stable agricultural workforce, and sustaining Ontario's long-term food production capacity. These goals are essential to maintaining the vitality of rural areas and the overall resilience of the province's agricultural system.

1. Office of the Auditor General of Canada. (2021). *Value-for-Money Audit: Land-Use Planning in the Greater Golden Horseshoe*. https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en21/AR_LandUse_en21.pdf 2. SUMMIT72 Advisory Services. (2021). *Understanding How Greenbelt Agriculture Feeds the Regional Economy*. Greenbelt Foundation. https://www.greenbelt.ca/gb_agriculture_economic_impact 3. Caldwell et al. (2021). *Enhancing Municipal Capacity to Support Agriculture in the Greenbelt*. https://www.greenbelt.ca/municipal_capacity



Ontario's Greenbelt consists of 3 plans with distinct landscapes – Niagara Escarpment, Oak Ridges Moraine and Protected Countryside. Agricultural is present across the Greenbelt and is the predominant land use in the Protected Countryside.

Together, these plans help sustain Ontario's agricultural lands, natural environment and water resources while managing urban expansion.

Niagara Escarpment Plan: Covers the Niagara Escarpment, a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve and preserves a unique geological formation, biodiversity and scenic landscapes. Land use controls prevent excessive development, ensuring natural habitats, water quality, and recreational spaces remain intact.

Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan: Covers the Oak Ridges Moraine a major groundwater recharge feature in southern Ontario and protects the moraine's ecological and hydrological functions, particularly its role as a water source for millions of people and irrigation source for agricultural. Restricts urban development, sand and gravel extraction, and activities that could disrupt groundwater flow and biodiversity.

Greenbelt Plan: Covers the Protected Countryside with agriculture as the dominant land use. Provides a broad framework for agriculture and environmental protection, and urban growth management with policies limiting urban expansion, promoting sustainable land use, and supporting agricultural viability.

Research Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this research is to explore current policies, needs, and challenges related to addressing the housing needs of rural communities and the agricultural sector. While the primary emphasis is on the Greenbelt, insights from this research may apply to other rural regions in Ontario. The main objectives of this research are:

1. To assess how current rural housing and land use planning policies in the rural countryside and rural settlement areas within the Greenbelt impact agricultural operations, industry growth, and the tax, servicing, and environmental implications of scattered rural residential development.
2. To understand the housing needs of farm families, agricultural workers, and other rural community workers, such as those employed in agri-businesses and essential services, and identify any gaps or challenges in meeting those needs.
3. To identify promising practices and develop evidence-based recommendations for addressing the housing needs of rural communities and the agricultural sector.

The findings from this study have important implications for housing and agricultural policy development in Ontario. By identifying gaps in current policies and offering evidence-based recommendations, the research aims to inform and shape housing strategies and policies that better support rural communities and the agricultural sector. The insights gained may help guide the development of policy solutions that better coordinate housing needs with the protection of farmland, aiming to sustain agricultural viability, strengthen rural economies, and foster resilient communities across the province.

Research Methods

Literature Review and Environmental Scan

The first stage of the research involved conducting a literature review and an environmental scan of provincial policies impacting rural housing, along with a review of municipal policies from seven municipalities across Southern Ontario: Caledon, Clarington, Hamilton, Kingsville, Niagara-on-the-Lake, South Huron, and Zorra. For each municipality, Official Plans (OPs; along with relevant upper-tier Official Plans, where applicable) and zoning by-laws (ZBLs) were reviewed, with a specific focus on housing policies in rural and agricultural areas. Where available, documents directly addressing farm worker housing were also examined, as well as housing strategies and other relevant reports. This comprehensive review helped to identify current policy gaps and opportunities to better support rural housing needs.

Secondary Data Analysis

A review of relevant secondary data was conducted, including information from Statistics Canada's Census of Agriculture and previous reports from the Greenbelt Foundation. The limited availability of data disaggregated by rural location or at the municipal level made it challenging to accurately quantify some of the issues discussed in this report. While qualitative data from stakeholder interviews highlights the significant impact these challenges have on the agricultural sector and rural communities, additional data is needed to fully understand the scope of these issues and their associated social and economic costs. Notwithstanding these limitations, the available data provided valuable insights that complemented the qualitative findings, particularly in informing the case studies. This underscores the importance of qualitative insights and case studies in capturing the realities faced by rural communities.

Case Studies and Key Informant Interviews

This research employs a case study approach, drawing on semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders, including farmers, municipal and provincial planners, and representatives from farm organizations. Additionally, municipal land use planning policies and other relevant reports were reviewed to complement the interview findings. In total, 13 interviews were conducted, involving 26 participants. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed, alongside other information, to identify challenges and potential solutions related to rural housing in Niagara Region (Chapter 3), Durham Region (Chapter 4), and Huron County (Chapter 5). A list of interview participants is provided in Appendix 1.

Advisory Committee

An advisory committee of subject matter experts was established to provide guidance throughout the research process, ensuring that the recommendations addressed the needs of various stakeholders. The committee included representatives from the Greenbelt Foundation, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness (OMAFRA), farmers, farm organizations, and several municipalities. On September 13, 2024, a workshop was attended by 13 Committee members and invited guests. The group worked collaboratively to identify, prioritize, and develop potential policy solutions and actions to address the challenges highlighted through the case studies. The outcomes of this workshop informed the principles (Chapter 6), and recommendations (Chapter 7) detailed in this report. The members of the advisory committee are acknowledged in Appendix 2.

Organization of Report

Following this introduction, **Chapter 2** reviews relevant literature and conducts an environmental scan of municipal and provincial policies affecting rural housing, with a focus on agricultural and rural communities. **Chapter 3, 4, and 5** present the case studies of Niagara Region, Durham Region, and Huron County, respectively, highlighting specific housing challenges, policy impacts, and local approaches to addressing these issues. **Chapter 6** synthesizes the findings from the case studies and other research to outline key principles for action that can guide future housing and agricultural policies. **Chapter 7** builds on these principles by presenting concrete recommendations aimed at addressing the housing needs of rural communities and supporting the agricultural sector. Finally, the report concludes with **Chapter 8**, which summarizes the overall findings and reflects on the research project as a whole.



Literature Review

Introduction

This study aims to better understand the housing needs of rural and agricultural communities through an examination of relevant literature, policies, and interviews with key informants, including farmers, land use planners, and other stakeholders. This chapter provides background and context for the remainder of the report, reviewing provincial land-use policies, reports from government and non-government organizations, and an environmental scan of planning documents from municipalities across the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) and beyond.

Provincial Policy

A Brief History of Rural Housing Policies in Ontario

Ontario's current land use planning policies regarding housing in agricultural areas represent the latest in a series of efforts by policy makers to address competing priorities. Historically, Ontario permitted farm parcels to have a single residential dwelling. Around the 1950s, the nature of agriculture shifted as many farm operators began to expand and intensify their operations in response to increased pressures from global markets and evolving social realities. Simultaneously, the significant expansion of urban centres led to the loss of farmland. There was also an increased demand for the creation of rural residential lots, partially due to dwellings that became surplus to a farm operation when two or more traditional agricultural lots (and their associated dwellings) were consolidated. The creation of new non-farm residential lots in rural areas, led to a number of issues and challenges, including the removal of agricultural land from production, conflicts between non-farm residents and their agricultural neighbours, and the potential limitation of the agricultural sector's future viability.

... new non-farm residential lots in rural areas, led to a number of issues and challenges, including the removal of agricultural land from production ...

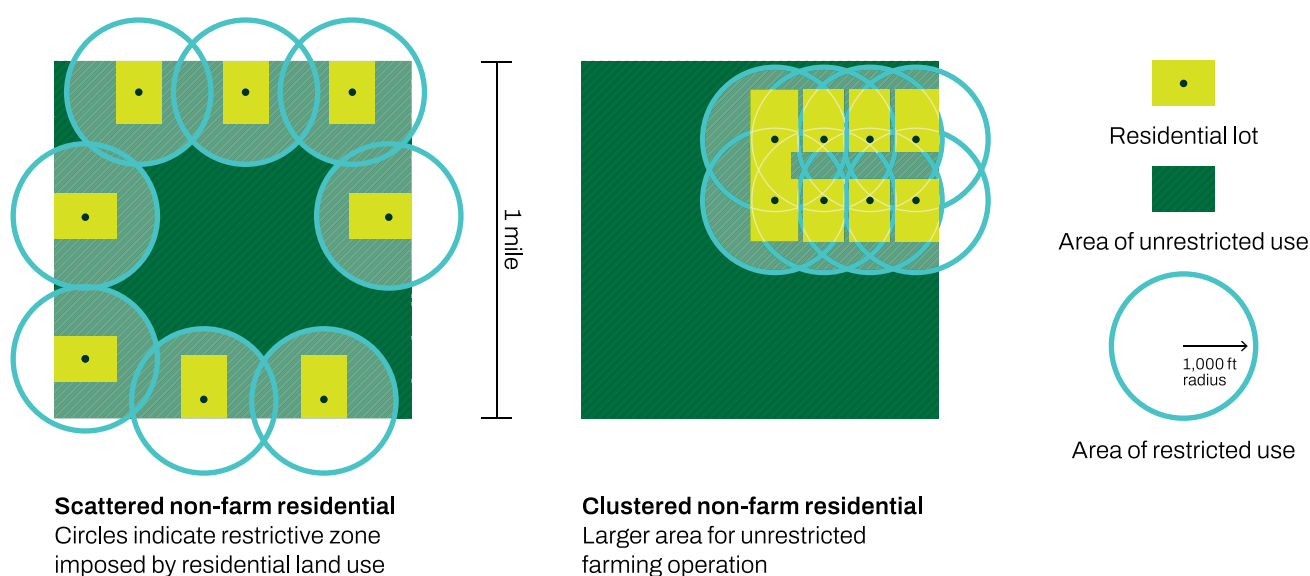
Between the late 1970s and 2024, there have been seven different province-wide planning policy statements/guidelines directing the creation of housing and new lots in agricultural areas in Ontario. These include the Foodland Guidelines (1978-1994), Growth and Settlement Policy Guidelines (1992-1994), Comprehensive Provincial Policy Statement (1994-1996), 1996 Provincial Policy Statement (1996-2004), 2005 Provincial Policy Statement (2005 - 2013), 2014 Provincial Policy Statement (2014-2019), the 2020 Provincial Policy Statement (2020-2024) and the current 2024 Provincial Planning Statement. These statements include provisions relevant to housing and agricultural land uses, such as primary dwellings, surplus farm dwelling severances, retirement lot creation (no longer permitted after the 2005 PPS), and secondary dwelling units. These policies were complemented by urban focused policies designed to limit the expansion of settlement boundaries and preserve the agricultural land base.

In the 1970s, the Foodland Guidelines established a framework for planning for agriculture in Ontario.⁴ Over time, this policy evolved but retained a level of consistency that remains evident in the current Provincial Planning Statement (PPS 2024). The growth and development of the agricultural sector have benefitted from this consistent application of standards and rules. The Minimum Distance Separation (MDS) formula and Nutrient Management Planning, for example, have guided agricultural development for decades.

In 1998, the Farming and Food Production Protection Act was adopted in Ontario to address conflicts between agriculture and neighbouring uses. The legislation reflects the reality that agricultural practices can be the source of odour, dust, flies, light, smoke, noise, and vibration – impacts that, while natural, can be significant irritants to neighbouring residents. Additionally, farm traffic combined with heavy vehicular traffic poses both an irritant and safety concern. These issues are exacerbated by the presence of non-farm residences in the countryside. More residences are likely to lead to increasing complaints and potential hearings before the Normal Farm Practices Board.

Simply put, agriculture and residential development are not always compatible. Without careful planning, increasing rural housing could compromise the agricultural sector's ability to produce food essential to the health of citizens and the provincial economy.

Figure 2 Scattered vs Clustered Non-Farm Residential Development



Source: James F. MacLaren Environmental Consultants. (1976, August). *Countryside planning: A pilot for Huron County*. Prepared for the County of Huron and the Province of Ontario.

Between 2001-2006, this sentiment was put into practice through major changes made to planning in the GGH. The introduction of the 2001 Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, 2005 Greenbelt Plan, and 2006 Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (Growth Plan), together with the existing Niagara Escarpment Plan, established a provincially coordinated land use planning framework for the region. These actions were in response to high growth pressures and concerns about sustainability, food production, economic prosperity and a high quality of life.

4. Government of Ontario. (1978). *Food Land Guidelines*. <http://www.waynecaldwell.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Foodland-Guidelines-1978-with-1983-Addendum.pdf>

Without careful planning, increasing rural housing could compromise the agricultural sector's ability to produce food essential to the health of citizens and the provincial economy.

Provincial Planning Statement

To address Ontario's current housing situation, the Province began a review of housing policies in 2019 and substantially changed the planning rules in Ontario with a series of bills that focused on housing supply and expediting the construction of new homes. These include the *More Homes More Choices Act*, 2019, the *More Homes Built Faster Act*, 2022 and the *Cutting Red Tape to Build More Homes Faster Act*, 2024. The new rules aim to shorten approval timelines and incentivize home building but also limit public oversight. Agricultural housing needs were not explicitly addressed in the bills, although concerns for farmland loss and negative impacts on agricultural operations were expressed.⁵

The PPS is the primary document for land use planning policy in Ontario, working together with policies in the Greenbelt Plans. The Province began a review of relevant policies in 2022.⁶ Following a two-step public consultation process, the Province introduced the new PPS, 2024 which came into effect on October 20, 2024 replacing the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS 2020), as well as the Growth Plan.

To limit potential land-use conflicts and other pressures of population growth on the agricultural system across the province, the PPS 2024 directs growth to urban and rural settlement areas. In these areas, the PPS 2024 encourages the development of a mix of housing types, efficient use of infrastructure, and the achievement of complete communities, which are inclusive and offer a range of opportunities for residents.⁷ Mandatory intensification and density targets from the Growth Plan are gone, and the PPS 2024 includes policies more permissive of settlement area expansions and the creation of new settlement areas. Policies that promote the conservation of rural character and amenities, ensuring that new development is compatible with the rural landscape, as well as sustainable with existing servicing, are largely similar to PPS 2020.

Although the PPS 2024 includes stronger policy direction for agricultural impact assessment, the removal of the Growth Plan and less stringent requirements for new and expanding settlement areas have raised concerns that agricultural land may be at greater risk under the new planning regime.

The PPS 2024 is stronger in requiring planning authorities to “use an agricultural system approach, based on provincial guidance, to maintain and enhance a geographically continuous agricultural land base and support and foster the long-term economic prosperity and productive capacity of the agri-food network.”⁸ Under the former Growth Plan, the Province provided mapping that identified an agricultural system for the GGH. The PPS 2024 also revises the definition of *agricultural uses* to include “housing for farm workers, when the size and nature of the operation requires additional employment.”⁹ Previously, PPS 2020 stipulated “accommodation for full-time farm labour.” This provides more flexibility to provide housing for farm owners and labourers working in seasonal or part-time roles. This is also important for farming operations wishing to expand – and build capacity.

5. Ontario Federation of Agriculture. 2022. OFA Presents to Ontario's Standing Committee on Bill 23. <https://ofa.on.ca/ofa-presents-to-ontario-standing-committee-on-bill-23/> 6. Environmental Registry of Ontario [ERO]. (2024, April). *Review of proposed policies for a new provincial planning policy instrument*. <https://ero.ontario.ca/notice/019-8462> 7. PPS 2024, s. 2.5.1. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/provincial-planning-statement-2024> 8. PPS 2024, s. 4.3.1.1. 9. PPS 2024, p. 40.

A proposed change during the public consultation for PPS 2024 would have allowed for the creation of three new residential lots per parcel in prime agricultural areas. Following criticism from municipal, environmental, and agricultural sectors, these policies were dropped in May 2023. Instead, PPS 2024 largely reverts to the severance policies from the PPS 2020 and clarifies that “new dwellings and additional residential units are prohibited on any remnant parcel of farmland created by the severance.”¹⁰

PPS 2024 permits a “principal dwelling associated with an agricultural operation...in prime agricultural areas as an agricultural use,” provided the dwelling had not been previously severed from the lot. It also allows up to two ARUs in prime agricultural areas. When two ARUs are added, at least one must be within or attached to the principal dwelling. Any other ARUs are required to:

- a. comply with the MDS formulae;
- b. be compatible with, and not hinder, surrounding agricultural operations;
- c. have appropriate sewage and water services;
- d. address any public health and safety concerns;
- e. be of limited scale and located within, attached, or in close proximity to the principal dwelling or farm building cluster; and
- f. minimize land taken out of agricultural production.¹¹

To help municipalities and stakeholders interpret and implement PPS policies consistently, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA)¹² developed the Guidelines on Permitted Uses in Ontario’s Prime Agricultural Areas.¹³ The guidelines offer a number of recommendations related to housing and clarify that full-time farm labour includes seasonal labourers. Where labourers are required for a few weeks per year, farms in prime agricultural areas are only permitted to provide temporary structures or off-farm housing. The guidelines also state that housing workers from one’s own farm or neighbouring farms could be considered on-farm diversified use.¹⁴ It is important to note that these guidelines were developed to support the PPS (2014) and should now be considered in the context of the updated PPS (2024) policies. It is unclear at this time if any revisions will be made to the Guidelines to account for the changed policies in PPS 2024. The final ERO decision for the new PPS acknowledged that additional guidance was requested in the implementation of policies such as agricultural systems and land use compatibility.¹⁵

Greenbelt Agriculture

40%

Agriculture is the predominant land use in the Greenbelt, accounting for 40% of its land base including rare specialty crop areas.

49%

Greenbelt farms are 49% more productive per acre compared to farms across Ontario.

\$4.1B

Greenbelt agriculture annually contributes \$4.1 Billion to Ontario’s GDP and 59,000 jobs.

10. PPS 2024, s. 4.3.3.1(c). 11. PPS 2024, s. 4.3.2.5. 12. OMAFRA was split into two ministries—the Ministry of Farming, Agriculture and Agribusiness and the Ministry of Rural Affairs—in June 2024. 13. OMAFRA. (2016). *Guidelines on Permitted Uses in Ontario’s Prime Agricultural Areas*. <https://www.ontario.ca/files/2024-04/omafra-publication-851-guidelines-on-permitted-uses-in-ontarios-prime-agricultural-areas-en-04-02-2024.pdf> 14. Guidelines on Permitted Uses, P. 25. 15. MMAH (2024, Aug 20). *ERO 019-8462*. <https://ero.ontario.ca/notice/019-8462>

Greenbelt Plan

The Greenbelt Plan was first approved in 2005, following the passing of the Greenbelt Act, 2005, which designated approximately 2 million acres including farmland, forests, and wetlands to safeguard and support regional sustainability and socio-economic benefits. The Greenbelt encompasses three landscapes each with their unique land use plan, the Niagara Escarpment Plan, Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, and the Protected Countryside (Greenbelt Plan). The lands include 750,000 acres of farmland, representing only 6.1% of Ontario's farmland but containing over half of Ontario's fruit acreage, 80% of Ontario's peaches, plums, apricots and grape acreage, and more than 10% of its vegetable acreage.¹⁶

The Protected Countryside contains two types of settlement areas. Towns/Villages are designated for development, with settlement area boundary expansions following policies unique to the Greenbelt. Hamlets, however, have a far more limited role in accommodating housing and development, focused on intensification and infill. In addition, the Greenbelt includes a Natural System which encompasses natural heritage features, water resources, and other ecological areas that create linkages between these features. The Agricultural System within the Greenbelt includes agricultural land, specialty crop areas, and essential infrastructure supporting agriculture, such as regional infrastructure, on-farm buildings, agricultural services, broadband internet, farm markets, distributors, and primary processing.

The expansion of settlement areas into specialty crop lands is not allowed. Rural lands that help maintain a continuous land base for agriculture are also considered part of the agricultural system and Agri-Food Network. Where settlement areas are located within the Greenbelt area, land use is governed by the PPS 2024, however, if settlement area expansion is proposed into the Greenbelt both Greenbelt and PPS 2024 policies apply.

The expansion of settlement areas into specialty crop lands is not allowed

The Greenbelt Plan was the first to use the agricultural system terminology to emphasize the importance of maintaining a continuous and permanent land base essential for long-term agricultural production and economic activity.¹⁷ The goal of the agricultural systems approach is to safeguard this land base from fragmentation and conversion to non-farm uses.

16. JRG Consulting Group. (2018). *Agriculture Trends and Updates: Understanding the Greenbelt's Unique Advantages*. Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation Occasional Paper Series. https://assets.nationbuilder.com/greenbelt/pages/9724/attachments/original/1550261687/Agriculture_by_the_Numbers_Understanding_the_Greenbelt%E2%80%99s_Unique_Advantages_2018-FINAL.pdf?1550261687 17. In 2020, the Province published *Implementation Procedures for the Agricultural System in Ontario's Greater Golden Horseshoe* (Publication 856), which aims to "help municipalities, farmers and others interpret and implement the Agricultural System references and policies in the four land use plans for the Greater Golden Horseshoe." For more on this topic, see Caldwell's (2015) report commissioned by the Greenbelt Foundation, "The Agricultural System, Components, Linkages and Rationale."

The 2017 revision of the Greenbelt Plan introduced policies allowing second dwelling units within any single dwelling or existing accessory structures, provided these are outside the Natural Heritage System.¹⁸ Within the Protected Countryside, the creation of new lots is highly restricted, however, the severance of a residence surplus to a farming operation is permitted as long as no new residential dwelling is allowed on the retained farmland lot and the severed lot is limited in size to the minimum required for appropriate use and servicing.¹⁹ The creation of four or more new lots or units for residential development through consent, plan of subdivision, or condominium, is prohibited on rural lands in the Protected Countryside.²⁰ Municipalities may choose to be more restrictive in their OPs regarding the number of permitted residential severances.

The Ontario government has issued an administrative amendment to maintain Greenbelt policies affected by the revocation of the PPS 2020 and Growth Plan.²¹ These, along with other provincial policy changes, add a complexity and uncertainty to agriculture planning, and for farmers themselves. Given the interconnectedness of these policies, it is critical to assess the impact of any changes on agriculture as a whole. Consistent, predictable, and supportive policies at the provincial and municipal levels will be vital for the future development of the agricultural sector.

Housing Challenges in Rural Communities

While there are varying definitions of affordable housing, this study uses the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) definition, which considers *affordable* as spending less than 30% of gross (before-tax) annual household income on housing costs.²² The PPS 2024 also uses the 30% guideline, as well as including housing where the purchase price is lower than the average sales price in the municipality by at least 10% or, for rentals, at or below market rental rate in the municipality.²³ Different perspectives and policy contexts, however, may adopt distinct definitions of affordable. Affordable housing generally aims to ensure lower-income families or individuals can secure housing without overburdening their finances. It can also be beneficial to consider if housing is *attainable*, meaning there are housing options available that are affordable to a broader spectrum of income levels, including middle-income renters or first-time home buyers.

Affordable housing

Housing is considered affordable if it costs less than 30% of a household's before-tax income.

Attainable housing

The number of housing options available that are affordable to a broad spectrum of income levels.

Source: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC)

18. Greenbelt Plan, s. 4.5(3). 19. Greenbelt Plan, s. 4.6.1(f). 20. Greenbelt Plan, s. 3.1.4(5). 21. ERO, 2024. 22. CMHC. (2019). Identifying core housing need. <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/professionals/housing-markets-data-and-research/housing-research/core-housing-need/identifying-core-housing-need> 23. PPS 2024, s. 8.0.

Due to the limited availability of affordable housing and rental units, rental prices in rural areas have increased significantly in recent years.²⁴ This trend hampers rural economic development, as businesses struggle to attract or retain employees when affordable housing options are scarce locally.^{25/26} For farm workers earning below living wages, off-farm rentals—if they are available at all—can consume a significant portion of their earnings.²⁷ When housing is not available locally, long commutes can be necessary. In fact, 20% of farm employees living off-farm report commuting an hour or more each day to work.²⁸ If on-farm housing were available, nearly half of commuting farm workers would consider that option. This shortage of adequate on-farm and rural housing contributes to an ongoing farm labour shortage in Ontario.²⁹ Addressing this shortage is important for the long-term viability of the sector and growth of the agricultural system and economy.

If on-farm housing were available, nearly half of commuting farm workers would consider that option

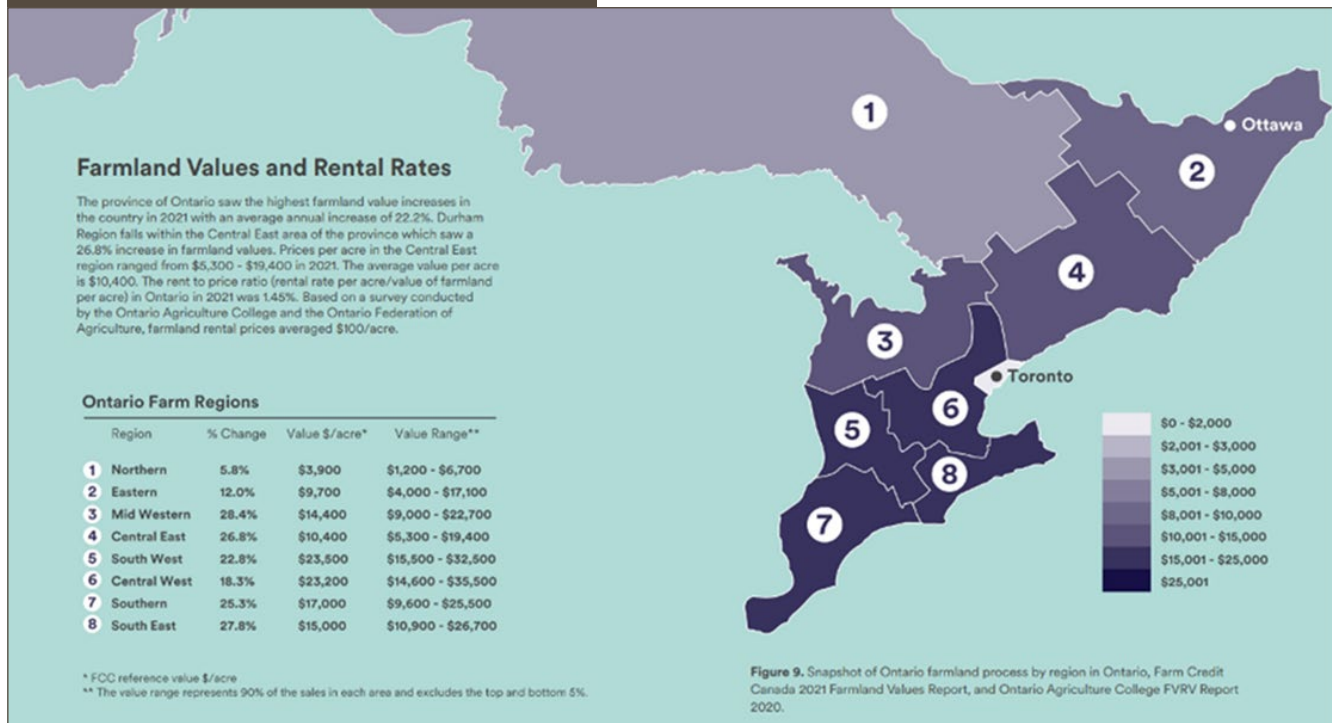
The impact of labour shortage and housing issues extend beyond farmers to the broader agri-food sector. Many agri-food businesses locate in rural areas, near the farms they work with and source from, but the lack of available and affordable housing sometimes means that willing and able workers cannot be hired due to the absence of nearby housing options.³⁰ Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Workforce Planning Board representatives surveyed reported that finding affordable housing is one of the greatest challenges faced by rural businesses.³¹ As a result, many rural businesses struggle to attract workers for available positions,³² contributing to labour shortages that threaten the economic competitiveness of rural municipalities. In 2022, labour shortages cost agri-businesses across Canada over \$2.8 billion in lost sales or contracts, and this situation is expected to worsen, with job vacancies in the agricultural sector projected to exceed 100,000 by 2030.³³

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the situation, as more people moved from cities to rural areas, increasing competition for the already limited housing supply. An increasing number of recreational property buyers and people moving to more affordable rural communities (often while maintaining higher-paid employment in another municipality) has further intensified competition for housing.³⁴ Development in rural areas tends to be less profitable, due to economies of scale, and infrastructure costs can be significant due to vast distances between rural or agricultural residences.³⁵ Additionally, municipal policies that favour single-family dwellings while restricting multi-unit projects further compound the scarcity of rental accommodations. The limited availability of on-farm or rural accommodations, combined with regulatory barriers preventing the construction of additional dwellings or temporary housing, threatens the long-term sustainability of farming careers and rural communities.

24. Rural Ontario Municipal Association. (2022). *ROMA Task Force on Attainable Housing and Purpose-Built Rentals*. <https://www.roma.on.ca/sites/default/files/assets/DOCUMENTS/Reports/2022/ROMAFootintheDoorAddressingBarriers20220812.pdf> 25. CAHRC. (2024). *Building a Solid Foundation*. https://cahrc-ccrha.ca/sites/default/files/2024-08/EN_CAHRC_Building-a-Solid-Foundation_REPORT_AUG_2024.pdf 26. NFU-O. (n.d.). *Joint Response to A Place to Grow and Provincial Policy Statement (ERO 019-6177)*. <https://nfuontario.ca/news/joint-response-to-a-place-to-grow-and-provincial-policy-statement-ero-019-6177/> 27. Thompson, D., & the National Farmers Union – Ontario [NFU-O]. (2021). *Reframing the Farm Labour Crisis in Ontario*. https://www.nfu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Reframing-the-Farm-Labour-Crisis-NFU-O-Farm-Labour-Study_compressed.pdf 28. Thompson & NFU-O, 2021. 29. Thompson & NFU-O, 2021. 30. NFU-O. (n.d.). 31. Graham, H. & Gibson, R. (2024). *Labour Force Dynamics in Rural Ontario: Perspectives from Ontario's Workforce Planning Boards*. <https://ruraldev.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/LSNARReport-WPB.pdf> 32. CAHRC. (2024) 33. CFIB. (2024). *Harvesting a Solution*. <https://www.cfib-fcei.ca/hubfs/research/reports/2024/Harvesting%20a%20solution%20-%20TFWs%20key%20to%20mitigating%20agricultural%20labour%20shortages%20-%20English.pdf> 34. Rural Ontario Institute. (2019). *Workforce Development in Rural Ontario - A Snapshot & Northern Perspective*. https://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/uploads/userfiles/files/Workforce%20Development%20and%20Northern%20Perspective_Rural%20Ontario%20Foresight%20Papers.pdf 35. Association of Municipalities Ontario. (2022). *A Blueprint for Action: An Integrated Approach to Address the Ontario Housing Crisis*. <https://www.amo.on.ca/policy/land-use-planning-resources-and-climate-change/blueprint-action-integrated-approach-address>

... municipal policies that favour single-family dwellings while restricting multi-unit projects further compound the scarcity of rental accommodations

Figure 3 Farmland values across Ontario





Solutions for Rural Housing Challenges

In 2022, the Ontario Housing Affordability Task Force published a report suggesting that construction of 1.5 million new homes by 2031 are needed to begin addressing the Province's housing affordability issue. Similarly, at the national level, the Task Force for Housing & Climate assessed policy solutions that would facilitate the development of 5.8 million affordable, low-carbon homes across Canada by 2030.³⁶ Some of the proposed solutions that could improve rural housing affordability and availability include:

- Amending policies relevant for urban development, but which are irrelevant or overly cumbersome for rural and northern communities.
- Rural intensification and aging-in-place strategies to create appropriate and diverse housing options for seniors who are ready to downsize but want to remain in their communities. This would help free up existing housing stock available for families or newcomers to the community.
- Financial incentives (e.g., tax exemptions or credits) for private and non-profit housing developers who build rental-housing in rural and northern communities.

Additional suggestions that would benefit both urban and rural areas include:

- Less restrictive land use planning systems to facilitate development.
- Removing “municipal policies, zoning, or plans that prioritize the preservation of the physical character of the neighbourhood” to allow a wider variety of housing options.³⁷
- Updating the Building Code to support innovative technologies and methods, enabling the development of more affordable and climate resilient buildings.

36. Task Force for Housing & Climate [TFHC]. (2023). *Blueprint For More and Better Housing*. <https://housingandclimate.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Blueprint-for-More-and-Better-Housing-Mar-2024-EN.pdf> 37. TFHC, 2023, p. 9.

Implications of Scattered Rural Residential Development

Scattered rural residential development creates negative externalities and has significant implications for taxes, servicing, and the environment. Cost of Community Service (COCS) studies conducted across North America have consistently shown that scattered residential development tends to cost municipalities more in services than it generates in tax revenue.³⁸ Additionally, the impacts of severance activity on agriculture in Ontario have been well documented, including restrictions on livestock operation expansions, increased demand for services, loss of farmland, changes in community structure, and rising land values.³⁹

Such development also hampers the efficient use of rural infrastructure and public service facilities. Extending water and wastewater infrastructure to rural settlements, which are often disconnected from existing urban settlements, incurs substantial costs.⁴⁰ Where municipalities bear part of these costs, it may result in higher property taxes. Meanwhile, when developers carry infrastructure costs during construction, it raises the cost of housing and contributes to higher prices for homebuyers.

Opportunities to retrofit infrastructure assets – promoting sustainability and innovation – could help address some of these challenges and extend the use and benefits of existing rural housing stock. While Greenbelt policies aim to curb this type of development, in the rest of Ontario the PPS 2024 introduces policies that permit new development in rural settlement areas, and allow for municipal or private communal sewage services and individual on-site water services.⁴¹ Conversion of land from the Natural Heritage System to residential use, another policy introduced outside the Greenbelt in the PPS 2024, contributes to significant loss of biodiversity and reduces climate resilience.

While Greenbelt policies aim to curb this type of development, in the rest of Ontario the PPS 2024 introduces policies that permit new development in rural settlement areas, and allow for municipal or private communal sewage services and individual on-site water services.

38. Extensive work has been completed by the American Farmland Trust in this area (https://farmlandinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/09/Cost_of_Community_Services_Studies_AFT_FIC_201609.pdf). In Ontario, the Federation of Agriculture has also undertaken CCS studies. In OFA's 2014 study done on the Municipality of Bayham, for example, they found that farms received \$0.50 cents worth of municipal services for every dollar of revenue brought into the municipality, compared to \$1.08 worth of services for every dollar brought in by residential. <https://ofa.on.ca/newsroom/ofa-case-studies-illustrate-economic-and-environmental-benefits-of-farmland/> 39. See *Lot Creation in Ontario's Agricultural Landscape (2000-2010)* and *Rural Non-Farm Development: Its Impact on The Viability and Sustainability of Agricultural and Rural Communities*. <https://www.waynecaldwell.ca/projects/> 40. Neptis. (2017). *Should rural settlements in the Greater Golden Horseshoe be a focus for growth?* https://neptis.org/sites/default/files/neptis_finalubuabrief_2017_03_09a.pdf 41. Proposed Provincial Planning Statement 2024, s. 3.6.5(c).

Municipal Planning Documents

To understand how housing policies vary across rural and agricultural areas of Southern Ontario, an environmental scan was conducted, examining planning documents from seven municipalities: Caledon, Clarington, Hamilton, Kingsville, Niagara-on-the-Lake, South Huron, and Zorra. For each municipality Official Plans (OP) and Zoning By-Laws (ZBL) were reviewed, along with regional OPs for lower-tier municipalities, focusing on housing policies in rural and agricultural areas. Where available, documents addressing farm worker housing, housing strategies, and other relevant reports were also reviewed. Any actions to improve affordable and attainable housing will have impacts across the municipality, however, these housing strategies rarely explicitly addressed or mentioned the unique housing needs of rural or agricultural areas. Policies from all seven municipalities were considered in compiling the list of definitions below. The policies for Clarington, Niagara-on-the-Lake, and South Huron are detailed in their respective case studies, while the policies for Caledon, Hamilton, Kingsville, and Zorra are summarized below.

Any actions to improve affordable and attainable housing will have impacts across the municipality, however, these housing strategies rarely explicitly addressed or mentioned the unique housing needs of rural or agricultural areas.

Caledon

The Town of Caledon is the northernmost municipality in Peel Region. Predominantly rural, Caledon is experiencing increasing urbanization pressures due to its proximity to the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). In addition to the PPS 2024 and Greenbelt Plan, Caledon is subject to the Oak Ridges Moraine (ORM) Conservation Plan, Niagara Escarpment Plan, and the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan, which further restrict development in some areas of the municipality to protect and enhance its unique ecological features.

Although Caledon's Housing Study examined agricultural area policies, it did not include specific recommendations for the needs of farm families or farm labourers.⁴² The study did, however, highlight the higher rates of seniors living in rural areas of the municipality and the importance of housing options that would support aging-in-place. It also noted the limited availability of rental housing (only 8.1% of households are renters), which impact farm workers seeking local accommodations.

A significant portion of Caledon that is designated for growth is also Prime Agricultural Area lying outside the Greenbelt.⁴³ Development is primarily concentrated in its three Rural Services Centre settlements: Bolton, Caledon East, and Mayfield West. The OP also identifies potential for intensification in rural areas through secondary suites and other housing types on existing lots.⁴⁴

42. Town of Caledon. (n.d.). *Housing Study*. <https://www.caledon.ca/en/government/resources/Documents/council-town-administration/Caledon-Housing-Study.pdf> 43. Town of Caledon. (2024). *Official Plan, March 2024 office consolidation*. s. 2.2.2. <https://www.caledon.ca/en/town-services/resources/Business-Planning--Development/Policy/Official-Plan/April-1-OP-OCnsolidation/OP-Text-and-Maps-ACCESSIBLE.pdf>

44. Caledon OP, s. 4.2.1.1.

Caledon permits a second dwelling for full-time or seasonal farm workers, subject to approval by the Committee of Adjustments through a minor variance application.⁴⁵ Typically, this is allowed only on lots 39 hectares in size or larger, but exceptions are made for labour intensive farming operations, such as greenhouses, orchards, or livestock production. The second dwelling must be located within the existing farm cluster. Bunkhouses are permitted only on lots of at least six hectares and only as a temporary, mobile, or portable building, for seasonal use.⁴⁶ The OP also allows the severance of one retirement lot from a 40-hectare lot in the General Agricultural Area outside the Greenbelt.⁴⁷

In June 2023, an amendment was made to the ZBL to include new provisions for ARUs on residential lots aligning with the requirements of Bill 23, the *More Homes Built Faster Act, 2022*.⁴⁸

Collectively, these policies in Caledon aim to balance the housing needs of agricultural workers and ARUs, while preserving the agricultural use of the land and preventing unnecessary fragmentation or development of prime agricultural areas.

Hamilton

Hamilton is a single-tier municipality which has developed comprehensive policies to address the unique needs of both its urban and rural areas. In response to requests from local greenhouse operators, the City of Hamilton began a review of farm labour residence (FLR) policies in 2021.⁴⁹ This was followed by amendments to the Rural Hamilton OP in February 2024, which introduced new policies related to FLR and secondary dwelling units (SDUs) in the Rural Area.

Hamilton defines a SDU as a self-contained unit within a principal dwelling or a separate detached unit on the same lot but excludes FLRs.⁵⁰ In agricultural, rural, and settlement residential zones, SDUs are permitted on lots greater than 0.6 hectares, while detached SDUs are allowed on lots of at least 1.5 hectares outside the Greenbelt Protected Countryside.

Their policies also permit the establishment of one FLR without requiring a ZBL amendment, provided it is necessary for full-time farm labour due to the size and nature of the farm operation.⁵¹ This can take the form of an accessory apartment within the principal farm residence or a detached temporary dwelling, such as a mobile home or bunk house. A report justifying the need for on-site employee housing must be submitted to the City for approval. Temporary farm labour dwellings must be removed once they are no longer needed, as determined by the City.⁵²

As part of the FLR review, an OP was amended to remove a requirement for shared servicing with the principal farm residence to allow greater flexibility in the siting and size of FLR.⁵³

45. Caledon OP, s. 5.1.1.13. 46. Town of Caledon. (2023). *Zoning By-Law*. <https://www.caledon.ca/en/town-services/zoning.aspx>, s. 10.2; s.3-10. 47. Caledon OP, s. 5.1.2.6.1. 48. Town of Caledon. (2023). *Proposed Zoning By-law Amendment, Town of Caledon pertaining to changes from Bill 23*. <https://pub-caledon.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=32820>. Bill 23, the *More Homes Built Faster Act, 2022*, requires municipalities to allow up to three ARUs on full y-serviced urban residential lots, either within a detached, semi-detached, or rowhouse, and/or ancillary building. 49. City of Hamilton Planning Department. (2024, February 6). *Farm Labour Residences Discussion Paper* (PED22002(a)). <https://pub-hamilton.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=395945> 50. City of Hamilton. (2024, May). *Rural Hamilton Official Plan, Chapter G - Glossary*. p. 13. <https://www.hamilton.ca/sites/default/files/2024-06/rhop-volume1-chapterg-glossary-may2024.pdf> 51. City of Hamilton. (2024, May). *Rural Hamilton Official Plan, Chapter D – Rural Systems, Designations and Resources*. s. 2.1.1.6(a). https://www.hamilton.ca/sites/default/files/2024-06/rhop-volume1-chapterd-ruralsystemsdesignationsresources_may2024.pdf 52. City of Hamilton, *Rural Hamilton Official Plan*, s. 2.1.1.6(b)(i). 53. City of Hamilton Planning Department, *Farm Labour Residences Discussion Paper*.

Similar to Clarington, reviewed in the Durham Region case study, garden suites may be allowed through a temporary use by-law, provided they meet servicing requirements. The owner must also provide financial securities to the City to ensure the eventual removal of the garden suite after the temporary use by-law expires. Unlike Clarington, Hamilton's OP or ZBL does not restrict garden suites to individuals who are sick, elderly, or disabled, offering more flexibility to property owners.⁵⁴ However, due to potential servicing challenges, garden suites and SDUs are not currently permitted in the rural settlement areas of Carlisle, Greensville, Freelon, and Lynden.

Kingsville

The Town of Kingsville, located in Essex County in southwestern Ontario consists entirely of prime agricultural land. It is home to the largest concentration of greenhouses in North America and is situated outside of a settlement area, making it critical to manage growth in an orderly and balanced manner. To ensure the efficient use of municipal services, development is directed towards areas with adequate water supply and sanitary sewage disposal services. In areas with partial municipal services, development is more strictly regulated unless it can be satisfactorily demonstrated that a site is suitable for the long-term provision of such services.⁵⁵

Kingsville's Affordable Housing Strategy noted that seasonal farm workers at local greenhouses place additional pressure on the local rental market, which has a low vacancy rate and high number of households living in unaffordable housing (i.e., rental rate is above 30% of their gross income).⁵⁶ In August 2021, the Town passed an interim control by-law that restricted temporary farm workers from residing in any dwelling other than the farm where they worked until a housing study was completed.⁵⁷ In June 2022, the "Kingsville Temporary Farm Worker Housing Study – Final Report" was released.⁵⁸ One of its recommendations was to introduce a definition for Temporary Farm Worker Dwelling Unit, which would limit the number of temporary farm workers permitted in a dwelling.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission sent a letter to Kingsville Town Council, expressing concern that such rules were discriminatory towards migrant workers.⁵⁹ Regulating who can live in specific types of housing, often referred to as "people zoning", violates Ontario's *Human Rights Code*. This situation underscores the importance of considering ethical and legal obligations alongside land-use policies when assessing potential housing solutions.



54. City of Hamilton. (2024). Zoning By-law 05-200. <https://www.hamilton.ca/build-invest-grow/planning-development/zoning/zoning-by-law-05-200>

55. Town of Kingsville. (2023) *Official Plan*. <https://www.kingsville.ca/en/resourcesGeneral/Plans-and-Studies/official-plan-2023.pdf>, s. 3.1.2.8.

56. Kingsville Planning Services. (2019). *Affordable Housing Strategy*. <https://kingsville-pub.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=15685>, p. 6-7.

57. Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2022). *OHRC letter to Town of Kingsville on migrant worker housing*. https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/ohrc-letter-town-kingsville-migrant-worker-housing

58. Town of Kingsville. (2022, June). *Temporary Farm Worker Housing Study Final Report*. <https://kingsville-pub.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=27387>

59. OHRC, 2022.

Following revisions, a new by-law came into effect in January 2024, permitting the development and licensing of Boarding, Lodging, and Rooming Houses (BLRH) in residential and agricultural land use areas.⁶⁰ A BLRH is defined as a bedroom unit rented or provided to a tenant for a period of at least 28 days. BLRHs (Residential) are allowed wherever residential uses are permitted by the OP and can accommodate up to 10 occupants. BLRHs (Agricultural) are permitted in agricultural areas, with no limit on the number of occupants, though they are subject to site plan control. BLRHs must also provide amenity space, such as walking paths or sports fields. While access to amenities is not a requirement for other forms of Additional Dwelling Units (ADUs) or farm labour residences, for workers living on-site at a greenhouse facility, bicycle racks must be provided.⁶¹

Kingsville was the only municipality reviewed where the ZBL explicitly stated that medical marijuana production facilities are not considered an agricultural use, nor is temporary or permanent housing for those employed at these facilities.⁶² Mobile homes are primarily restricted to designated park areas, and the ZBL prohibits the use of mobile homes or RVs as living accommodations in agricultural zones.⁶³ The OP does allow for their use in some cases as temporary, supplementary, or on-site worker housing in agricultural areas.

In residential and agricultural zones, ADUs are permitted within single detached, semi-detached, and townhouse dwellings, with a maximum of two ADUs per lot, one of which may be located in an accessory building, such as a carriage house. ADUs must be secondary to the main residential use, cannot be severed from the primary dwelling, and must comply with building and fire code regulations. ADUs are prohibited in floodplains, other hazard areas, areas that do not meet Provincial flood-proofing standards, and properties with existing garden suites or other ancillary accommodations.

Zorra

Zorra is a rural municipality in Oxford County. It does not have a separate lower-tier Official Plan; instead, planning policies follow those outlined in the County of Oxford OP, tailored to Zorra's context through its ZBL. A bunk house is permitted for seasonal farm workers, but its use is restricted to no more than six months per calendar year, with the specific dates left up to the farm operator.⁶⁴

Garden suites, as defined in the Planning Act, are permitted, with a minimum gross floor area of 50m and maximum of 70m².⁶⁵ To place a garden suite on a lot, a zoning amendment is required, authorizing temporary use for up to ten years. Garden suites must be occupied by retired parents or grandparents of the lot owner, or by the retiring lot owner if the main dwelling is occupied by one of their children or grandchildren.

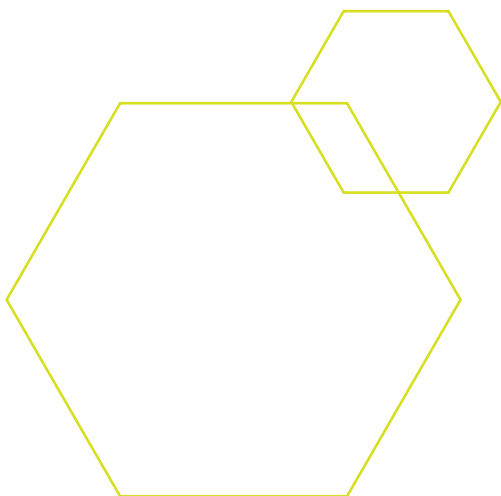
Accessory detached dwellings are permitted in agricultural zones, with up to two permitted in the Limited Agricultural Zone (A1)⁶⁶ and up to three in the General Agricultural Zone (A2)⁶⁷. These dwellings must have a minimum gross floor area of 93 square metres, which precludes the use of tiny homes or similar smaller, more affordable dwellings.

60. Town of Kingsville. (2024, January 8). *A By-law to License Boarding, Lodging, and Rooming Houses (BLRH) in the Town of Kingsville* (By-Law 3-2024). <https://forms.kingsville.ca/Licensing/Boarding-Lodging-Rooming-Houses> 61. In this report, the term *Additional Residential Unit (ARU)* is generally used, consistent with the terminology in the 2024 Provincial Planning Statement (PPS). However, some municipal planning documents refer to *Additional Dwelling Unit (ADU)*, and where that term is used in a specific municipal context, it has been retained here. 62. Town of Kingsville. (2023 consolidation). *Comprehensive Zoning By-Law 1-2014*. <https://www.kingsville.ca/en/town-hall/resources/bylaws/ZBL-1-2014-Consolidation-03-2023---Accessible.pdf>, s. 3.1.10. 63. Kingsville ZBL, s. 7.1(vi). 64. Oxford County. (2022). *Township of Zorra Zoning By-Law No. 35-99*. <https://www.oxfordcounty.ca/en/services-for-you/zorra.aspx#Zoning-By-Laws-Schedules>, s. 4.43. 65. Zorra ZBL, s. 5.10. 66. Zorra ZBL, s. 6.2.3. 67. Zorra ZBL, s. 7.2.4.



Definitions

Across the agricultural and housing sector there are a wide range of terms and definitions used by the Province and different municipalities. In the following section, relevant terms from the PPS 2024 and other terms from municipal documents that provide clarity for the research are provided.



Accommodations for Farm Labour

Each municipality used slightly different terminology to describe farm labour accommodations. The table below provides some of these definitions. For other municipalities, descriptive writing was used without a specific term. For example, the Durham ROP uses the phrase “second dwellings to accommodate persons employed full-time on the farm.”⁶⁸

Municipality	Source	Terminology	Definition
Caledon	OP, s. 5.1.1.13.1	Second Dwelling for Farm Help	A permanent or temporary ... accommodation [for] family or non-family farm help employed full-time by a bona fide farmer
Clarington	OP, s. 13.3.5	Farm Worker Dwelling	Temporary, mobile or portable farm worker dwellings... where the intensity of the farm operation warrants it... permitted on a farm for the purpose of accommodating persons employed full-time or seasonal on the farm
Essex	OP, s. 3.3.3.5	Accessory Farm Accommodation	For full-time or seasonal farm help where: a) The size and/or nature of the farm operations makes the employment of such help necessary; b) Such additional dwellings do not have a significant effect on the tillable area of the farm or its viability; c) Permitted in the local Official Plan; d) The lands are appropriately zoned..., [preferably] within temporary structures such as garden suites.
Hamilton	OP, ch. G	Farm Labour Residence	Secondary accommodations provided for full-time farm labour where the size and nature of the farm operation requires additional employment in the form of either of the following: a) An accessory apartment attached to and forming part of the principal farm residence; or b) An accessory detached dwelling of temporary construction, such as a mobile home or bunk house, located in close proximity to the farm cluster.
Niagara-on-The-Lake	ZBL, s. 5	Farm Help Accommodation	An accessory building, and may include a mobile home, containing proper sanitation facilities, for the use of housing seasonal agricultural employees, and is not used for year-round occupancy, by any employee.
South Huron	OP, s. 4.4.1(b)	Farm Labour Dwelling Unit	Accommodations for additional farm labourers if demonstrated to be required by the farm operation. The accommodations can take multiple forms and are not limited to temporary forms of housing, but must be located within close proximity to the building cluster.

68. Envision Durham, Regional Official Plan 2023, s. 6.4.1. <https://www.durham.ca/en/doing-business/resources/Documents/PlanningandDevelopment/Envision-Durham/Adopted-Durham-ROP.pdf>

Additional Residential Unit (ARU)

Also referred to as Additional Dwelling Unit (ADU) or Secondary Dwelling Unit. The Planning Act defines a “residential unit” as “a unit that, (a) consists of a self-contained set of rooms located in a building or structure, (b) is used or intended for use as residential premises, and (c) contains kitchen and bathroom facilities that are intended for the use of the unit only.”⁶⁹ An ARU is any unit beyond the primary unit that meets this definition. For some municipalities, such as Hamilton, accommodations for farm labour are specifically excluded from this definition.

Agricultural Uses

The PPS 2024 defines agricultural uses as “the growing of crops, including nursery, biomass, and horticultural crops; raising of livestock; raising of other animals for food, fur or fibre, including poultry and fish; aquaculture; apiaries; agro-forestry; maple syrup production; and associated on-farm buildings and structures, including, but not limited to livestock facilities, manure storages, value-retaining facilities, and housing for farm workers, when the size and nature of the operation requires additional employment.”⁷⁰ The PPS (2020) definition previously specified housing for full-time farm labour; most municipalities include this full-time requirement in their definitions for farm labour accommodations.

Agriculture-related Uses

The PPS 2024 defines agriculture-related uses as “those farm-related commercial and farm-related industrial uses that are directly related to farm operations in the area, support agriculture, benefit from being in close proximity to farm operations, and provide direct products and/or services to farm operations as a primary activity.”⁷¹

Agri-food Network

The PPS 2024 defines the agri-food network as “within the agricultural system, a network that includes elements important to the viability of the agri-food sector such as regional infrastructure and transportation networks; agricultural operations including on-farm buildings and primary processing; infrastructure; agricultural services, farm markets, and distributors; and vibrant, agriculture-supportive communities.”⁷²

Attainable Housing

The Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA) Task Force on Attainable Housing and Purpose-Built Rentals defines *attainable housing* as “housing that is adequate in condition (no major repairs needed), appropriate in size (bedrooms appropriate for household), reasonably priced (for lower and moderate-income households), and available (a range of housing options).”

Boarding House

Also referred to as lodging or rooming houses. Residents in these houses rent or are provided with a private bedroom and share bathroom and kitchen facilities with other residents. The Kingsville OP specifies that a rental term must be 28 days or longer and residents must be unrelated. Caledon caps a boarding house at four guest rooms, while Kingsville does not limit the number in agricultural zones.

69. Planning Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. P.13, s. 1(1). 70. MMAH. PPS 2024, s. 8, p. 39. 71. MMAH. PPS 2024, s. 8, p. 39. 72. MMAH. PPS 2020, s. 6, p. 40.

Bunkhouse

Caledon's ZBL defines "bunkhouse" as "a temporary, mobile or portable building, accessory to a farm, designed or used during the planting, growing or harvesting season, for the accommodation of agricultural workers and consisting of at least 1 bathroom and not fewer than 2 rooms providing therein living, dining and sleeping accommodation in appropriate individual or combination rooms. A bunkhouse shall not contain cooking facilities."

Garden Suite

The Planning Act defines a "garden suite" as "a one-unit detached residential structure containing bathroom and kitchen facilities that is ancillary to an existing residential structure and that is designed to be portable."⁷³

Intensive Farming

While some municipalities consider the labour-intensive nature of farming in allowing additional farm help dwellings, only the Kingsville ZBL specifically defined an intensive agricultural operation, as "any Agricultural Use consisting of ten or more nutrient units...but does not include a medical marijuana production facility."⁷⁴ Caledon's OP noted examples of labour-intensive operations included greenhouses, orchards, and livestock operations.

Residence Surplus to an Agricultural Operation

The PPS 2024 defines residence surplus to an agricultural operation as "one existing habitable detached dwelling, including any associated additional residential units, that are rendered surplus as a result of farm consolidation (the acquisition of additional farm parcels to be operated as one farm operation)."⁷⁵



73. Planning Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. P.13, s. 39.1(2). 74. Kingsville ZBL, s. 3.1.8. 75. MMAH. PPS 2024, s. 8, p. 51.

Key Findings

Historical shifts in agricultural land use have shaped current policies, evolving from early guidelines in the 1970s to the more detailed policy frameworks in place today. These policies have consistently sought to preserve agricultural land while allowing for controlled development. Challenges such as non-farm residential lots and the ongoing loss of agricultural land outside the Greenbelt have made achieving this balance more complicated. Reports and literature highlight the need for less restrictive land-use planning, financial incentives for rural housing development, and infrastructure investments to support housing in rural areas. Studies also reveal additional adverse effects of scattered rural residential development, which increases pollution, strains infrastructure, and reduces biodiversity. Effective land-use planning is essential to avoid these issues and ensure the sustainability of both rural communities and the agricultural sector.

The municipalities examined in this environmental scan have approached rural and agricultural housing needs in various ways through their OPs and ZBLs. Several terms were used to describe permanent or temporary housing for farm workers in the various municipal documents reviewed including Farm Labour Residence, Accessory Farm Residence, Farm Help Dwelling, and several other terms. While the terminology varied, the underlying meaning was largely the same, with only minor exceptions where specific time frames were provided to clarify what was meant by “seasonal.”

The following chapters of this report will detail case studies from Niagara Region, Durham Region and Huron County, which will provide a more in-depth examination of the issues faced by farmers and municipalities in developing appropriate housing for rural and agricultural areas.



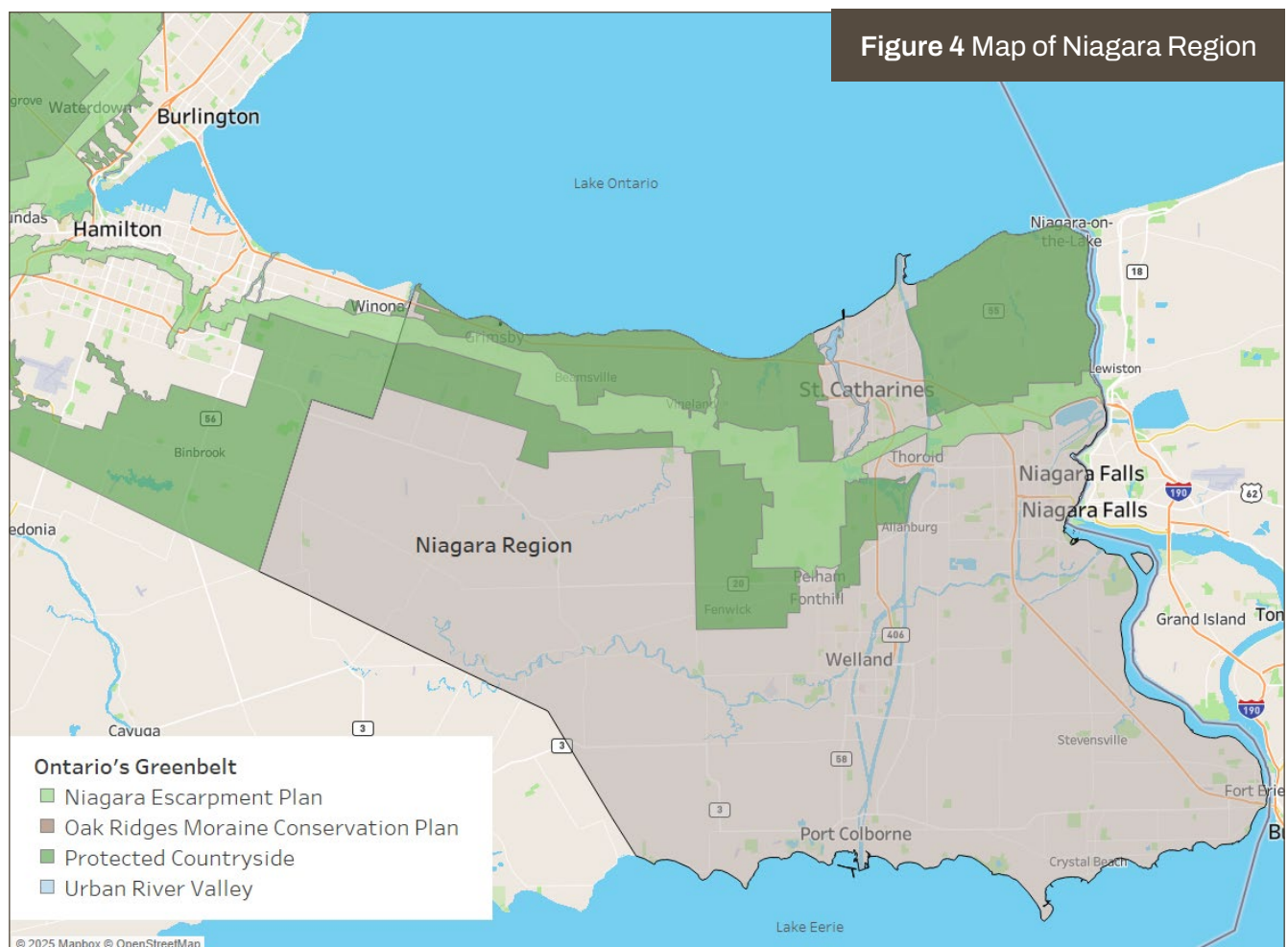


3

Niagara Region

Introduction

The Niagara Region is home to some of Canada's most specialized agricultural lands. Bound by Lake Ontario, Lake Erie, the Niagara River and neighbouring municipalities of Hamilton and Haldimand (Figure 4), the region benefits from a unique microclimate that supports outstanding opportunities for tender fruit and grape production (especially in the area sandwiched between Lake Ontario and the Niagara Escarpment). Niagara Region's agricultural sector is diverse, with floriculture, nurseries, fruits and vegetables, field crops, livestock and poultry, all being major contributors to the Region's agricultural economy.



Niagara Region has also experienced significant growth pressures. In 2021, the Region's population was 477,904, including the two largest cities of St. Catharines (136,805) and Niagara Falls (94,415), one of the top tourist destinations in North America. Growth pressures have led to farmland loss over decades. Provincial and regional policies, such as the Foodland Guidelines (1978) and the Greenbelt Plans, have played a major role in reducing the loss of tender fruit and grape lands.

Niagara hosts 1,651 farms,⁷⁶ generating \$930 million in farm cash receipts (2021). Major farm categories include 480 fruit and tree nut farms, 342 oilseed and grain farms, 210 greenhouse, nursery and floriculture farms, and 162 poultry and egg farms, among others. In 2023, 70% of farms in the region did not employ workers, though some crops such as peaches and grapes are labour-intensive and require housing. In the crop production category, 336 farms had employees and 711 did not; likewise, in animal production and aquaculture, 317 farms did not have employees, while 109 farms did. The number of employees on certain farms is significant, with 40 farms having more than 50 employees (see Table 1).⁷⁷

While Niagara's economy is diverse, the role of agriculture is significant. Local land values and farmland prices can vary significantly,⁷⁸ but interviews with farmers indicated that tender fruit lands can reach values as high as \$100,000 per acre, reflecting the premium placed on land suitable for high-demand crops.

This case study is built on information coming from numerous sources including municipal plans, by-laws and related documents, and interviews with key informants. Key informants included a provincial planner, a regional and single-tier planner from Niagara-on-the-Lake, three farmers/farm organization representatives, and an expert in mortgages and lending.

Why Niagara Region and Niagara-on-the-Lake Were Selected as a Case Study

Niagara's combination of fertile soil and a favourable climate positions it as a leader in various agricultural categories, while also facing intense urbanization pressures putting it at the forefront of agricultural land preservation. The Niagara Peninsula Tender Fruit and Grape Area is one of only two Specialty Crop Areas in the Greenbelt Plan (Section 3.1.2) and provides the highest provincial protection to agricultural lands, prohibiting urban expansion and allowing only agricultural uses and limited on-farm development to preserve these lands for high-value crops. Including crops such as peaches, cherries, plums, grapes, and other specialty crops, Niagara contributes over 80% of Ontario's grape and peach acreage.

Table 1

Farms in Niagara by Number of Employees

Total Farms	1473
Without Employees	1028
With Employees	445
1-4	198
5-9	73
10-19	69
20-49	65
50-99	22
100-199	15
200-499	3
500+	0

76. There are differences in the way the census (2021) and Total Primary Agriculture (Business Location Counts - 2023) are tabulated. For example, farms with under \$7,000 of annual gross farm income are not required to register their farm businesses and so are not included in business count data.

77. Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs [OMAFRA]. (2024, March 22). *South - Niagara. Ontario business, agri-food, and farm data profiles*. <https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/ontario-farm-data-by-county> 78. In this OFA study (https://ofa.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/ONFVRVS_AnnualReport_2023.pdf) \$15,000 per acre is reported for general cropland in Niagara. Specialized agricultural land, like tender fruit land, which is in high demand, typically fetches much higher prices.

A municipal planner emphasised Niagara-on-the-Lake's (NOTL) agricultural diversity:

"From a planning perspective, we consistently are receiving applications for on-farm diversified uses, for existing agricultural uses, as well as the establishment of new wineries and new estate wineries. [Our] agriculture really lends itself to tender fruits. We have some greenhouse operations and then we also have a number of wineries. Feeding off of all of our valuable farmland and all of our vineyards, we support a number of wineries within the town, and then we also support wineries across the rest of the region [by] providing grapes."

NOTL is located east of St. Catharines and west of New York State and was selected for a more detailed analysis of local planning documents. All rural lands in the municipality are designated as a part of the Specialty Crop Area under the Greenbelt Plan, as it is one of the few areas in Canada with the conditions needed to grow tender fruit.⁷⁹ In 2021, NOTL possessed 54.9% (2,530 acres) of the province's entire peach crop acreage and 49.4% (9,102 acres) of total grape acreage.



79. Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake. (2019). *Official Plan*. <https://www.notl.com/sites/default/files/2022-06/Official%20Plan%20Text%20-%20August%2015%202019.pdf>, s.2.1.5. 80. OMAFRA, 2024, March 22. S 81. Niagara Economic Development. (n.d.). *Niagara's Agri-Business Sector*. <https://niagaracanada.com/key-sectors/agri-business>

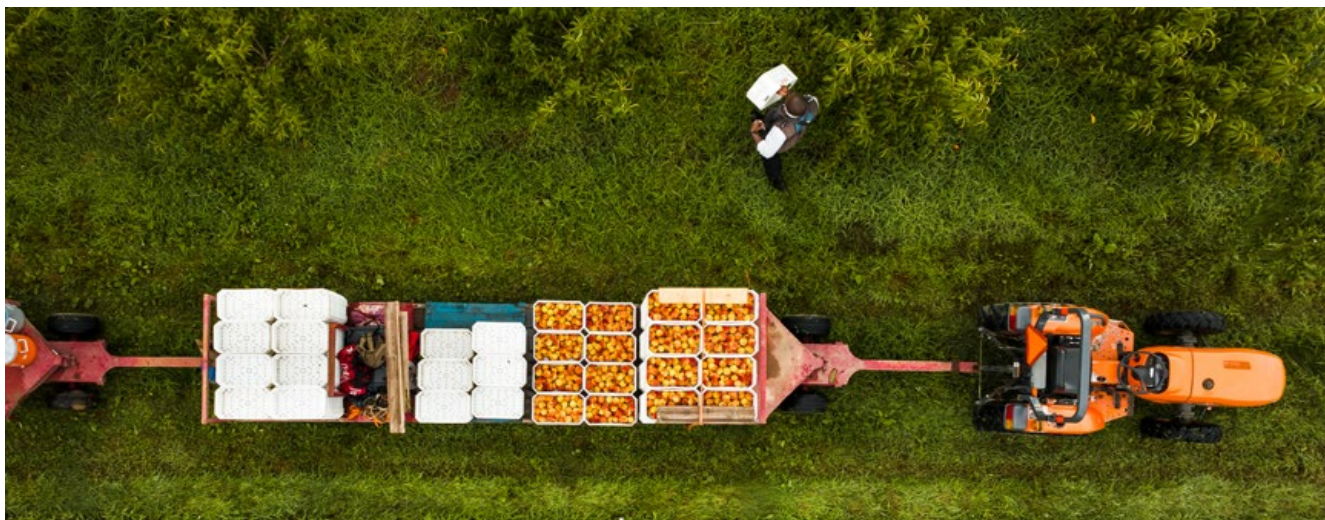
Perspectives on Housing: An Agricultural Lens

Niagara Region possesses one of the most diverse agricultural economies in the province, including a multitude of products, farm types, and supporting services and employment opportunities. The high concentration of fruit, vegetables and floriculture leads to a strong reliance on seasonal farm labour, and in turn, a significant demand for housing. Beyond its 1,473 farms (30% with employees), there are 4,522 agri-food businesses, 2,512 of which employ workers in food processing and other agricultural services.⁸⁰ This sector is a significant contributor to the economy and employment. According to reports,⁸¹ Niagara's agri-food businesses employ over 24,000 people, representing a 21% increase since 2016. As a farm organization representative noted "it is not a one-sized fits all" approach to agricultural policy in Niagara Region and this certainly applies to housing for workers on farms and for agri-food businesses.

... "it is not a one-sized fits all" approach to agricultural policy in Niagara Region and this certainly applies to housing for workers on farms and for agri-food businesses.

Fruit and Vegetable Production, Temporary Labour and Housing

Fruit, vegetable and floriculture production is labour intensive. While large scale equipment can help a grain and oilseeds farmer manage thousands of acres, an operation with a greenhouse or orchard may require dozens, if not hundreds, of employees.⁸² Historically, these farms have relied on seasonal workers and increasingly these workers participate in Canada's labour force as Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs). It is difficult to have a discussion in Niagara about agriculture and housing without encountering this reality. As one small-scale vineyard operator observed, they typically employ five seasonal workers, but in response to recent disease pressures, they had 47 additional workers employed through an agency to provide extra help over a short time period.



82. Over half of TFW in Ontario for example (13,360 TFW; 51.7% of Ontario total) were employed in greenhouse, nursery and floriculture production in 2021 (Statistics Canada. [2024]. *Temporary foreign workers in the agriculture and agri-food sectors, by industry*. <https://doi.org/10.25318/3210021801-eng>).

This reliance on TFWs in the fruit and vegetable sector is likely to remain for the foreseeable future. Projections from the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC) and the Conference Board of Canada estimate a 28.2% increase or 7,282 new TFW positions in Ontario by 2030.⁸³

Succession Planning, and Impact of Land Values on Young Farmers

Historically, farms have transitioned from one generation to the next through some form of succession planning. While the farm sector has continued to evolve through increasing corporate structures, approximately 97% are family-owned entities.⁸⁴ In this context, it is not surprising that land values, related housing costs and the future of agriculture were discussed by a number of interviewees.

In Niagara Region, land values vary by location and intended use, but in all instances the purchase of land for agricultural purposes is expensive and as noted by one farmer high land costs make it almost prohibitive for a young person or new farmers to enter the industry: *“A young person barely has the ability to build up enough to pay a car out in cash, and at land values of between \$50-\$100,000 per acre the margins that can support these payments are really difficult.”* While some may look to severances as a way to assist with land acquisition, this same farmer was concerned with the impact of severances for residential purposes, which drives up agricultural land values:

“There’s a house on a severed lot that was right across the road that was listed at \$950,000 and I think it sold for \$865,000. You know, we’re in Niagara-on-the-Lake and building lots are between [\$600,000] and \$800,000 per acre even in the rural area. I think that there’s nothing but negativity around the value of land in general making it prohibitive to enter into agriculture.”

It is a cyclical dilemma: while severances can help finance farmland, they simultaneously drive-up farmland costs due to speculative value in lot sales, and introduce non-farm interests into agricultural communities. The end result is often detrimental to agriculture’s long-term viability and does little to promote reasonably priced housing. The compatibility between newly severed residential lots and the existing agricultural community was raised as a concern. As a NOTL planner said:

“There is some concern in terms of the surplus farm dwelling severances, especially with people moving to those lots who might not necessarily be used to normal farm practices. I do think that the severance of those residential dwellings can lead to compatibility concerns if you do not have a full understanding of typical operations in the area. We have bird bangers, and people are spraying on their properties and other normal farm practices that I do think that some people have concerns with when they move to a one-acre lot and have not previously been exposed to living in a more agricultural environment.”

For decades the Province and many municipalities have worked to limit severances within agricultural areas and for the most part they have been successful.⁸⁵ The one type of residential severance that continues to be allowed on prime agricultural land under provincial policy and most municipal Official Plans are severances for surplus farm dwellings. This continues to be a point of debate amongst planners, farmers, farm organizations and municipal councils.

83. CAHRC. (2024). *ONTARIO Agriculture labour market information and forecast 2023-2030*. https://cahrc-ccrha.ca/sites/default/files/2024-03/ProvON-Factsheet_2024-EN.pdf 84. Agriculture in the Classroom Canada. (n.d.). *snapAG Farming Basics*. https://aitc-canada.ca/Portals/0/adam/snapAG/NXB4dC_Ycky5ZUR-UKT3Q/Link/Today%27s%20Farm%20ENG.pdf 85. Caldwell et al. (n.d.). *Lot Creation in Ontario’s Agricultural Landscape*. <https://www.waynecaldwell.ca/projects/lot-creation/>

Housing Affordability, Availability and Financing

The provision of housing on farms and in the broader rural community is a concern in Niagara as it is elsewhere in the province. Housing for seasonal workers is critical but requires its own policy framework. Housing for the broader farm community also remains a conundrum. Farm parcels typically are allowed a primary residence and most have a historic farmhouse. In this respect many farms have an adequate supply of housing, however, issues of affordability and housing for the broader rural community and family members is a concern. As a Niagara Region planner reflected:

“Local realtors report an unprecedented number of houses for sale in Niagara, yet they are largely unattainable for the average buyer, leading to a shortage of housing that aligns with local income levels in both urban and rural areas. Rural hamlets,⁸⁶ in particular, have become highly desirable, with prices exceeding those in urban areas. Recently, growers have increasingly purchased farms with existing houses, applying for severances on surplus residences to offset land costs. However, these homes rarely remain farm residences, as farmers often cannot afford to keep them as housing for farm labour.”

Affordable or attainable housing is an issue for farm families, farm workers, new entrants into agriculture, and the broader rural community. One farmer suggested that there should be a one-time grant in support of new housing on farms. His belief was that grants would incentivise construction of new homes, however, he also realized the challenges of ensuring that this supported farms and not the broader non-farm community. The notion of ARUs on farms has been promulgated by provincial policy as a means to create more affordable housing but remains a point of discussion in Niagara. As the NOTL planner noted:

“We don’t have policies right now that would allow for additional dwelling units outside of the urban area boundary. We have received a number of inquiries from people looking to have secondary dwelling units that might not be considered seasonal farm help, and they would require amendments to our policies. Even though the Greenbelt plan does have some permissions for secondary dwelling units, we haven’t updated our policies at this point. So that’s something that some homeowners are up against. Alternatively, we do have some policies in our zoning that permits additional dwelling units for seasonal farm help and requiring a minimum acreage of land in order to have more housing on that property. We have limitations.”



86. In Niagara, all hamlets are in “rural areas” (PPS definition). Further to this, the Regional Official Plan section 2.2 states: “Settlement areas are comprised of both urban areas, which include built-up areas, designated greenfield areas and strategic growth areas, as well as rural settlements, otherwise known as hamlets.”

While the opportunity to establish ARUs has been pursued elsewhere in Ontario (see for example the Huron Case Study) it remains a point of debate for many municipalities within the Niagara Region and the Greenbelt more broadly. The following quote from the NOTL planner demonstrates the opportunities and challenges associated with this form of development:

"I would have some concerns if there's permissions for new additional buildings (dwellings), unless there are additional criteria related to the need to cluster those buildings closer together, to have some sort of consideration for not taking additional lands out of agricultural production. As we know, [with] a lot of farm parcels, at the front, they'll have the house, and then there's manicured lawn all around there that's not used for agricultural purposes but for amenity space. I [would] try to balance the impact if there was an additional unit or an additional structure, but it's located in the manicured lawn area, what is the net impact to the overall agricultural system."

While policies allowing for ARUs on farms provide an avenue for new housing in agricultural areas, the perspective of a recently retired branch and regional credit union manager is of interest. He reflected on a situation where:

"A dairy farmer had been on the farm forever and ever. So, the oldest son was working on the farm as well. With his family there, they were able to build the second house on the farm for Mom and Dad to move into, and so they shared the driveway, but the relationship got so adversarial between Mom and Dad and the son because the parents didn't want to give up control. I don't think he got possession until both parents had passed."

This quote highlights the challenges that can occur where the second dwelling has no option but to be bound to the ownership of the farm. He went on to describe another situation:

"Where a farm family and one of the kids wanted to build a dog kennel on the farm property and they needed to finance the construction. Mom and Dad owned the property. So, in that case, they need to sign on. They're part of the mortgage and they're on the hook just as much as the child. The son and his wife split up. They got divorced. It was massive but the parents got sucked into it because they're on title. And then you also have to look if the payments can be supported? ...Who owns it, because the kids are building on property owned by mom and dad. The kids don't bring that unless there's something written up in agreement or you get severance. But that's where the complication comes."

These thoughts serve to highlight the challenges that can occur with units built on a property without a separate title. While it will work in many situations, there will be situations where due to some unforeseen personal situation (illness, death, changing jobs, divorce, family conflict, etc.) someone will find that the house they occupied (and perhaps thought of as theirs) is suddenly not available to them.

Housing for Agri-food Business Employees

Agri-food businesses are an essential component of the agricultural system.⁸⁷ In Niagara, the agricultural industry relies on a diversity of services ranging from truck drivers to veterinarians to food processors. Parallel to this, there is a range of services required by the general public, including, among many others, health care, education, retail and municipal services that also serve farm families. This is all part of the agricultural system and each of the employees engaged in these related sectors require housing.

The provision of housing for the agri-business sector is important. Generally, this housing has been provided in existing settlement areas as part of the housing requirements of the general population. While the occasional employee may live on a rural property (a severed lot or potentially an ARU) the focus of municipal and provincial policy has been to encourage this housing within settlement areas. In the words of the NOTL Planner:

"I have concerns with providing additional housing in the agricultural area, because that's not the focus of our intensification. We should be sticking to our urban boundaries and not intensifying outside of that." She goes on to note: "a number of our urban areas are slated for additional growth. We do have space for growth in pretty much all of our urban settlement areas, so we do have a large amount of subdivisions coming forward, and more intensification." From these observations, policy needs to facilitate the development of attainable housing within towns and villages across the Region.

87. Caldwell, W. (2015). *The Agricultural System: Components, Linkages, and Rationale*. https://www.greenbelt.ca/agricultural_system_report_2015



Policy Considerations

Housing Needs and Planning Policies

Planners from Niagara Region and NOTL acknowledged barriers to meeting agricultural housing needs, including cost, policies, and zoning. While costs largely reflect market factors like construction, land values also play a role. Discussions with area farmers and planners suggest that housing availability isn't a constraint on agricultural development; farm labour housing for TFWs is generally accommodated under existing policies in Niagara.

The planner for NOTL had two key observations related to housing:

"The first is the surplus farm dwelling severance - we continue to have at least a couple of those every month on our Committee of Adjustment agendas for severing off that existing residential dwelling. We do receive a lot of building permit applications for more seasonal help accommodations that are typically provided in the form of a trailer or a mobile situation. In most situations, all of those are located in clusters. So, they're located around existing buildings. They're not scattered throughout and a lot of times, a lot of the workers that are within those housing options, they contribute to multiple different agricultural operations. There might be housing [in] a couple of different areas, but those workers might not ... be working under one operation, they could contribute to multiple farms."

Policy that allows for severances is a point of on-going discussion. While residential severances in the countryside are largely limited to the severance of surplus dwellings, they contribute to escalating farm values and alter the farm/non-farm composition of the countryside.

Location of Housing

As noted earlier, TFWs make key contributions in the production of certain agricultural sectors and in turn require housing. While there was universal recognition of the need for this housing, there were differences of opinion as to where the housing should be located – should it be on farms or integrated into existing urban areas? From the perspective of a farm organization representative, the housing needs to be on farms. Conversely, the regional planner identified some benefits associated with integrating farm worker housing into urban communities:

"There's a lot of benefit to the urban piece, in terms of housing labour in a more complete community, where there's access to transit and access to amenities that don't involve riding your bicycle down an 80 kilometre an hour road in the dark of the night, to travel back and forth between the farm and the urban area. So, there's benefits to it, [and] there's also transportation drawbacks to it. It's an interesting trend, and we've talked about more of an edge planning context, if labour accommodation might be something that locates itself or could be directed to the fringe area of that urban, rural, boundary, if there could be a benefit to directing uses like that or greenhouses to that periphery where they provide access to urban amenities, while providing a transitional buffer between urban and rural uses."

Protecting Farmland and Farmers

The importance of protecting farmland was raised in every interview. Some also pointed to the importance of protecting farmer livelihoods, equity and businesses. Farm workers and the larger rural agri-food sector are also part of this equation. This creates an interesting lens, because it is not just about protecting farmland for its' productive capacity but also limiting conflict in the countryside and in turn protecting the farmer's ability to make a living.

Housing in agricultural areas has both positive and negative aspects. It provides homes for those living and working on farms, however, it can also contribute to the housing stock for non-farm residents. This has at least two impacts on agriculture: it consumes land that could otherwise be used for agricultural production, and it introduces residential interests into what is a busy, working, and at times industrial, agricultural landscape.

Housing that Addresses the Needs of the Broader Rural Sector

As noted earlier, agriculture is dependant on a range of agri-food business and community services, all reliant on employees with corresponding housing needs. With limited opportunity for housing in prime agricultural areas, policy has directed this development to settlement areas where a range of services and housing types are typically available. The Greenbelt report "Growing Close to Home: Creating Complete Rural Communities", provides a useful framework in its discussion of "complete communities."⁸⁸ This report notes the importance of restricting development in agricultural areas, while building opportunities in urban centers:

*"Many rural Greenbelt municipalities have created or are in the process of creating policies and zoning by-laws that permit and encourage higher densities, diverse housing types, and mixed-use areas in order to provide more housing options for residents. To attain more affordable housing options, many municipalities are permitting and encouraging the development of secondary and garden suites. They are also looking at opportunities for intensification and infill to make better use of land, and reduce dependency on greenfield developments for accommodating new population growth."*⁸⁹

The report provides further thoughts on a complete community: "This is what a complete community looks like: a vibrant, compact, walkable place with retail and services, transportation options, housing diversity, employment, public service facilities, and protected natural spaces and agricultural lands. Complete communities are economically more robust, improve residents' health, and are more resilient to the impacts of climate change."⁹⁰ Such communities provide easy access to services, attract businesses, offer diverse housing for all ages and incomes, efficiently use existing infrastructure, support active and public transportation, and protect natural heritage and agricultural lands by preventing scattered development.

This thinking is consistent with the perspective of both the NOTL and Regional planner. The Regional planner for example notes that a complete community can provide "access to transit and access to amenities." Both planners see development in urban settlement areas offering diverse housing options that can help to protect agricultural lands.

88. Shortly, A. (2020). *Growing Close to Home: Creating Complete Rural Communities*. https://www.greenbelt.ca/complete_communities

89. Shortly, 2020, p. 17. 90. Shortly, 2020, p. 9.



Region of Niagara's Existing Policies

The Region of Niagara's first Regional OP was approved in 1973 (following the creation of the Region in 1970). The Regional OP interprets and implements provincial policy through a Niagara lens and guides local planning. While the future of regional planning in Niagara is under transition⁹¹ the Regional OP (adopted in 2022 and consolidated in 2024⁹²) continues to be a relevant planning document. Planning in Niagara is also guided by the Niagara Escarpment Plan, the Greenbelt Plan and the PPS.

Within Niagara there are 12 local (lower-tier) municipalities, both urban and rural. To develop an understanding of lower-tier planning policies (including zoning provisions) the Town of NOTL has been selected for further analysis.

Provincial Direction

The PPS (2024) and Greenbelt Plan play an important role in Niagara Region. Official Plans need to be consistent with the PPS and conform with the Greenbelt Plan:

- Municipal plans within the Greenbelt must conform to the Greenbelt Plan, giving higher priority to farmland protection, urban expansion control, and natural heritage compared to areas outside its jurisdiction.
- Both the Greenbelt Plan and PPS designate the Tender Fruit Lands of the Niagara Escarpment as Specialty Crop Areas, which receive the highest protection among Ontario's agricultural lands, prohibiting settlement expansion.
- Both plans permit Farm Residences, Farm Worker Housing, and ARUs.⁹³

The impact of these provincial policies is evident in the comments of the regional planner. He observes that "communities in Lincoln or Grimsby, they've got hard boundaries around the urban area put in place by the Greenbelt." He goes on noting that:

"I support the idea of the land base being preserved for agriculture and so the housing that is permitted through those provincial plans, through regional plans and local plans, is very much focused on farms that are aimed at active agriculture, and whether that's traditional farmstead farmhouses, or whether that's farm help houses, it's really a focus on keeping the housing stock in the rural area for agricultural use. The restrictions around lot creation limit rural residential properties that aren't beneficial to agriculture. So, there's that protection piece in place."

91. In November 2022, the Province announced changes to the *Planning Act* that would identify certain upper-tier municipalities, including Niagara Region, as "upper-tier municipalities without planning responsibilities". This will eventually change the planning relationships and functions within Niagara Region. 92. Niagara Region. (2024, May consolidation). *Making Our Mark: Niagara Official Plan*. <https://www.niagararegion.ca/official-plan/pdf/2022-niagara-official-plan.pdf> 93. Farm Residences are allowed under section 4.3.2.4 of the PPS and under section 4.5.2 and the definition of Agricultural Uses within the Greenbelt Plan; Farm Worker Housing is allowed under the definition of Agricultural Uses in both the PPS and Greenbelt Plan and Additional Residential Units are permitted under Section 4.3.2.5 of the PPS and Section 4.5.3 of the Greenbelt Plan (it should be noted that the PPS allows up to 2 additional residential units with one potentially located in a separate structure. In the case of the Greenbelt Plan a second dwelling unit must be within an existing residence or within an existing accessory structure).

Official Plan Policy

The Regional OP (2022) provides a supportive framework for agriculture. It encourages agricultural development and restricts non-farm uses in the countryside. Most development is directed to urban areas (Section 2.2), intensification targets are established for urban areas (Section 2.2.1.1), rural settlements shall be the focus of development outside urban area boundaries (Section 2.2.3.2), and Local Area Municipalities shall permit up to two ARUs as-of-right within new or existing residential development (Section 2.3.3.2). These and many other criteria direct urban development to urban centers, encouraging intensification and serving to protect farmlands.

Agricultural policies are provided in Section 4.1 of the Regional OP, “The Agricultural System.” These policies are detailed and provide a framework for agricultural development. In terms of housing, provisions are included for temporary accommodations:

- 4.1.7.2 Temporary accommodation for seasonal or full-time farm labour may be permitted where:
- a. the size and/or nature of the agricultural operations make the employment of such help necessary;
 - b. such temporary accommodation does not have a significant effect on the tillable area of the agricultural operation or its viability; and
 - c. the severance of a temporary accommodation for seasonal or full-time farm labour is not permitted.

In addition, the definition of agricultural uses includes housing for farm workers, when the size and nature of the operation requires additional employment (PPS, 2024).

The OP and ZBL for NOTL provide a more detailed framework specific to this municipality. While both are dated (the ZBL was adopted in 1974), there have been amendments through the years. A municipal planner noted that some areas do not comply with provincial or regional policy:

“The last consolidation of our OP was in 2017, and we did have a proposed OP around 2019. It was adopted by town council, but it was never approved by Niagara Region, so it doesn't have any status. Our OP is outdated under our severance section; it does permit a retirement lot. There are some very outdated policies. We are working on the OP compliance review in the background, ensuring that the 2019 OP adopted by town council is updated to conform with all provincial and regional direction. In general, there is quite a bit of work that needs to go into our OP. We don't have terminology for agriculture-related or on-farm diversified uses, and oftentimes our OP conflicts with OMAFRA guidelines and general policies contained within provincial regional plans.”

While the challenge of keeping planning documents current is shared by other municipalities across the province, it does speak to issues of resourcing and the numerous requirements placed on municipalities related to rapidly evolving provincial policy.

The current NOTL OP still provides important guidance for housing and agriculture. In addition to the farm residence, section 7.3.1 permits farm help houses and additional farm dwellings for seasonal or full-time farm help.

Section 7.4.3(c) Additional Dwellings of the NOTL OP provides further direction:

“All farm holdings may have accommodation for full-time and seasonal labourers. If a residence is required to provide accommodation for full-time farm help or seasonal farm help, the dwelling units providing accommodation shall be permitted as part of a farm unit where the nature of the farm is such that help needs to be located nearby.

Zoning By-law Amendment applications for additional farm-related dwelling units, shall be evaluated having regard for the type of farm operation, other holdings of the operator, the suitability of the location of the dwelling units as to adjacent land uses, access, number of units, etc.

Additional permanent and portable dwellings may be permitted without severance for full time farm help.”

NOTL Zoning Provisions

The NOTL ZBL provides detailed criteria that regulates development and implements the policies established within the NOTL OP:

Section 3.17 of the NOTL ZBL provides the following criteria:

(b) In a Rural (A) Zone where a lot has an area of at least 8.09 hectares (20 acres) and is used only for farming, one additional dwelling may be erected, altered or maintained and for each additional 20.24 hectares (50 acres) used only for farming, one further additional dwelling may be erected, altered or maintained; providing that such additional dwelling shall be used only for the accommodation of persons necessary to the operation of such farm on a full- time basis. (By-law 500GD-91)

While this size-based criteria may benefit larger farms, the type and intensity of farming operations may dictate labour needs differently from the size of the lot. Further, the definition of farm (2.3.1) “includes a farm dwelling and accessory buildings, where such accessory buildings may include accommodation for seasonal farm workers.” A definition for Help Accommodation (2.39A) is also included in the by-law and: “means a structure for the housing of seasonal farm employees between the months of March 15th to November 15th in any year, but in no event shall be used for year round occupancy. (By-law 500GD-91)”

NOTL land use planning policies (OP and ZBL) appear to address the needs for agricultural housing. Farm residences and accommodations for seasonal agricultural workers are permitted. The policies do not appear to allow for the development of non-farm residences, including ARUs in agricultural areas, although the severance of surplus dwellings and retirement lots are included in the OP. Discussions with the municipal planner confirmed that while severances of surplus dwellings are a regular occurrence, landowners are not applying for retirement lot severances.

Region of Niagara: Key Takeaways

Niagara's policies aim to balance growth with farmland protection. While the Region accommodates housing for seasonal workers, further provincial guidance is needed. Questions remain on optimal housing locations, structural allowances and transportation needs.

The protection of farmland is crucial for maintaining a viable agricultural industry. Niagara must also support young farmers by addressing succession planning challenges and housing affordability. Ultimately, strengthening settlement areas as complete communities will relieve pressure on agricultural lands.

The following provides greater insights from the interviews and literature review for this case study.

Housing and Temporary Farm Workers

Many farms in NOTL are heavily reliant on TFWs. Across the region, 30% of all farms have employees and, in the fruit, vegetable, and floriculture sector, many farms are reliant on manual labour. This labour requires housing and is typically accommodated in bunkhouses and mobile structures. While local, regional and provincial policy provide a framework that seems to adequately address these housing needs, further direction from the Province is required, especially for farms reliant on many temporary workers. Sample issues to address include: How much farm housing should be placed on a single farm? What type of structures should be allowed? How should this development be integrated on the farm or should it be directed to settlement areas? How should transportation and other related services be addressed?

While there are benefits to locating this housing in neighbouring settlement areas, farmers may prefer on farm locations. Further work in this area would be helpful.

On-farm Housing and Services

On-farm housing creates implications for access to transportation, transit and amenities. Sometimes workers travel between farms and sometimes workers travel to neighbouring urban services. It can also impact pedestrian and cycling activity on busy roads with related safety issues. Where on-farm housing is prevalent, municipal staff need to plan for these aspects as well.

Additional Residential Units

ARUs (i.e., allowing up to one ARU in the Greenbelt and two ARUs elsewhere) on farms have not been embraced by the Region or NOTL. While this may be a function of timing, discussions with planners, farmers and lenders point to certain challenges, which are outlined above. Additional non-farm residential uses in the countryside raise compatibility concerns with agriculture. More fundamentally, there are practical issues over lending and ownership connected to these units that would benefit from further discussion and reflection.

Resource Challenges in a Busy Municipality

Not only is NOTL home to the largest and most concentrated production of peaches and grapes in the province, but there are also more than 35 wineries. In addition, the urban settlement of NOTL is an incredibly popular tourist destination. All this development and development pressure combined with rapidly evolving provincial policies and provincial plans makes it challenging at a municipal level to keep pace with this level of activity. The result is that planning documents can become dated and fall out of sync with provincial and regional direction. Clearly, there is a need to update municipal documents to ensure compliance with provincial and regional policies. There may also be a need for additional resources (provincial/municipal) to complete this work.

Protection of Farmland and Farmers

Niagara's agricultural resources (especially those below the escarpment) are unique in Ontario and in Canada because of location and climate. Continued protection of these resources is paramount. The loss of agricultural land can occur as a result of settlement area expansion, but also as a result of severance activity and other forms of scattered non-farm development. While housing is important, the special agricultural lands of Niagara were recognized by farmers and planners as a resource requiring long-term protection. In this context, farmers pointed to the protection of the industry itself. Without viable farms supporting farmers, farm workers and agri-business, the protection of farmland on its own doesn't lead to a vibrant, viable agricultural industry.

Support for Young Farmers Needed

The price of farmland and the price of housing are ongoing challenges for those wanting to enter the agricultural sector. Succession planning is difficult for farm families. While there is debate concerning how best to proceed, the general consensus of those interviewed is that protecting farmland is essential. This means limiting urban encroachment into prime agricultural areas. It means restricting non-farm severance activity and it means developing and supporting new farm entrants.

Urban Settlement Areas and Complete Communities

Niagara's towns, villages and larger urban centers have a critical role to play in accommodating the housing needs of those employed on farms, in agri-food business and within the broader rural economy. These settlement areas offer a range of amenities, housing options and services that make them desirable places to live. While housing is expensive, municipal and provincial policy through as-of-right zoning, increased density and diverse housing requirements can help to increase the supply of housing, while improving affordability.

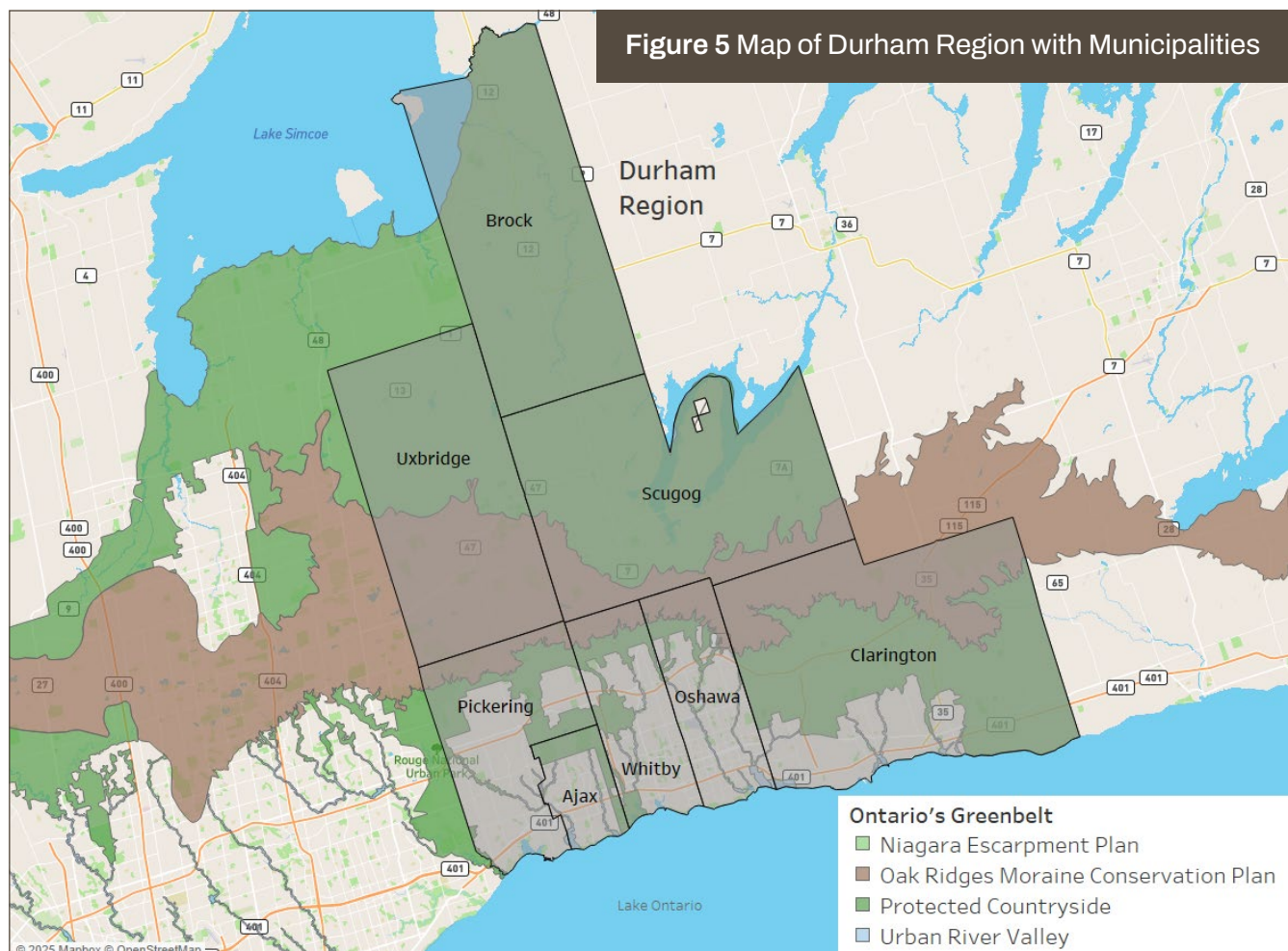


Durham Region

Introduction

The Region of Durham, located in southern Ontario, is a dynamic area experiencing significant population and housing growth while maintaining a strong agricultural and agri-food industry. Falling within both the GTA and the GGH, the region consists of eight municipalities listed in order of population: City of Oshawa, Town of Whitby, Town of Ajax, Municipality of Clarington, City of Pickering, Township of Scugog, Township of Uxbridge and Township of Brock (Figure 5). As of 2021, the populations of these municipalities range from 12,567 in Brock to 175,383 in Oshawa, reflecting the diverse contexts within the region and need for appropriate policy frameworks.

The majority of lands within Durham Region are located within the Greenbelt, encompassing large areas of 'Protected Countryside' and the ORM (see Figure 1). The policy framework aligns with these Greenbelt Plans while also accommodating substantial growth along the region's southern border, following the highway 401 corridor.



As part of the GTA, Durham has experienced increased development pressure. Between 2016-2021, the Region's population grew by 7.9% reaching 696,992 people. By 2046, Durham's population is projected to reach nearly 1.05 million, creating sustained housing demand in the region.⁹⁴

To address this, the "At Home in Durham Plan", the Region's housing and homelessness strategy, aims to develop 1,000 new affordable rental units by 2024. The plan addresses broader housing affordability issues while also building capacity for transitional and supportive housing for vulnerable residents.⁹⁵

Agriculture remains a vital industry in Durham Region. As of 2021, Durham Region had approximately 1,200 farms covering about 264,518 acres, with an average farm size of 220 acres.⁹⁶ In 2023, Durham Region contributed significantly to Ontario's economy, with farm cash receipts totalling over \$413 million⁹⁷ However, farmland conversion is evident: between 2011 and 2021 the region lost approximately 30,000 acres of farmland outside the Greenbelt decreasing from 297,012 acres in 2011 to 264,518 acres in 2021⁹⁸. The number of farms has also declined, from 1,454 in 2011 to 1,323 in 2016 and 1,200 in 2021 – a 28.8% reduction over 15 years compared to a 15.5% decline provincially. This trend reflects both increasing development pressure and industry consolidation, as Durham's Agricultural Strategy notes a shift towards fewer, more intensive farm operations.⁹⁹

Durham's agri-food sector is also a key economic driver, home to over 4,440 agri-food businesses, including feed and seed suppliers, farm equipment dealers, grain handling and storage facilities, abattoirs, and equine service providers. In 2021, the Region's top agricultural commodities by cash receipts were floriculture, nursery and sod, followed by corn and then dairy products. Notably, the number of beef cattle and sheep farms increased by 23% and 18% respectively, in the last census period, indicating the availability of necessary services along the value chain such as feed mills, large animal veterinarians, livestock transport, and abattoirs. The assets of the agri-food network have been mapped by the Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance (GHFFA).

As of 2021, the agri-food sector in Durham region employed 25,890 workers. The region has a high concentration of greenhouses compared to the rest of Ontario with 74 farms reporting over 1.37 million square feet of land under greenhouses. The industry continues to expand, with an additional 42,000 square feet of greenhouse area added across the Region since 2016 - 3.2% increase. Greenhouse operations tend to require intensive labour and more than half of Ontario's TFWs (51.7%) are employed in this sector,¹⁰⁰ which directly and indirectly impacts housing demand in the region.

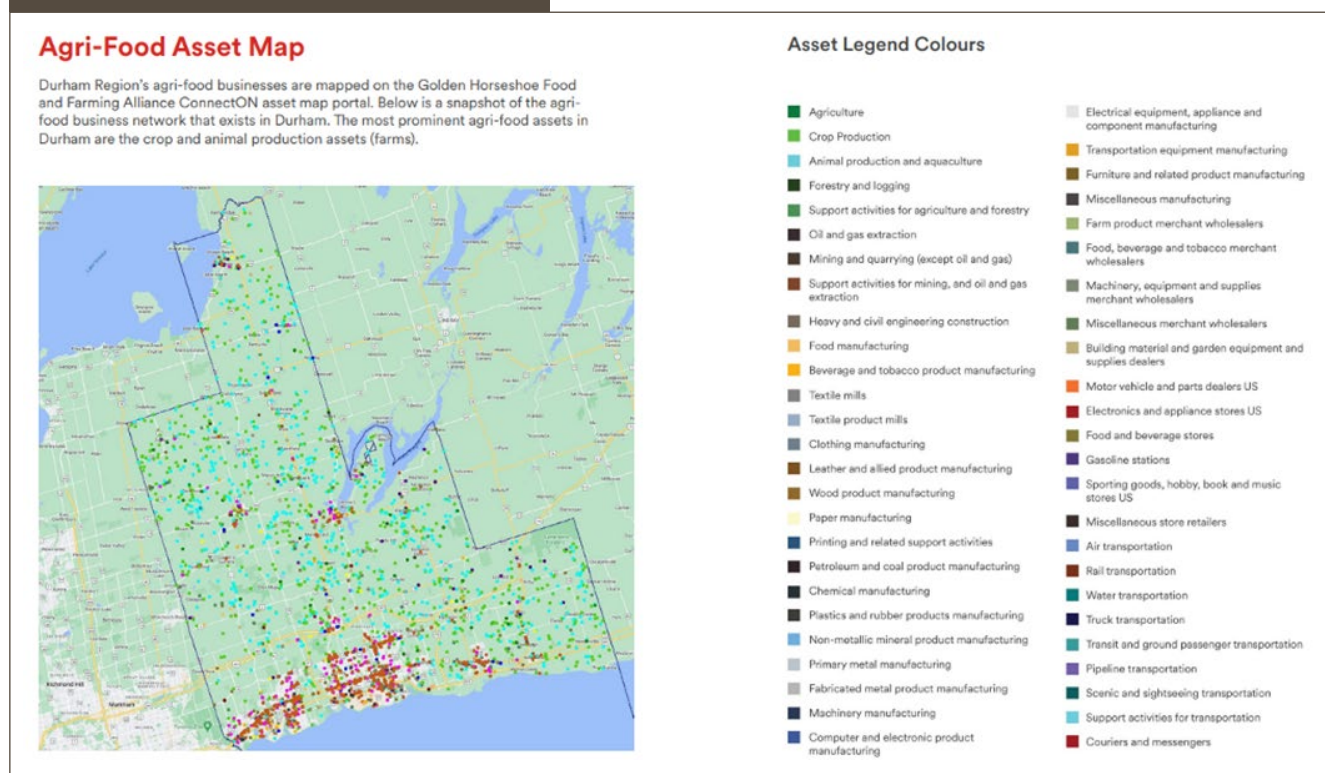
Modernization is increasingly evident in Durham's agricultural sector from greenhouse automation and drones to the growing use of robotic milking systems. Significant advancements have also been made in energy and direct sales. Between 2016 and 2021, the number of farm operations using renewable energy systems increased by 50%, while the number of farms selling value-added agricultural products directly to consumers grew by 33%. Another sign of modernization is the rise in succession planning – by 2021, 10% of Durham's farm operations had a written succession plan, marking a 42% increase since 2016.

94. Ontario Ministry of Finance. (2024). *Fall 2024 Population Projections*. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-population-projections>

95. Durham Region. (2014). *At Home in Durham*. www.durham.ca/en/doing-business/at-home-in-durham.aspx 96. Ontario Federation of Agriculture [OFA]. (2021). *Agriculture at a Glance: Durham*. <https://foodandfarming.ca/custom/uploads/2022/11/Local-Snapshot-Durham.pdf> 97. Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness. 2024. *Ontario farm cash receipts by county and commodity*. <https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/ontario-farm-cash-receipts-by-county-and-crop> 98. Summit72 Advisory Services. (2021). *Understanding How Greenbelt Agriculture Feeds the Rural Economy*. https://www.greenbelt.ca/gb_agriculture_economic_impact 99. Invest Durham. (2023). *Growing Agri-Food Durham*. <https://www.durham.ca/en/economic-development/resources/PDF/2023---2027-Growing-Agri-Food-Durham-Strategy--Action-Plan---ACCESSIBLE.pdf>

100. Statistics Canada. (2024) Temporary foreign workers in the agriculture and agri-food sectors, by industry [Table 32-10-0218-01]. <https://doi.org/10.25318/3210021801-eng>

Figure 6 Durham's Agri-Food Assets



Source: Excerpt from Invest Durham, 2023, p. 50

Durham Region actively supports agri-food businesses through its agricultural strategy, Growing Agri-food Durham (2023-2027), continuing a commitment in place since 2013. The strategy focuses on four key areas: business attraction, retention and expansion; promoting outreach and agri-food education; fostering a supportive policy environment; and strengthening the agricultural workforce. The Region also supports agriculture through the Durham Agricultural Advisory Committee, initiatives by Invest Durham (Agriculture & Rural), and the promotion of local food through the Durham Farm Fresh Marketing Association.

Why Durham Region Was Selected as a Case Study

With a diverse agricultural industry and over 80% of its lands located within the Greenbelt, Durham provides an opportunity to examine how historic policies have been effective or ineffective in responding to the housing needs of the agricultural community. Additionally, Durham places a strong emphasis on agriculture and the agri-food sector, boasting the second highest number of farms within the Greenbelt after Niagara Region, as well as initiatives like its agri-food strategy and agricultural advisory committee.

Durham is also experiencing significant population and housing growth pressures. Within Durham, specific focus is given to Clarington in this research, which contains one-quarter of the region's farms and Greenbelt lands.

Perspectives on Housing: An Agricultural Lens

Discussions with members of Durham's agricultural community provided a wealth of examples and observations into how farmers have addressed housing needs over the years. From second single detached units to on-farm labour accommodation, various strategies have been undertaken to accommodate those actively involved in day-to-day farm operations. It was also noted that there growing interest in housing options for those not directly engaged in farming.

Housing for Farm Families

Farming is often a family business with multiple members and generations involved. Through discussions with the Agricultural Advisory Committee, Durham-area farmers emphasized the need for housing solutions that support farm succession planning and accommodate those workers involved in day-to-day operations. Several strategies were highlighted:

- a. **Purchasing additional agricultural parcels:** Whether containing an existing house or having the opportunity to construct a new house, a separate title was the most desirable way to accommodate housing needs, though often financially prohibitive. Farmland in Ontario's Central West region, which includes Durham, is some of the most expensive in Ontario. In 2023, the average price was \$27,900 an acre, almost a 9% increase from the previous year.¹⁰¹
- b. **Purchasing previously separate parcels with a house in the surrounding area:** While typically less expensive than an entire farm, small acreage residential properties are highly sought after and often exceed one million dollars, according to the Agricultural Advisory Committee.
- c. **Constructing additional residential unit(s) on farm:** The Greenbelt Plan permits one ARU in a single detached dwellings on a farm or an accessory structure within the Protected Countryside, provided the lands are outside of the Natural Heritage System. Varied municipal implementation approaches exist within Durham Region, with some areas having permitted two single detached structures on a farm for decades. One farmer who accommodated a second-generation member of the farm family stated *"We never separated. [The house] was built as 1200 square feet... You can build, not separate. So since then, we've added to it. I think it's closer to 1750 now. So, it's a fine little house"* (Clarington Agricultural Advisory Member, farmer).

Members of the Agricultural Advisory Committee noted a more recent need to house family members not involved in farming, including the use of mobile homes and trailers. These were generally seen as temporary solutions, since investment in a second, full scale dwelling was not the goal.

101. Farm Credit Canada. (2023). *Farmland Values Report*. <https://www.fcc-fac.ca/en/knowledge/economics/farmland-values-report>

Permitting ARUs provides a “pressure relief valve” by offering farmers additional options for housing, but not one without challenges. An ARU, whether attached or detached from the main dwelling, provide privacy for occupants, while allowing those involved in farming to remain close to the operation, which can be important as farming involves long working hours. For those not involved in farming, it provides access to land at no additional cost. The drawbacks of ARUs are that they cannot be separated from the farm and thus create financial risk and potential for strained familial relations. Additionally, this arrangement may limit the ability to access financing or generate income from the unit independently, potentially complicating estate planning and succession for future generations. A Durham Region staff member noted:

“I’ve heard a few concerns about that from a couple different standpoints, and a lot more from, a business, family dynamic standpoint. For example, if you have one son build a house on the family farm, they don’t actually own that house. The farm owns the house. From a succession planning perspective, things can get dicey if the other siblings also end up owning the property that the one sibling lives on...I’m not sure how that would play out from a long-term business planning perspective, but I could see it being challenging.”

Housing for Farm Labourers

Additional labour is critical for Durham’s agricultural industry, particularly the greenhouses. To accommodate this workforce, housing options and a degree of flexibility are necessary. A Durham Region staff member noted *“I know of one greenhouse operator who had to make some quick changes to housing which were probably way above budget but had to do it in order to get their workers there. I think, like anything that limits labour, it definitely holds back the industry.”*

The process of establishing on-farm accommodation for additional labour needs is varied. Permanent housing requires planning approvals prior to initiating the building process. Even for temporary housing, rigid Ontario Building Code requirements can lead to “work arounds” to get the accommodation built, which often aren’t practical, productive and may cost more money. A Durham Region staff member outlined one such case:

“There’s one example, a farm that grows vegetables and fruits, and they’ve been around for as long as I can remember. They have a portable for seasonal worker housing, and they wanted to put up another portable to accommodate the seasonal workers’ new housing requirements. The city said that they couldn’t have a second dwelling or two dwellings for TFWs on the property. So, they had to be connected. Then they connected the two buildings, and it was a risk with the fire chief, and then they had to go and do some changes and move the portable. They ended up spending all this money and time, and still weren’t approved.”

Municipal policies on on-farm labour accommodations differ; some allow multiple structures, while others require all accommodations to be within a single structure. A key takeaway from the Durham case study is the importance of flexibility in housing solutions. Tailored accommodations can better meet the needs, preferences, and cultural considerations of TFWs. This flexibility not only improves workers’ quality of life but also enhances farm operations by aligning housing arrangements with labour needs. One farmer shared: *“We’ve gone with school portables mostly and renovated them so each portable has five smaller bedrooms. The guys all have their own private house key, communal kitchen, bathrooms, and then we do an external laundry facility that they share. But that’s worked well for us. I know some people do larger rooms with many people in it. We prefer the guys, even though it’s a smaller room, to have a little bit of personal space. And it’s worked well for us”* (Farmer, Clarington Agricultural Advisory).

A lack of familiarity among municipal staff with federal and provincial housing requirements for TFWs was noted as a stumbling block. One farmer explained: *“Process was fairly simple once the municipality was—I use the word educated on what it’s for...Initially, they wanted to charge us development fees and market more as a residence as opposed to a work camp, but it was a workable process. But I think in a lot of cases, the municipalities, not so much Clarington, because they have so much market labour in Clarington, but some of the more northern municipalities just aren’t familiar”* (Farmer, Clarington Agricultural Advisory).

Broader Housing Shortage and Pressure on Agricultural Lands

Clarington experienced tremendous population growth during the last Census period, with a 10% increase from 2016-2021. According to the PPS 2024, Clarington is one of Ontario’s ‘fastest growing’ municipalities and experiencing the same housing shortages affecting communities across Canada. The decision to add an ARU to a property may be less of a choice and more a decision made in response to broader issues in the province such as housing affordability.

A Durham Region staff member noted:

“I’ve also heard some things about farmers wanting to put up a secondary house or residence on the property for family members to live in because they can’t find anywhere else ... I’ve seen a lot more trailers, like mobile homes, popping up in the rural area in the last couple of years”.

Questions also arise regarding housing for the agri-food industry workforce and whether residents should be permitted in agricultural areas for this sector. Considerations include whether a residence (or multiple residences) should be allowed as an accessory to facilities such as grain elevators, mills, large animal vet clinics, abattoirs, produce warehouses, and egg weighing stations. While this workforce is essential to the agricultural economy and requires housing, is it distinct from tradespersons who build barns and greenhouses or the person who drives the milk truck?

The PPS (2024) defines these types of uses as “agriculture related uses”; which are farm-related commercial and industrial operations that directly support agriculture, benefit from being in close proximity to farm operations, and provide direct products and/or services to farm operations as a primary activity.

The new Regional OP encourages municipalities to adopt best practices from OMAFA’s “Guidelines for Permitted Uses in Ontario’s Prime Agricultural Areas” regarding dwellings that accommodate full-time farm employees in their local OPs and zoning by-laws (Section 6.4.2.).¹⁰² It further specifies that such dwellings should not be severed, regardless of when they were established. Additionally, section 11.3.25 of the Regional OP allows severances for agricultural and agriculture-related uses, provided they conform to Provincial Plans including for the Greenbelt and the Oak Ridges Moraine.

Clarington’s OP (Sections 13.5.5 and 13.5.6) permits agri-businesses of an industrial nature in land designated as Rural through site-specific zoning amendments, provided it can be demonstrated that it requires a location outside the Urban Area boundary.¹⁰³

102. Durham Region. (2020, May 26 consolidation). *Durham Regional Official Plan*. <https://www.durham.ca/en/doing-business/resources/Documents/PlanningandDevelopment/Official-Plan/2020-Durham-Regional-Official-Plan-Consolidation---Revised-1.pdf> 103. Clarington. (2018). *Official Plan*. <https://www.clarington.net/en/business-and-development/resources/Official-Plan/Clarington-Official-Plan-AODA.pdf>

Agri-business proposals of a commercial nature are encouraged to locate within settlement areas but may be permitted on lands designated as Rural subject to a site-specific zoning approval and meeting the requirements of the Regional OP. There is no mention of housing units accessory to agriculture-related uses and the direction of the Plan would suggest no support for this type of proposal. The limitation to lands designated as Rural, as opposed to Prime Agriculture, may be another factor to consider in supporting a prosperous agri-food sector, in addition to the question of sufficient housing for the sector.

Clarington's ZBL (Bylaw 84-63), which applies outside the ORM, permits agriculture-related uses – including abattoirs, livestock auction facilities and produce warehouses – in the Agricultural Exception Zones. Unless explicitly stated otherwise, Exception Zone uses have the same housing options as typical farms: one single detached unit; an additional single detached dwelling for an employee, provided the lot is at least 20 hectares; and a converted dwelling with a maximum of two units occupied by employees on the same lot.

At this limited scale of one to two units, residential use remains accessory to the main use and presents limited opportunity for the policy to be abused or lead to unintended consequences over the long term. Larger residential structures would require a planning approval process to demonstrate conformity with the Durham and Clarington OPs and ensure that the residential units are justified.



Policy Considerations

Existing Options for Additional Dwellings

Clarington planners, farmers and municipal staff have noted that there are options for farming operations seeking to accommodate ARUs. This flexibility has been beneficial, providing security for those that may need housing, whether temporarily or on a more permanent basis. Area farmers have expressed that Clarington's second dwelling policy, in place since 1984, has been well received. It has effectively supported retiring farmers, and more recently, family members not involved in day-to-day farming operations. With the aging baby-boomer generation and a shortage of assisted housing options, it is reasonable to expect that farm properties may increasingly accommodate ageing parents who return to the farm to be closer to family in their retirement years.

Temporary vs Permanent On-Farm Labour Accommodations

The lifespan of structures has been a key consideration in Clarington's approach to planning for farm labour housing, where only temporary structures are permitted as of right. Permanent structures require a demonstrated need at the Zoning Bylaw Amendment stage to ensure they are justified by the scale and intensity of the farming operation.

Permanent structures for on-farm housing typically take the form of a bunkhouse or multi-unit structure which poses a risk if they become unnecessary. These larger structures do not easily convert to other farm uses, and as farms become more efficient with increased mechanization, the need for labour may decrease over time. Given a structure's potential lifespan of 50 years, but an uncertain long-term need, options for repurposing or removing excess accommodations include:

1. Conversion to ARU (i.e. one unit). The difficulty is that many ARU zoning frameworks require the ARU to be smaller in physical size than the main dwelling and to convert a multi-unit building into a single unit would, in many cases, be larger than the main dwelling, thus not meeting the policy test.
2. Rental stock for persons not involved in the farming operation. Current policy does not support this use, as it does not qualify as either an agriculture-related use or an on-farm diversified use.
3. Demolition of the unit.

Given these challenges, temporary and portable structures are preferable, as they provide a clear removal option once they are no longer needed.

While the distinction has been made for farm labour housing, in many ways the same question applies to ARUs, as these units will not necessarily be required for the lifespan of the structure and may be rendered excess at some point. Options in those cases include:

1. Convert to non-dwelling space (e.g., home office, recreation, or hosting space);
2. Rental stock for alternate persons;
3. Relocate to alternate property (if designed to be portable); or
4. Demolition.

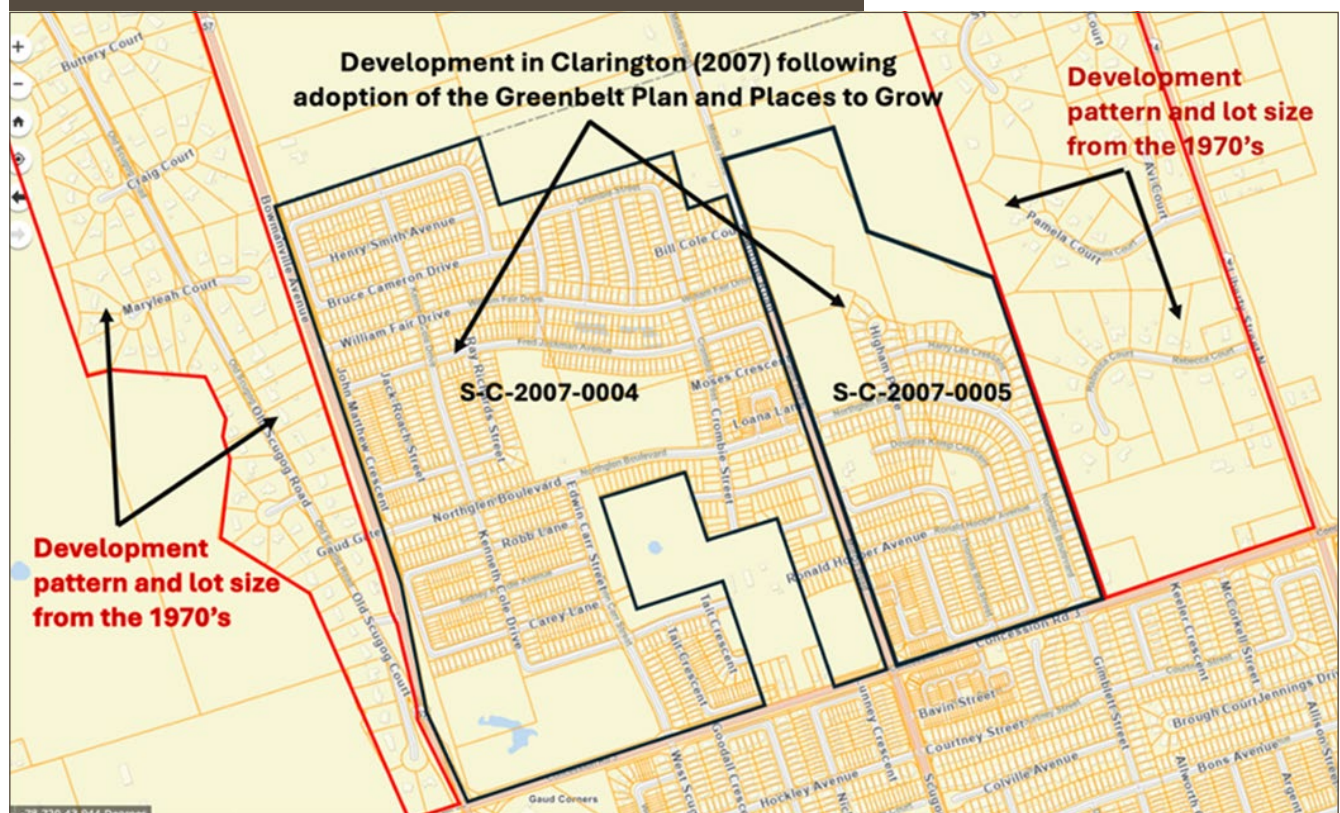
Permitting as-of-right accommodations for on-farm labour at a limited scale and size may prove to be the middle ground and provide a balanced approach - offering flexible housing solutions while protecting farmland. Requiring farmers to demonstrate need as part of the zoning compliance exercise at the building permit stage ensures that housing is provided only when necessary for the specific farm property. This approach provides a practical solution that addresses immediate labour needs while minimizing long-term impacts on land use planning and agricultural operations.

Near-Urban Pressure

Between 2000-2015, the region approved five Official Plan Amendments redesignating a total of 1,753 hectares from “prime agriculture” to “developmental”.¹⁰⁴ While concerning, there is evidence that provincial policy and guidance on new forms of development have influenced development patterns in ways that benefit agriculture.

In the 1970s, near urban development often occurred on very large lots, consuming significant amounts of farmland. With the introduction of the Greenbelt Plan and Places to Grow (Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe), developers have shifted towards smaller lots and more intensive land uses and development. A case from Clarington illustrates this change – where a single home once occupied a large parcel in the 1970s, up to 20 or more lots can now be accommodated within the same space. While still consumptive of farmland, this shift represents a significant improvement over previous decade.

Figure 7 Map Comparing Development Patterns in Clarington



Source: Map created by research team using <https://clarington.maps.arcgis.com> as a base

104. Epps, S. (2018). *Planning Exchange: Measuring Farmland Conversion in Ontario*. <http://ontarioplanners.ca/Blog/Planning-Exchange/March-2018/Measuring-Farmland-Conversion-in-Ontario>

With significant urban growth, will policies permitting ARUs in agricultural areas be used to accommodate general housing needs? While farmers may not be inclined to house individuals beyond family members and farm workers and family members, the potential for substantial rental income could incentivize the use of ARUs on non-farm lots in agricultural areas.

An increase in non-farm dwellings in the agricultural area, however, introduces a population that may have little connection to or understanding of agriculture and normal farm practices. While many farmers maintain positive relationships with their non-farm neighbours, challenges can arise. Concerns over spraying practices, spreading of manure, noise, dust, timing - especially late evening or weekend activities – can lead to friction between agricultural operators and residents with different expectations of rural living.

Region of Durham's Existing Policies

Region of Durham Official Plan

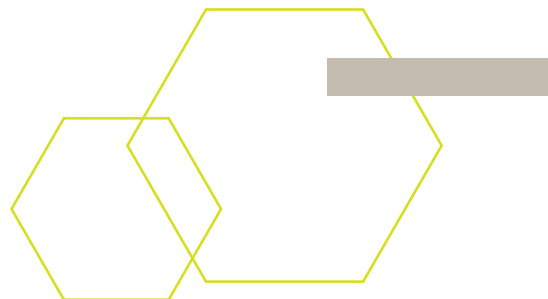
Durham Region's Official Plan was originally approved in 1993 and consolidated to 2020. A new OP was adopted in 2023 and approved with modifications by the Minister of the Municipal Affairs and Housing on September 3, 2024. This section examines the newly adopted OP.

Durham's OP aligns with the policies of the Greenbelt Plan as well as Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan by mapping the natural heritage system, prime agricultural areas, and incorporating policies to maintain compliance with these provincial plans. It strongly protects the agricultural system and seeks to avoid non-agricultural land uses encroaching into the Prime Agricultural Area, wherever possible (Sections 6.2.3. And 6.2.4.).

The Plan permits second dwellings to accommodate full-time farm employees, when justified by the farm's size and nature (6.4.1.). Additionally, it encourages local municipalities to adopt best practices from OMAFA's Guidelines on Permitted Uses in Ontario's Prime Agricultural Areas to accommodate these workers in their official plans and/or zoning by-laws (6.4.2.).

Clarington Official Plan

The Municipality of Clarington is subject to Durham's Regional OP, the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (until October 2024), the Greenbelt Plan and the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan. Clarington's OP was adopted in 1996 and consolidated to 2018. Its agricultural and rural housing policies emphasize supporting farm operations, while maintaining agricultural land integrity. Growth is directed to clearly defined urban and rural settlement area boundaries including urban, hamlets, estate residential, and rural residential clusters. Clarington's OP supports Greenbelt expansion to further protect agricultural areas.



Clarington's OP includes policies for farm worker housing, specifically outlined in Sections 13.5.5 and 13.5.6:

13.3.5 Temporary, mobile or portable farm worker dwellings may be permitted on a farm for the purpose of accommodating persons employed full-time or seasonal on the farm. The farm worker dwelling shall:

- a) Not interfere with or hinder normal farm practices;
- b) Only be permitted where the intensity of the farm operation warrants it;
- c) Be located in close proximity with the principal farm dwelling; and
- d) The principal farm dwelling is occupied by the farmer, retired farmer and/or member of the family.

13.3.6 A permanent farm worker dwelling may be permitted subject to a site-specific zoning by-law amendment and the provisions of Section 13.3.5.

Clarington Zoning By-laws

Clarington has two ZBLs: one which establishes provisions for lands within the ORM, established in 2005, and another for remaining lands, established in 1984. There have been efforts to replace the 1984 Comprehensive ZBL; most notably in 2017 when a three-year position was created to develop a new ZBL. Despite the dedicated resources, various pressures and other priorities occurred and a new updated by-law was not completed.

The existing ZBL permits some "as of right" housing options in agricultural areas. In the Agricultural (A) Zone, permitted residential uses include one single detached dwelling and an additional detached dwelling for employees on lots of at least 20 hectares. Converted dwellings can house up to two units occupied by farm employees or the owner's immediate family. Surplus farm dwellings may not be severed if needed for farm employees.¹⁰⁵

ADUs are permitted in legally established single detached, semi-detached, or townhouse dwellings, and within accessory buildings, with a maximum of three units per lot. They are not permitted within the Environmental Protection Zone and are only permitted in the Protected Countryside within the Greenbelt in buildings that had building permits issued prior to July 1, 2017.

All additional dwelling units are subject to additional provisions (Section 3.2). When an additional dwelling unit is located within an accessory building:

- i) The floor area of the additional dwelling unit must be less than the floor area of the principal residential building.
- ii) Notwithstanding Section 3.1 c., the accessory building must:
 - a) Conform to the zone's front yard and exterior side yard setback requirements for residential uses;
 - b) Have a minimum rear yard and interior side yard setback of 1.8 metres;
 - c) Not exceed, whichever is less:
 - i. Lot coverage of 10% for the additional dwelling unit, or
 - ii. The zone regulation's lot coverage maximum; and
 - d) Have a maximum height of 6.5 metres within the Agricultural Zone and Rural Residential Zones, and 5.25 metres within Urban Residential Zones.

¹⁰⁵ Clarington, 2018, s. 13.3.9(b).

There is no maximum distance specified between the principal dwelling and the accessory building containing the ARU, though the OP requires ARUs outside Urban Areas and temporary, mobile, or portable farm worker dwellings to be located near the principal dwelling. The “only detached in buildings constructed prior to July 2017” policy means no new construction for ARUs within the Protected Countryside, but existing buildings can be renovated. This policy’s benefits include utilizing existing structures, avoiding further land removal from natural or agricultural use, and integrating ARUs in a way that maintains agricultural character. Drawbacks include more complex building permit applications, as buildings must now meet residential rather than agricultural standards under the Ontario Building Code; ARUs may be located farther from the principal dwelling; and detached ARUs are prohibited on properties without a suitable accessory building from before July 1, 2017.¹⁰⁶

Clarington’s Zoning By-law does not permit permanent farm worker dwellings as of right. It does permit temporary, mobile, or portable farm worker dwellings (Section 13.3.5) provided they:

- do not interfere with normal farm practices;
- are necessary due to farm operation intensity;
- are located near the principal farm dwelling; and
- the principal farm dwelling must be occupied by the farmer, retired farmer and/or member of the family.

It is important to note that zoning approaches which refer to familial or household relationships should be avoided.

Within the ORM, only temporary, mobile, or portable units are permitted as second dwellings for farm help. These structure types are quite limiting and may not support the number of employees required or employee needs. They also may not fit the farm workforce over the long term. Additionally, only permitting farm worker dwellings on farms where the owner resides has limitations, for example, many operations involve multiple properties and may benefit from the workers residing on the same parcel as the barn or greenhouse in which they work, rather than on the same property as the farmer.

Since the Regional OP precludes the severance of land for farm retirement or intra-family purposes, garden suites under Clarington’s ZBL may provide a suitable alternative. Garden suites are allowed in association with single detached dwellings, except within the ORM. They are permitted for up to 20 years under a temporary use by-law when needed to provide care and/or supervision for a sick, disabled, or elderly person. Approval requires demonstrating need, ensuring adequate site conditions, compatibility with adjacent uses, sufficient on-site parking, and services, and entering into an agreement between the Municipality and the owner regarding installation, maintenance, removal, and other conditions.

Accessory apartments are also permitted outside urban areas within detached dwellings or accessory buildings, provided they remain secondary to the principal dwelling and meet specific development criteria. These policies acknowledge and support the agricultural sector’s role in Clarington’s economy and ensure its sustainability for future generations.

106. While describing Clarington’s ZBL, it is worth noting potential adjustments that could allow detached ARUs under specific conditions, such as requiring clustering ARUs near principal dwellings, introducing size limitations, and restricting detached ARUs to rear yards to maintain agricultural character and eliminate potential for future severance.

Durham Region Agriculture Strategy

The Region has made concerted efforts to protect and promote agriculture, including an agricultural strategy titled “Growing Agri-Food Durham: A Five-Year Plan to Grow the Agri-Food Industry in Durham Region, 2023-2027”.¹⁰⁷ The strategy outlines many worthwhile initiatives but is nearly silent in regard to the housing needs of the agricultural sector. A sole reference to housing appears as an example of an “agricultural use”, citing the PPS definition, which includes permanent and temporary housing and accommodation of full-time and seasonal farm labour. Despite detailing a specific goal to identify opportunity and solutions for the labour shortages in the industry, housing is not identified as one of the barriers or solutions. This is consistent with scans of other municipal plans and strategies, which showed little formal assessment of housing needs for the agricultural sector has been completed.

Region of Durham: Key Takeaways

Housing Options Exist on Agricultural Parcels

Existing policy frameworks, which have been in place for upwards of 40 years, allow for a primary and additional single detached dwelling unit on Clarington farms outside of the ORM and over 50 acres in size. In speaking with a local planner, it appears there has been a modest degree of uptake on this issue over the years. Further, ADUs within the primary dwelling are permitted in all areas and in detached structures under a stricter set of criteria.

Permitting permanent housing for agricultural labour as of right, to a limited size, may be worth pursuing provided that appropriate measures to mitigate potential abuse of the policy are established (e.g., size of farm parcel, intensity of operation, location of farm labour housing).

Discussions with interview participants indicate that certain housing options in agricultural areas are being pursued out of necessity rather than genuine choice, such as constructing an on-farm ARU for an adult child who is not involved in farming but cannot afford to purchase or rent a dwelling in their desired location. As discussed, there are positives and drawbacks to this option and speaks to the need to focus on upzoning land within urban settlement areas to facilitate choice in dwelling type, size and location.

Require Clustering

Clustering detached ARUs with the main farm dwelling is critical for maintaining the farm’s operational cohesiveness. A maximum distance between the structures creates a close proximity which wards off the pressure for severance as one would not want a separated parcel that close to their own farmhouse. A planner who practices privately in the Region stated that clustering was more important than who comes to reside in the unit: *“Regardless of who occupies that dwelling, if it’s proximal to the farmhouse and other farm buildings....I really don’t see there being much that can go wrong.”* The PPS 2024 specifically requires ARUs in prime agricultural areas to be “located within, attached, or in close proximity to the principal dwelling or farm building cluster.”¹⁰⁸

107. Invest Durham, 2023. 108. PPS 2024, s. 4.3.2.5(e).

Clarify Requirements

Despite the fact that options are available, multiple interviewees mentioned that most people need help navigating planning and building requirements. A local Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) Member Service Representative suggested, “having a picture book on how to go through this process to establish an ARU might be a benefit to both the applicants and to the planning staff”. Municipal staff would benefit from enhanced understanding of agricultural needs, particularly with respect to accommodations for on-farm labour and Provincial standards for acceptable building size and housing requirements would create a fair and level playing field across the province. Further, a “how to” book for farmers and landowners should outline that investment in diversified forms of housing on-farm comes with financial risk and must be carefully considered as the asset cannot be separated from the farm.

Good Urban Planning is Good Agricultural Planning

Focusing on intensification in the urban boundary will relieve pressure on surrounding agricultural land. Regional municipal staff noted, *“So much of what happens in the urban area impacts what happens in the rural area, and I would love to see ...more focus on intensification and dense housing options in our urban areas...I think that could help our rural areas too, just to take the pressure off a bit.”* While some progress has been made, ‘as-of-right’ permissions remain limited. A regional municipal staff member indicated that *“six storey buildings are now permitted through a simple Zoning Bylaw process, instead of a four-year Official Plan Amendment.”* Concerns of local residents often remain a barrier to urban intensification. Additional resources for communication, education, and zoning reform are needed to support intensification, meet housing needs, and protect agricultural lands from accommodating unnecessary dwelling units.

The Province has passed a series of legislation in recent years in an effort to build 1.5 million homes by 2031. In 2022, as part of the Building More Homes Faster Act, the Province introduced as-of-right permissions for ARUs in fully serviced settlement areas. In response, the Ontario Federation of Agriculture stated:

“OFA applauds the provincial government for taking this sweeping measure to intensify housing development within existing urban boundaries. However, OFA challenges the Ontario government to be more ambitious by increasing the density of units allowed on a parcel of urban residential land. We firmly believe the government should take a more assertive approach to end exclusionary ‘single detached’ zoning and allow for mid- to higher densities (beyond just three units) as-of-right provincewide. OFA wants the proposed regulations for ARUs to be applied to rural and smaller-town municipalities within designated settlement areas.”

The lack of housing options within urban settlement areas results in housing investments on agricultural parcels which could have been avoided. This is concerning as additional dwellings do not significantly appreciate value of the overall property but if separated, can be a considerable financial asset and thus create substantive pressure for severance.

Role of Agricultural Advisory Committee

Regional municipal staff noted that Agricultural Advisory Committees are invaluable for insights into shifting trends, potential policy changes, and other pressures in the agri-food sector. Both Durham and Clarington have committees with diverse membership, representing various agricultural sectors, from cash crops to greenhouses to livestock. A staff member for Durham Region said, *“They are just such a great group to bounce ideas off... We can basically take anything to them and get their raw and honest feedback, their ideas, suggestions, and a lay of the land.”* Strong relationships between staff and Agricultural Advisory Committees can especially benefit municipalities with less direct agricultural experience.

Lack of Assessment of Agricultural Housing Needs

There is evidence of considerable study of the housing shortage in the Municipality of Clarington with the focus largely on the urban areas. Even at the Region level, where planning authorities are typically focused on broader housing needs, the agricultural strategy is silent on housing and the housing plan (At Home in Durham 2014-2024) is silent on agriculture. A strong agricultural economy requires housing units and there is an opportunity to more comprehensively consider how those needs can be met.

Proximity to Urban Centres – an Opportunity and Threat

Clarington has large, urban centres within its borders, as well as small to medium size settlement areas. This provides the opportunity to accommodate housing needs of the area within urban settlement boundaries, preserving farmland for agricultural uses. Some participants spoke of this potential and desired innovative transportation solutions to create urban to farm transit for those farms located on the edge of the urban areas. This idea may be worthwhile. The current reality, however, is that it is very difficult to source housing for the general population, and far less so for temporary agricultural workers. Thus, the need for on-farm housing is expected to continue.

The threat is that growing urban populations create pressure for the decentralization of general housing uses onto prime agricultural lands. For example, if a 10-acre parcel has a main dwelling and two ARUs (as per 2024 PPS), is the primary use of that parcel agricultural or residential? If there was a greenhouse on the 10 acres, one could argue agricultural, but the fear is that over time, the already fragmented agricultural land base becomes populated with non-farm or general housing uses, creating increased potential for MDS limitations, complaints and traffic impediments for slow moving vehicles.

Conformity with Provincial Legislation

Rapidly changing policies at the provincial level has created confusion and increased potential for misinformation; this was noted during interviews by practicing Planners, municipal economic development staff and farmers alike. Municipalities need the resources, time and experienced staff, to undertake thoughtful policy framework updates that conform with provincial legislation but also strive to create as-of-right housing options in fully, partially and privately serviced settlement areas as well as on farms and small acreages.



5

Huron County

Introduction

Huron County, with a population of 61,000 people, is situated along the eastern shores of Lake Huron approximately 2.5 hours west of Toronto and 2.5 hours north of Detroit, Michigan (Figure 8). While one of the most rural and agriculturally dominant areas in all of Canada, the county also has a vibrant lakeshore community with a strong seasonal and growing retirement population. The County includes several towns, villages and hamlets, with Goderich – its largest town and county seat – home to a population of 7,881.

Huron has a diverse agricultural sector with a wide range of crops and livestock and is a leader in numerous agricultural categories in Ontario including hogs, cattle, and field crops. In 2021, Huron generated \$1.4 billion in farm cash receipts from 2,564 farms surpassing Niagara's total of \$930 million from 1,651 farms and \$354 million from Durham's 1200 farms. With 3,500 farm operators and 3,738 local agri-food business establishments employing 6,385 workers, agriculture is the cornerstone of the local economy. The County of Huron Official Plan underscores this significance:

“Agriculture in Huron is of national significance. Huron leads all counties and regions in Ontario in total value of production; and it also exceeds the production totals of several provinces. Huron has the advantage of an informed and progressive farm community, a supportive service sector, high capability soils, a diversified agricultural industry, a favourable climate, and limited non-farm intrusion. Agriculture has a significant positive economic impact in the County that goes beyond the farm gate and rural areas into Huron’s towns and villages. The continued health of agriculture is important not only from an agricultural perspective, but also from a broader community and economic perspective.”

Like much of Ontario, housing is a major concern in the county. It is expensive and increasingly in short supply. According to county growth and housing projections, Huron County needs more than 10,000 new housing units by 2051, with the county’s existing housing stock just above 25,000 units in 2024.¹⁰⁹ In 2016, 82% of all dwellings were single detached homes. As of June 2024, the average home price was \$638,166, reflecting a 6.9% decrease from the previous year, according to the Huron-Perth Association of Realtors.

Figure 8 Map of Huron County



109. Watson & Associates Economists Ltd. (2024). *Population and Housing Projections Study - Huron County*. <https://www.huroncounty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Huron-County-2023-Population-and-Housing-Projections-Study-Final-Report-March-6-2024.pdf>

This case study draws from a number of sources including a review of municipal plans and documents, county videos and interviewees including a provincial planner, a county and single-tier planner and three farmers/ farm organization representatives.

Why Huron Was Selected as a Case Study

Huron County was the first municipality in Ontario to adopt a provincially approved County Official Plan in 1973, notable for its integration of a strong agricultural perspective, as highlighted in the 1976 Countryside Planning report. This agriculture-first approach has kept the County at the forefront of innovative policies. Huron was selected as a case study for its long-term commitment to agricultural planning, dedicated resources, and evolving agricultural sector. As one farmer noted, *“Agriculture is changing. We’re getting bigger and we require more and more labour for several operations in this vicinity. We have a pepper plant greenhouse that requires temporary foreign workers, and they require housing.”* The Municipality of South Huron was chosen for a closer examination of its Official Plan, zoning by-law, and relevant policies.

Perspectives on Housing: An Agricultural Lens

Housing and agriculture in Huron are intertwined with the needs of farm families, farm workers, agri-food business and agricultural services recognized in the local planning framework. In 2023, there were 2,545 farms involved in primary production, 86% (2,188 farms) operating without employees. Employment patterns varied by category, with 8% of crop production farms employing workers, compared to 21% of animal and aquaculture farms.¹¹⁰ There is also a recognized relationship between housing on farms and housing in neighbouring towns, villages and hamlets. Research for the Huron case study provided a number of perspectives on housing and agriculture.

Housing on Farms

A major shift in local and provincial policy has been the introduction of ARUs. First considered by the county in 2019, ARUs have become increasingly accepted as a means of providing additional housing in both rural and urban settings, but there are risks. Key concerns include long term funding, potential severance pressures in the years ahead, and their impact on the financial well-being of farms and family members.

In the words of a county planner: *“With ARUs we are opening a door. That makes me a little bit uncomfortable, so we were really careful in how we did it. In Huron, we said for general agriculture, typically 100-acre parcels, you could have up to two ARUs, a maximum of one of those can be detached. For the detached it had to be within a maximum of 200 feet.”* Part of this concern relates to the need to comply with MDS and to minimize the risk of potential severance applications in the future, recognizing that they consume and fragment farmland, and potentially conflict with agricultural practices.

110. Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs [OMAFRA]. (2024, March 22). *West – Huron. Ontario business, agri-food, and farm data profiles*. <https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/ontario-farm-data-by-county>

Both planners and farmers noted that additional housing on farms has the potential to alleviate housing concerns in neighbouring settlement areas. A farmer observed that policies to allow two additional farm dwellings has opened things up – particularly in towns. He noted:

“We have a couple friends – one a dairy farmer, another a pork farmer and they were renting multiple homes in the local villages to house their staff, and now that they are allowed to build these secondary residences that house staff at the farm where they’re needed, that opens up those residences in the villages, in the communities, for people other than our employees.”

The farmer went on to note:

“There’s a hog farmer that I know quite well, and they turned an old little bungalow into almost a motel type building. It’s 11 rooms. Each room has its own washroom, living space, and bedroom, and then there is a community kitchen on the one end. ... Another farmer has built quite an extensive bunkhouse for his employees. It’s a combination of things, multi room, traditional style homes with bedrooms and shared washing facilities to motel style buildings to traditional block houses. So, there’s lots of different things that individuals are building depending on their needs. But the big benefit is with this last policy statement, we are now allowed to build those things no matter where we are in the province, instead of it being regionally.”

The local planner stated:

“We had hog farmers coming in saying, this wasn’t International Workers, these were just local workers. They couldn’t find anywhere in town that they could rent based on what they were paying. And so, the feeling was, well, then in order to have someone take this job and do the chores, I need to provide them with a housing unit.”

Both planners and farmers recognize the need for additional housing on farms – especially for employees. The expense of traditional construction and limited supply of housing supports the need for new options.

Temporary Farm Labour

Securing farm workers through the Temporary Foreign Workers Program is a necessity for many farms. While TFWs were historically associated with greenhouse and fruit and vegetable production, it is increasingly a necessity for livestock producers as well. As was noted by an area farmer:

“The number of TFWs grows every day. We are having less children - so these farms that used to have five kids, working on the farm now have one, two or three, so they’re requiring more labour. The traditional Canadian population is looking at jobs other than the hard, physical, manual labour that a lot of agriculture facilities require. So the usage rate of the temporary foreign worker program, or the offshore or the foreign worker programs is definitely going up in agriculture. We see it. We see it on dairy operations. We see it on hog and poultry operations. It seems to be across the board.”

While typically accommodations for TFWs are oriented to individuals, county staff noted that larger farms are thinking increasingly about accommodations for family units in the hopes of retaining these workers.

A local farmer also noted an important partnership with the municipality of South Huron in helping to support the needs of TFWs:

“Between the Municipality of South Huron and a local greenhouse, they paved the road shoulders, allowing TFWs, whose licenses don’t apply in Ontario, to bike into Exeter. That’s a great example of a rural municipality supporting agriculture for everyone’s benefit. Those employees will spend money in town, boosting Exeter’s economy, and they’ll be happier, too. It’s very positive for safety —now they’re on a paved shoulder instead of the road’s edge, where traffic on Highway 83 is heavy even on a good day.”

Succession Planning

Building a second farm home for a family member can help pass the farm on to the next generation. As policies have increasingly worked to accommodate this need it can help with succession planning, but as a farmer noted it can come with certain risks:

“I think we’re seeing the scenario where mom and dad passed over control and ownership of the farm right away getting fewer and fewer. Farmers seem to be hanging on to the bitter end, so it may not be the former generation that has the risk. It may be the next generation that builds a home and is living there that takes on the risk, because in 15 or 20 years, when mom and dad are ready to quit, suddenly somebody else wants it, or maybe mom and dad haven’t structured it properly in their will. I’ve been on the farm my whole life, and my sibling suddenly wants it, and it can get very messy. So, there’s lots to consider when building these homes.”

Another farmer championed the notion of a barndominium as a means of building equity in the farm, while also assisting with farm transition and succession.¹¹¹

“When a shouse, a barndominium came to mind, I thought, that’s 100% for me. Our building is 35 by 60, two floors, with a 1000 square foot porch and a gym for us and our employees. Our shed space is around 100 by 60 feet. It’s the perfect stepping block, as your parents can live in their same house... I’d like to bring back the idea of multi-generational homes on farmland. Just like us, my sister, my brother, and both my parents all live within a kilometre and a half of each other, and we love it. It’s awesome.”¹¹²

111. A barndominium or shouse integrates a residential unit with an agricultural structure, like a shed or barn (the terms are not connected to the Condominium Act) 112. Huron County. (2024). *How We Grow Matters: “Shouse” or “Barndominium” in Dashwood* [Van Raay Farms Ltd.]. <https://www.huroncounty.ca/planning/how-we-grow/>

Figure 9 Recently constructed “barndominium” in Huron County



Policy Considerations

Farmland Protection

Farm organizations and individual farmers recognize the importance of thoughtful planning for both the agricultural industry and their livelihoods. There is a recognition that farmland preservation is crucial, as residential development in towns and the countryside can consume farmland and impose restrictions on farming. As one farmer stated:

“If we continue to sprawl, at the rate we’re sprawling, there won’t be an acre of farmland left in Ontario in 100 years or 150 years. And I don’t think anybody wants that.”

A farmer perspective on the importance of protecting farmland:

“You drive out of Toronto or Kitchener-Waterloo, and for hours of driving, all people see is farmland, and they don’t understand that what looks like a vast amount of farmland represents less than 5% of Ontario’s land. It may seem vast to them, but in the big picture, it is just a drop in the bucket and needs to be protected.”

Surplus Residential Severances

The average farm size in Huron County is 266 acres, though the County was originally settled on 100-acre parcels. This has led to more residences than farm operations, resulting in a surplus of homes not needed by the farm. According to the county planner and a farmer, this issue is notable for cash crop farmers, who operate large acreages with minimal housing needs. Some of these surplus homes have been demolished, used for farm workers, or severed in line with provincial policy. While historically restricted, severances are now permitted if the house is at least 15 years old—a policy that remains debated, as some advocate for a shorter timeline. Severing surplus residences has been a topic of discussion in Huron for over 50 years. Once severed, these homes are unlikely to serve as farm dwellings, can limit neighbouring livestock facilities, may require enhanced services, and provincial policy prohibits a dwelling on the retained parcel.

Nevertheless, a local planner noted that severed surplus dwellings provide housing for farm workers:

“I also hear about retaining farm labour and prices or wages not keeping up with inflation. A common scenario we’re seeing is farm hands who are subsequently buying those surplus resident severances from the farmer. And it’s sort of a goodwill gesture between the two parties. I have this awesome worker and I want to keep him over the long term. He wants to live in the country and buying a commercial scale farm is not his future. But hey, maybe I can sever off this house and make it affordable for him. I think that’s a story we hear quite often.”

Planning for Settlement Areas and As of Right Zoning

The need for housing in rural communities extends well beyond the farm. Huron’s agri-food sector is vital, encompassing a wide range of businesses - from local veterinarians and truckers to some of the largest agricultural enterprises in the country. The staff for these businesses and other community services, such as schools and hospitals also require housing and for more than 50 years planning policy in Huron County has directed residential, commercial, and industrial development to settlement areas. While growth pressure within the county has been relatively limited, the county has succeeded in placing a high priority on farmland and farming practices. Recent trends, however, increasingly point to the need to accommodate more housing, with 10,640 new housing units needed in the County by 2051.

This need for more housing in urban areas was clearly articulated by the county planner:

“I honestly think we’ve failed to bring online enough housing in urban communities, and for lots of reasons. It’s not just planning, it’s planning, it’s building, it’s the whole housing machine and interest rates. So as much as we’re talking about agriculture, we can’t avoid the (question) why haven’t there been more options in urban areas?”

As-of-right zoning recognizes that a given use is permitted within a designated zone without requiring further planning approvals, provided it complies with applicable zone provisions. In residential zones, for instance, a house is typically permitted as long as it meets setback and other requirements. As part of a strategy to encourage greater housing diversity and density, additional uses, such as duplexes or triplexes, could be permitted where zoning was previously limited to single dwellings. This opportunity was discussed by a farm representative with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture:

“As an organization (OFA), we talk a lot about as of right zoning. And I mean, I see it happening in Seaforth right now. There’s a two story three-unit apartment. Looks kind of like a house being built. The next-door neighbour is a good friend, and they are upset like you would not believe because this thing doesn’t look like their house. But as it gets closer and closer to completion, it looks just like any other two-story home in the community, it’s just a little bit longer. So, I think that as of right helps with density, allowing a two or three story apartment; in London or Kitchener, maybe it’s a fiveplex, rather than a single detached home, or maybe it’s a 40 story building. I think you’ve seen KW, or Region of Waterloo do some very spectacular things with density in their downtown and in other areas.”

In Wingham, North Huron, a local developer saw the need for more rental housing to serve the community, including agricultural and agribusiness workers. This development, with over 40 units, marks a shift in the town’s typical rental scale. In the words of developer Brock Hodgins:

“It’s a farming community, and people here don’t want us giving out farmland to build more houses. We only have so much space, right? Building up saves costs because you’re still only putting one roof on it, but you’re getting another floor of units.... We’re small-town local guys and have never done anything of this scale.”



Source: *How We Grow Matters: Wingham* video by Huron County

This approach to as-of-right zoning has also been championed by local politicians and county and local planners. In the words of the county planner:

“We were looking at how to make housing as of right in as many contexts as possible. So fully serviced urban, partially and privately serviced urban, we looked at the agricultural areas and then to a lesser extent, the rest of the lakeshore.”

The county planner went on to elaborate on what they thought would address housing needs in urban areas in Huron and beyond:

“I would go as of right in all of the surrounding urban fabrics, within the Greenbelt or within any planning context, and make their zoning by law, as of right for more dense forms of housing. As much as people say they permit triplexes and fourplexes, they don’t, because they still require two parking spaces per unit, they still have a maximum coverage of 30%, they still require three meter side yards. If we care about preserving agriculture and avoiding sprawl, we need to actually codify zoning bylaws such that compact forms can be built and thus relieve the pressure on agricultural land.”

County of Huron's Existing Policies

The County of Huron and its member municipalities have been actively engaged in planning for more than 50 years. The County Planning Department oversees County-wide planning while also providing planning services to the nine lower-tier municipalities. This structure ensures coordinated and reasonably consistent planning policies across the county..

When it comes to agriculture and housing, policy is coordinated under the County OP and developed in more detail with the input of individual member municipalities. Local OPs and ZBLs implement an overall direction that for a number of years has tackled the issue of housing, recognizing the importance to agriculture, farmland preservation and enhanced opportunities within urban centers. Goderich, with a population of 7,881 people, is the largest urban center in the county. The Municipality of South Huron has been selected as a representative lower tier municipality with a diverse agricultural industry, a total population of 10,065 and is in relatively close proximity to the City of London (located 30 minutes to the south).

In 2021, the County released the report, *Through a Housing-Friendly Lens: A Review of Development Policy in Huron County*.¹¹³ It provides recommendations to the eight lower-tier municipalities, primarily focused on settlement areas, to help address the current and projected housing shortfall in the county. While, in the words of the county planner, these are “*still a work in progress,*” she goes on to note that these policy directions “*have led to a number of changes at the local level, including support for intensification, the inclusion of additional residential uses policy, and increased density through as-of-right zoning in low and medium density zones.*”

The following discussion reviews key elements of the County and South Huron Official Plan, and the South Huron Zoning By-law.

Official Plan Policy

The County of Huron sets high-level planning policies, while the Municipality of South Huron provides more detailed guidelines in its OP. Both emphasize the critical role of agriculture in the community and economy. Notably, the South Huron OP is the only municipality reviewed to specifically highlight the importance of housing for the agricultural sector, stating a goal “to recognize that a strong agricultural economy requires housing but not to allow the decentralization of general housing uses onto prime agricultural lands.”¹¹⁴

While the County OP supports up to three residential units on parcels in prime agricultural areas (Section 2.3(19)), local OPs provide more detail. South Huron's OP authorizes the following provisions:

4.4.1 b) Additional Residential Units: This section clarifies that for a farm unit a maximum of two ARUs ancillary to a main dwelling may be permitted on farms engaged in commercial scale farming (subject to a number of conditions including: the residences may not be severed; it meets MDS requirements; it is in close proximity to the existing dwelling / cluster of buildings; it uses the existing driveway and it has appropriate services). A farm parcel is also permitted to contain accommodations for additional farm labour if required by the farm operation.

113. For a detailed review of the policy and zoning recommendations proposed by the County please see: County of Huron Planning and Development Department. (2021). *Through a Housing-Friendly Lens: A Review of Development Policy in Huron County*. <https://connectedcountyofhuron.ca/20439/widgets/81802/documents/55272> 114. South Huron. (2024, February consolidation). *Official Plan*. s. 4.3.8. <https://www.huroncounty.ca/planning/land-use-planning/>

4.4.3 Residences in Agricultural areas: This section clarifies the criteria under which a residence may be established for different sized parcels in agricultural areas.

4.4.6 Housing for On-Farm Labour: This section allows on-farm labour dwelling unit(s) where farm operations, including commercial greenhouses, and agriculture-related uses require housing for employees on the same property as the main use. Criteria include that the dwellings are located within 60 metres of the main dwelling or if no main dwelling exists, within 60 metres from the largest building (e.g., livestock barn, greenhouse, etc.); Uses the same laneway and complies with MDS.

7.5.5.4.2 Residential Development (Low, Medium and High Density). This section includes residential policies for the Town of Exeter. The policies push higher densities and allow for two ARUs in fully serviced residential areas either within the main dwelling and/or in a structure accessory to a residence.¹¹⁵

South Huron Zoning Provisions

The South Huron Zoning By-law (consolidated April of 2024) provides detailed criteria that regulates development and implements the policies established within the Municipal OP.¹¹⁶

4.2 In the General Agriculture zone (AG1) a number of residential uses are permitted on farms. These include a Dwelling Unit accessory to a farm, ARUs (total of two) with a maximum of one in a detached structure and dwellings for on-farm labour (in a single dwelling containing a maximum of 6 dwelling units).

4.4.2 This section provides criteria for ARUs and on-farm labour, including that an accessory structure must be located at a maximum separation of 60 meters from the main dwelling, use the same laneway, comply with setbacks for the main dwelling, and comply with MDS.

2. ARU Definition: The by-law defines an ARU as “a dwelling unit within a dwelling in addition to the main dwelling unit or a dwelling unit within a detached accessory structure.”

7.2 and 7.3 This section applies to agricultural small holdings (AG4) which are small parcels that accommodate a residence. Sections 7.2 and 7.3 allow for a single ARU. The unit (Section 7.5), if in an accessory structure, must be located at a maximum separation of 60 meters from the main dwelling, use the same laneway, be in the interior side yard or to the rear of the main building and comply with setbacks for the main dwelling.

30.1, 30.2 and 30.4.2: Section 30 of the zoning by-law provides provisions for the R1 zone (Residential- Low density). These zone provisions apply in Exeter and other villages and hamlets within the municipality.

Section 30.1 lists a number of permitted uses including converted dwellings, duplex dwellings, single detached, semi-detached and triplex dwellings.

115. South Huron Official Plan, consolidated February 2024. 116. Municipality of South Huron. (2024, April consolidation). *Zoning By-Law*. <https://www.southhuron.ca/build-invest/planning-and-development/zoning-by-law/>

Section 30.2 specifies that this zoning includes Additional Residential Unit(s) in a single detached dwelling, semi-detached dwelling or an accessory structure.

Section 30.4.2 provides provisions for ARUs. Where there are full services, two ARUs are permitted; where there are partial or private services one is permitted. Specific provisions pertain to driveways, proximity to property line and street, size and relationship to the main dwelling.

County of Huron: Key Takeaways

Huron's approach to housing and agriculture is notable for a variety of reasons. The overall approach reflects an on-going recognition of the importance of agriculture in the local economy, while at the same time recognizing that there are issues related to housing that need to be addressed. The interviews and document review leads to the following conclusions.

Awareness: Agriculture First and Farmland Protection

In speaking to farmers and planners within Huron there was a high level of awareness of the relationship between agriculture and housing. There was a recognition that an emphasis on protecting farmland necessarily leads to a cautious approach to housing on farms, while encouraging housing in urban areas. The overall conclusion is that the agriculture first policy, which has been in effect for 50 years, still needs to be championed and while housing needs to be encouraged, it should not occur at the expense of a robust farm economy.

From the perspective of a county planner this commitment to farmland protection should not be taken for granted. There is a role for farm groups, municipalities and the Province. From their perspective, *“what's happened in the past four to five years has done more damage to the preservation of agriculture because of what's been coming out of the province. Cutting into the Greenbelt and proposing three lots per farm parcel... the whole discourse of farmland preservation has been really thrown off.”*

Evolving Policy

In 2021, the County released *Through a Housing-Friendly Lens: A Review of Development Policy in Huron County*. This document identified various options to facilitate housing development, largely in the county's settlement areas. The OP and ZBL are the primary tools for implementing these options and are evident in the planning documents for the municipality of South Huron. South Huron's OP and ZBL provide strategies and policy for increasing density and more diverse forms of housing within Exeter and other smaller hamlets and villages. At the same time, these documents allow for new opportunities on farms that can accommodate family members and the growing need for housing for farm workers. Policy attempts to do this, while working to manage the risk of future pressure for potential severances.

Innovative Communications

Increasing density, as of right zoning, and protecting agricultural lands are at times contentious public issues. Huron County has addressed these issues in a number of ways. Staff and local elected officials have presented at local events and have worked with developers and the farm community. The County has also released several videos, as a series called How We Grow, that help to explain the rationale behind changes to help achieve higher density, provide housing options, and, ultimately, to make housing more available for county residents.

Housing for Agriculture, but not at Agriculture's Expense

Additional housing opportunities on farms have been provided. In reviewing planning documents and in speaking to farmers and planners, there is a recognition of the need to carefully monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the policy options and its relationship with a highly functioning agricultural system. As an example, the county monitors housing starts, severance activity, and uptake of ARU construction.

Focus on As of Right Zoning

As of right zoning leads to higher density, diversification and reduced NIMBYism and was encouraged by planners and farmers. Indeed, local planning documents provide diverse housing options within R1 zoning while limiting the need for further planning approvals. Similar opportunities for ARUs and farm labour have been extended to the farm community. This contributes to housing options on farms and within settlement areas.

Planning for Agriculture by Planning for Settlement Areas

This relationship between agriculture, agri-food business and settlement areas was discussed by planners and farmers and evident in planning documents. By encouraging residential development in settlement areas, the net result is housing that can accommodate farm and agri-food business workers, while concurrently reducing pressure for urban development in rural areas. As a local planner noted: *"Within settlement areas we need to create a fulsome opportunity for a range of housing. It's zoning as a right, it's long-term care homes so that grandma and grandpa can be near the farm in their final years. It's transit investment so that those international agricultural workers, can either get to the farm or as close to the farm as they can from their house in town."*





6

Principles for Action

Reflections from the Case Studies

The case studies provide valuable insights into a range of housing issues for agriculture in the Greenbelt and across Ontario, highlighting regional differences in geography and planning strategies. In Niagara Region more than 50 years of provincial policy and guidelines have served to protect unique specialty crop areas from urban development. Agriculture in Durham Region contributes significantly to the local economy through a number of agricultural products including livestock, grain and oilseed production, while Huron County provides insights and relevant policies from a long history of planning for agriculture.

Important similarities and lessons from the case studies and shared experiences from planners and farmers contribute to our understanding of housing in both an agricultural and rural community context:

- Many farm family operations occasionally require additional help, such as an extra driver or harvest workers, but not at a scale that justifies on-farm housing, however, for those with ongoing labour needs, on-farm housing for employees was identified as a priority.
- Large farm operations and specialized operations such as high-volume fruit and vegetable production may have significant labour requirements with a corresponding need for housing. Without a reliable workforce, these operations are unlikely to make investments and expand their businesses. This was particularly evident in Niagara.
- It was largely recognized that housing in prime agricultural areas should be limited to housing required in support of the agricultural industry with some recognition that ARUs could help farm families accommodate family housing needs and needed to be carefully thought through (e.g., impacts on agriculture, private services, municipal servicing, and environmental implications).
- Planners noted opportunities to establish farm worker housing within settlement areas. This perspective captures the challenges agri-food sector workers face finding housing and planners recognize the need to accommodate this housing within settlement areas, offering a number of ideas.

Throughout all discussions, challenges related to farming and the importance of appropriate housing including the following highlights:

- Meeting the housing needs of the agricultural sector is critical for workforce development and sustaining investments in agriculture to maintain and expand operations.
- Non-farm residences in Prime Agricultural Areas and Rural Areas can significantly hinder agricultural operations and economic growth.
- Non-farm residences in these areas can also increase competition for land resulting in rising prices for homes and farmland and further negatively affect the viability of agriculture in the Greenbelt and beyond in Ontario.
- Rural housing and infrastructure that centres planning on local agricultural economies also supports the financial sustainability of rural communities.

The following principles provide strategic guidelines to support rural communities in meeting housing needs and recognize the interconnectedness of rural housing and infrastructure and agricultural viability. The principles may help to reinforce and strengthen the policy framework in the Greenbelt and across the province in rural communities with significant agricultural operations and economies.

Protect Agricultural Land

The importance of protecting farmland was expressed in each case study and by all interviewees. Quality farmland is the foundation upon which agriculture exists in Ontario, playing a crucial role in ensuring long-term food security and rural viability. However, this limited resource is under increasing pressure from urban expansion and other land-based activities.¹¹⁷ The recent heightened focus on housing in Ontario has led to concerns that agricultural land could be placed under even further pressure to meet these demands.

The relationship between the Oak Ridges Moraine (ORM) and Greenbelt Plan (Protected Countryside) highlights differences in housing policies for agricultural areas. While both protect agricultural lands, the ORM Plan imposes stricter limits on additional dwelling units to safeguard ecological and hydrological integrity, particularly for farm worker and temporary housing. Tailored guidance is needed to align housing solutions with the distinct requirements of each plan while preserving agriculture and the environment.

Principle 1: The preservation of agricultural and rural lands needs to remain a key priority at the municipal and provincial government levels. Efforts should be made to avoid further fragmentation of the rural landscape, and policies should strive to safeguard both prime agricultural land and other valuable rural areas from urban encroachment and non-agricultural development.

Foster Sustainable Agriculture and Balance Growth with Environmental Protection

The relationship between agriculture and other land uses can present challenges, as farming practices such as noise, dust, and odours may conflict with non-farm developments. Planning policies that allow urban expansion and non-farm activities in rural areas without considering their impact on agriculture can exacerbate these conflicts. Additionally, housing and infrastructure project decisions must recognize the need to preserve farmland and natural resources which enable growth by providing food, clean water flood control, and biodiversity. Supporting sustainable farming practices and promoting compact urban development can help protect rural areas from encroachment and enable rural and agricultural communities to thrive.

To further support thriving rural communities, it is essential to strengthen transportation networks that connect rural areas and communities. This includes traditional transportation services as well as active transportation options such as cycling and pedestrian pathways, which can reduce isolation, improve access to services, and enhance quality of life for rural residents.

117. The Ontario Farmland Trust reports that the total acreage of farmland in Ontario decreased from 12,348,463 in 2016 to 11,766,071 in 2021. This averages out to approximately 319 acres of farmland lost per day during this time period. This rate of loss is almost double the 175 acres of farmland lost per day that was reported in the 2016 Census of Agriculture. (https://ontariofarmlandtrust.ca/2022/07/04/ontario-losing-319-acres-of-farmland-every-day/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

Urban-focused development strategies—such as increasing density, ensuring adequate services, and offering diverse housing options—can alleviate housing pressure in rural areas, ultimately benefiting the agricultural sector. Strengthened tools, including the MDS formulae and Agricultural Impact Assessments, are necessary to mitigate potential conflicts and ensure the long-term viability of agricultural land.

Principle 2: Development and agricultural practices must promote sustainability and recognize the importance of healthy ecosystems and environmental protection. This involves conserving natural resources, supporting economic viability in rural communities, and concentrating growth in urban centers to preserve agricultural lands and maintain environmental integrity.

Support Affordable Housing and Recognize the Role of Agri-Food Workers

Affordable and accessible housing is essential for sustaining Ontario's agricultural and rural communities. Farm and agri-food workers, both year-round and seasonal, play a critical role in supporting the agricultural sector. Housing options must accommodate the diverse needs of farm families, local rural residents, and agri-food workers, whether through on-farm housing or within nearby settlement areas. Addressing these housing needs can relieve pressure on local housing markets, support the economic viability of agricultural operations, and foster vibrant rural communities.

Principle 3: Affordable housing options that support farm families, agri-food workers, and rural residents are essential for the prosperity of Ontario's agricultural sector. Policies, partnerships, and community initiatives should ensure suitable housing for these groups without compromising farmland protection or rural viability.

Enhance Rural Infrastructure

Scattered residential development in the countryside can impose significant financial burdens on municipalities. Additionally, the cumulative impact of increasing housing in rural areas warrants careful consideration, as incremental growth may compound pressures on infrastructure, land use compatibility, and environmental sustainability. Studies across the U.S. and Canada consistently show that servicing dispersed low-density housing developments (e.g., roads, utilities, emergency services) is costlier per household compared to higher-density urban areas.¹¹⁸ These developments often require extensive infrastructure investments but generate relatively low tax revenues, leading to long-term financial strain on municipal budgets. In contrast, agricultural operations generally demand fewer municipal services, while contributing more revenue relative to their consumption, and also provide significant societal benefits through the provision of ecological goods and services, such as carbon sequestration, water filtration, and biodiversity conservation.

118. For details on Cost of Community Service Studies in the U.S., please see: https://farmlandinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/09/Cost_of_Community_Services_Studies_AFT_FIC_201609.pdf. For a perspective from the Ontario federation of Agriculture, please see: <https://pub-northmiddlesex.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=509>

Further complicating the issue, the environmental impact of scattered development—such as the loss of agricultural land and natural areas and increased vehicle dependency—can add additional financial and ecological costs. Ensuring that future development is strategically located to optimize service delivery and preserve agricultural land is essential for the sustainability of rural communities.

Principle 4: Effective infrastructure planning is necessary to support rural communities. Municipalities should prioritize compact development in designated settlement areas to avoid the high costs associated with scattered rural development and address the transportation, servicing, and technological needs that are unique to rural areas.

Promote Collaboration Between Stakeholders

The planning system in Ontario has undergone significant changes in recent years, with updates to the Planning Act, revoking the Greater Golden Horseshoe Growth Plan, and the introduction of a new PPS (2024) as of October 2024. These changes have created challenges for those working in the planning sector, leading to some confusion. Public opposition to as-of-right zoning or higher-density housing often arises without a full understanding of the potential benefits. Likewise, the housing needs of the agricultural and agri-food sectors, as well as the importance of the agricultural industry, can become overshadowed in broader discussions about housing.

Amid recent changes to provincial policies, municipal agricultural advisory committees play an essential role in addressing the resulting confusion by fostering collaboration and promoting clear communication. They help ensure that agricultural needs are clearly articulated and understood by the public and policymakers, providing valuable insights into the specific housing requirements of various parts of the agricultural sector.

Principle 5: Collaboration across all levels of government, agricultural organizations, and community stakeholders are essential for developing balanced policies that effectively support both rural development and agricultural protection.

Ensure Municipal Capacity for Rural Planning

The Greenbelt Plans establish policies specifically tailored to protect agricultural and natural resources within its boundaries while directing urban development away from these critical systems. These policies are vital in addressing the intense development pressures across the Greater Golden Horseshoe. While some stakeholders may advocate for harmonizing these policies with other areas of the province, it is crucial to recognize the unique environmental and developmental challenges faced within and adjacent to the Greenbelt.

The removal of the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe further emphasizes the need for municipalities to effectively manage land use planning and growth within this rapidly growing region, reinforcing the importance of Greenbelt Plan protections. Municipal politicians and staff must be equipped with the necessary resources and expertise to navigate these pressures, particularly as they relate to agricultural land use and rural development.

Principle 6: Municipalities must have the resources, capacity and expertise to manage rural development and land-use planning effectively, ensuring that Greenbelt Plan policies continue to protect vital agricultural land and natural resources while responding to the unique pressures within the GGH region.

Streamline Planning Processes

In today's housing climate, there is growing pressure on farmers to establish housing for tenants on farms, including immediate family members (e.g., sons, daughters, or parents). This housing can sometimes be built on separate farm parcels, or within existing dwellings or accessory structures as allowed under the Greenbelt Plan. Outside of the Greenbelt, the new Provincial Planning Statement (PPS 2024) allows farmers to establish up to two ARUs, one of which must be located in or attached to the principal dwelling. However, this approach carries risks in some contexts, such as when a family member who pays for the residence does not own the farm, leaving control of their investment under another family member.

From a municipal perspective, clear criteria can help reduce the long-term pressure for severances, ensuring that additional housing aligns with the broader goal of protecting farmland. The modification of Greenbelt Plan policies to allow more additional housing units may weaken agricultural protections and is not recommended.

Principle 7: Simplified and more efficient planning processes are essential to reducing barriers to housing and development, particularly for farmers and rural residents seeking to build additional housing units, however, the balance between providing housing and protecting agricultural land must be carefully maintained.

Incorporate Flexibility in Policy

The Greenbelt Plan has critical policies for protecting agricultural and environmental resources, recognizing the unique pressures faced by municipalities within the Greenbelt compared to other regions of the province. However, this plan also allows for flexibility in how municipalities apply these policies to meet local needs. For instance, in Niagara, where the region's agricultural economy relies heavily on seasonal labour for tender fruit and grape production, policies have been tailored to accommodate on-farm housing for temporary workers.

While the Greenbelt Plan emphasizes the protection of farmland, Niagara's flexible approach to housing supports its specialized agricultural workforce. This adaptability allows municipalities to address specific housing demands while remaining aligned with the Greenbelt Plan's broader objectives. By fostering adaptable policy frameworks, municipalities can effectively balance preserving agricultural land with meeting local housing needs, even when those policies differ from those applied in other regions.

Principle 8: Policies must be adaptable to the diverse needs of rural communities, providing flexibility in planning and zoning to accommodate different types of agricultural operations and housing solutions. These municipal policies, however, must still confirm to the objectives of the Greenbelt Plan. Municipalities within the Greenbelt need to find a balance to implement flexible policy frameworks that still align with the Greenbelt Plan's policies, enabling them to address local housing needs while maintaining provincial objectives for land protection and sustainability.



Prioritize Long-Term Rural Viability

Issues and policies evolve over time. While the housing shortage may feel like a relatively recent issue, it has been building for many years. The challenge now is to guide the evolution of housing and agricultural policy in a measured and consistent manner. Agricultural planning in Ontario has developed over more than 50 years, and changes to one policy can have ripple effects on related policies and on agriculture itself. Ensuring the long-term viability of rural communities requires policies that are consistent, predictable, and supportive of both housing and agriculture.

Principle 9: Long-term rural viability should be a key focus of planning and development policies. Housing policy must evolve carefully, taking into account its impact on housing supply, attainability, and the corresponding effects on agriculture, while addressing future needs and challenges in rural areas.

Support Innovation in Agriculture and Housing

As housing needs evolve in agricultural areas, technology and innovation play a key role in developing efficient, cost-effective solutions. Modular or prefabricated housing, for example, offers affordable and flexible options for accommodating seasonal farm workers or expanding rural housing capacity. Additionally, innovative tenancy arrangements, such as long-term leases or easements, can provide alternative pathways to support housing development while maintaining agricultural land use. Supporting innovation in agricultural practices and sustainable housing development can address both the demand for housing and the need to minimize the environmental footprint of new developments.

Principle 10: Encourage the adoption of innovative solutions, such as modular or prefabricated units, in both agricultural practices and rural housing, to meet the evolving needs of rural and agricultural communities while minimizing the environmental impact of these developments.

Summary of Principles

The principles presented in this chapter reflect the critical need to balance agricultural protection with sustainable development, recognizing that housing, rural infrastructure, and agricultural viability are deeply interconnected.

Table 2
Summary of the 10 Principles

Municipality	Explanation
Protect Agricultural Land	The preservation of prime agricultural land is essential to ensuring long-term food security and rural viability. Policies must prioritize the protection of farmland from urban encroachment and non-agricultural development.
Foster Sustainable Agriculture and Balance Growth with Environmental Protection	Sustainability and balanced growth are essential for rural prosperity. This principle emphasizes farming practices that conserve natural resources and reduce environmental impact while promoting compact urban development to protect farmland and support rural communities' long-term viability.
Support Affordable Housing and Recognize the Role of Agri-Food Workers	Affordable and accessible housing is essential for sustaining Ontario's agricultural sector. This principle highlights the need for housing solutions that meet the diverse needs of farm families, agri-food workers, and rural residents, supporting agricultural operations and vibrant rural communities.
Enhance Rural Infrastructure	Effective infrastructure planning is necessary to support rural communities. This includes addressing transportation, servicing, and technological needs that align with the unique challenges of rural areas.
Promote Collaboration Between Stakeholders	Collaboration across all levels of government, agricultural organizations, and community stakeholders is essential for developing policies that balance rural development and agricultural protection.
Ensure Municipal Capacity for Rural Planning	Municipalities must have the resources and expertise to manage rural development and land-use planning effectively, particularly as it pertains to the unique needs of agricultural communities.
Streamline Planning Processes	Simplified and more efficient planning processes are needed to reduce barriers to housing and development, particularly for farmers and rural residents seeking to build additional housing units.
Incorporate Flexibility in Policy	Policies must be adaptable to the diverse needs of rural communities, providing flexibility in planning and zoning to accommodate different types of agricultural operations and housing solutions.
Prioritize Long-Term Rural Viability	The long-term viability of rural communities should be the ultimate goal of planning and development policies. This principle encourages forward-thinking approaches that account for future needs and challenges.
Support Innovation in Agriculture and Housing	Encouraging innovation in both agricultural practices and rural housing solutions is vital. This principle advocates for policies that support technological advancements and creative approaches to rural development.

Conclusion

The principles outlined in this chapter underscore the importance of safeguarding agricultural land while ensuring that housing needs are met in a manner that supports rural, agricultural communities and the Agri-Food Network in the Greenbelt and beyond. These principles aim to provide a framework for sustainable planning and decision-making, which will be explored further in the following chapter that outlines recommendations. While these principles reflect foundational values and priorities, recommendations offer specific actions and policy approaches to implement these principles.





Recommendations

Introduction

Adequate housing is essential for the sustainability and growth of Ontario's agri-food sector. The viability of agricultural development relies on policies that address the housing needs of farmers, farm workers, and the broader agri-food network, while protecting farmland and rural resources. In areas like the Greenbelt, where development pressures and unique agricultural attributes coexist with vital natural resources, these policies are especially critical.

The recommendations in this chapter build on the principles outlined in the previous chapter, drawing from case studies, a comprehensive literature review, and insights from an advisory committee workshop. These recommendations aim to expand housing options, support farm workers, and ensure that planning policies align with the long-term goals of protecting agricultural land and fostering resilient rural communities. Although this report is focused on the Greenbelt, many of the insights and recommendations can also be applied to other regions of rural Ontario where agriculture plays a significant role.

Workshop participants also helped to evaluate the proposed recommendations. Recommendations 1, 2, 8, 9 and 10 were considered feasible and a high priority, indicating a need for immediate action.

The Evolving Role of Upper-Tier Municipalities in Land-Use Planning

Recent shifts in municipal governance in Ontario have affected planning authority in certain upper-tier municipalities, particularly within the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) regions of York, Peel, and Halton (and others may be affected). As planning responsibilities adjust to these changes, such as the removal of Official Plan authority and the downsizing of planning departments, the feasibility of certain recommendations involving upper-tier municipalities may be affected. While many upper-tier municipalities will continue to play a critical role in education, training, and providing strategic direction to their lower-tier municipalities, alternative approaches to fostering collaboration among lower-tier municipalities and supporting agricultural and rural land-use planning may need to be explored. This report recognizes these challenges and encourages flexible implementation strategies that account for regional differences in governance structures and capacity.



Actions

This chapter organizes the proposed recommendations under five thematic headings, each reflecting the essential connection between housing and agricultural viability. These themes represent critical areas of focus, though the order does not imply prioritization or a specific sequence for implementation.

1. Housing and Farm Worker Accommodation

These strategies focus on meeting the housing needs of farm workers through innovative and flexible solutions tailored to the agricultural workforce. Providing suitable housing supports both agricultural operations and the vitality of rural communities.

2. Municipal Capacity and Planning Processes

Emphasizes strengthening municipal capacity to address rural housing and agricultural planning needs. This includes guidance, training, and support to streamline planning processes and ensure municipalities can develop effective housing policies for rural and agricultural areas.

3. Infrastructure and Servicing for Rural and Agricultural Areas

Outlines essential infrastructure and servicing improvements needed to support housing in rural areas. These strategies ensure sustainable service provision for agricultural housing without straining resources.

4. Land and Environmental Protection for Agricultural Sustainability

Highlights the need to balance housing development with farmland preservation and environmental sustainability. These strategies aim to protect natural resources and prevent unnecessary land fragmentation.

5. Economic and Community Development in Rural Areas

Focuses on fostering rural growth through incentives for affordable housing that bolster local economies, enhance community engagement, and promote sustainable development in rural regions.

Housing and Farm Worker Accommodation

Recommendation 1: Province maintain existing ARU policies for on-farm housing in the Greenbelt Plans and PPS 2024, and consider expanding these policies to agri-businesses.

The Provincial Greenbelt Plan allows one ARU within the main dwelling or an existing accessory building. The PPS 2024 allows up to two ARUs with at least one unit located within or attached to the primary dwelling. Extending these policies to include agri-businesses would meet the growing need to support employees of these businesses, such as processing plants, veterinary clinics, and equipment dealers. Greater consideration is needed to determine impacts on agricultural areas or landscapes including the Greenbelt. As-of-right zoning bylaw updates and a review of development charges can streamline the process for ARUs and lower costs for farmers. Clear policy guidance is needed to prevent residential uses from interfering with agricultural operations or disrupting sensitive hydrological and ecological systems.

ARU policies are in addition to the farm worker housing policies permitted as an agricultural use in the plans.

Context: ARUs can address immediate needs for housing and labour shortages within Ontario's agricultural workforce. It is necessary to maintain specific ARU policies in the Greenbelt to manage urban development pressures and preserve farmland and an economically important Agri-Food Network. An ARU policy for agri-businesses can help address acute housing shortages in the larger agri-food sector and rural communities, while supporting workforce stability and economic growth.

ACTION STEPS

- **Policy Guidance:** The Province collaborate with municipalities and agricultural organizations to streamline the approval process for ARUs within and outside the Greenbelt. Clear criteria should be developed covering access, location, size, and servicing requirements. Guidance should be flexible to address unique regional, hydrological protections and environmental needs while focusing on agricultural viability.
- **PPS Amendment for Agriculture-Related ARUs:** The Province consider amending PPS 2024 to explicitly permit ARUs as housing for employees in agriculture-related businesses, such as processing plants and vet clinics. Concurrently, ARU policies within the Greenbelt and ORM Plans must remain distinct to prevent severance pressure and ensure the protection of ecological and hydrological integrity.
- **Municipal Zoning Updates:** Municipalities update zoning by-laws to permit ARUs as accessory housing for agriculture-related commercial and industrial uses on an as-of-right basis in designated agricultural areas.
- **Development Charges and Fees:** The Province and municipalities establish clear, transparent rules regarding development charges and fees for ARUs and farmworker housing. Policies should ensure fair cost assessments for agricultural operators and minimize financial barriers. Consideration should be given to waiving, reducing, or deferring development charges for ARUs to improve affordability and address housing needs in agricultural areas.
- **Environmental and Hydrogeological Considerations:** Maintain hydrogeological assessments as a requirement for ARU and farmworker housing, especially in areas with shallow aquifers, private wells, and septic systems, to protect water resources and environmental integrity. Cumulative impacts of additional residential development, such as increased water demands on aquifers and heightened risks of water contamination, must also be considered.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- **Preservation of Farmland:** Targeted ARU placement and servicing guidelines will help safeguard farmland, especially within the Greenbelt.
- **Flexible Housing Options for Agri-Food Workers:** By permitting ARUs for agriculture-related businesses, housing solutions for agri-food workers will support workforce retention and economic resilience.
- **Clear Policy Guidance:** A specific ARU policy framework will enable municipalities to manage housing demand without increasing urban pressures, supporting long-term agricultural sustainability.
- **Streamlined Development Charges:** Transparent and simplified development charges will make ARU development more affordable, fostering feasible housing solutions for farmers and rural businesses.

Recommendation 2: Municipalities and Province collaborate to promote innovative housing solutions for farm workers and agri-food businesses.

The Province and municipalities should collaborate to explore and increase awareness of innovative housing solutions for agriculture. There is a specific need for adaptable housing options, such as modular or tiny homes, ARUs, and temporary worker accommodations, both on-farm and within nearby settlement areas. Current policies should enable these options or identify needed updates to zoning by-laws and policy.

Context: Agriculture-related housing options are needed for both seasonal and permanent workers. New and innovative housing options will increase possibilities for farmers, address housing shortages and respond to the sector's unique demands. A greater focus on housing solutions ensures that agriculture is treated as a vital part of planning decisions, rather than as an afterthought.

ACTION STEPS

- **Agricultural Lens in Planning:** Greater attention is needed by municipalities to plan housing that serves the agricultural workforce and rural and agricultural areas, including integrating an agricultural lens into Official Plans and housing policies. Economic development strategies should also incorporate housing for farm workers, prioritizing innovative housing solutions for both seasonal and permanent agricultural workforce needs.
- **Advisory Committees:** The Province should encourage municipalities to establish Agricultural Advisory Committees to provide expert advice on the implications of housing policies for agriculture. These committees would work closely with municipal planning teams to align housing policies with the needs of farm workers and agri-food business. Municipalities should determine whether these committees should advise upper or single-tier governments.
- **Zoning and Policy Updates:** Municipalities should update zoning by-laws and policies to promote flexible and innovative housing solutions responsive to the needs of the agricultural workforce. The Province also has a role to encourage this work.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- **Agriculture-friendly Housing Policies:** Housing policies that are responsive to the specific and evolving needs of the agricultural sector, ensuring that agriculture remains central to all planning and decision-making discussions.
- **Increased Flexibility for Farmers:** Increased availability of innovative and flexible housing for farm workers and agri-food business, supporting the sector's growth and sustainability.
- **Cross-sectoral Collaboration:** Strengthened collaboration between municipalities, Agricultural Advisory Committees, and the Province to integrate agriculture into economic development and housing strategies effectively.

Recommendation 3: Municipalities develop specific housing strategies for farm workers.

In municipalities closely tied to agriculture and agri-food economies, housing strategies should prioritize the need for farm workers, including on-farm housing and congregated off-site housing in nearby settlement areas. These strategies should address the unique service and infrastructure needs of off-farm housing and incentivize shared housing solutions that serve multiple farms, increase density, reduce farmland loss, and encourage collaboration among farmers. Follow through to update zoning should also be a priority.

Context: The agriculture and agri-food industry is the economic cornerstone of many Greenbelt rural communities' and plays a critical role in the provincial economy. To support this sector, municipalities must actively integrate agricultural perspectives into their economic development and housing strategies. With high labour demand, particularly in horticulture and livestock farming, a comprehensive housing strategy serving multiple farms and supplying year round housing can help alleviate farm worker housing shortages. ARUs and communal housing located in nearby hamlets, towns, and villages can provide viable options. This approach requires strong collaboration between farm businesses, municipalities, and transportation providers. Challenges associated with off-farm housing, such as rezoning, transportation infrastructure, competition from short-term rentals (e.g., Airbnb) and limited services in settlement areas must be addressed to make this model viable. Solutions should work for farms of various sizes and must also respect human rights and avoid limiting where people can live.

ACTION STEPS

- **Collaboration with Farm Businesses:** Foster cooperation between farm businesses, municipalities, and agricultural organizations to develop shared farm worker housing solutions for farm workers, balancing both on-site and off-site worker accommodations.
- **Centralized Housing in Settlement Areas:** Municipalities, with provincial support, should identify appropriate settlement areas (e.g., towns and villages) for ARUs or communal housing developments. These locations must be well-serviced with infrastructure, public transportation, and access to essential community amenities, such as grocery stores, to ensure accessibility and support for farm workers.
- **Zoning By-law and Official Plan Updates:** Municipalities should update Official Plans and zoning by-laws to allow for farmworker housing that serves multiple farms, addressing both on-site needs and off-site communal housing options.
- **Address Off-Farm Housing Challenges:** The Province and municipalities should mitigate challenges to off-farm housing, such as competition from short-term rentals, by creating incentives for farm worker housing and addressing transportation concerns for workers commuting from settlement areas.
- **Streamlined Development Charges:** Transparent and simplified development charges will make the development of farm worker housing more affordable.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- **Shared Housing Solutions:** Practical, shared housing options for farm workers will ease the burden on individual farms while promoting efficient use of housing resources.
- **Integrated Housing in Urban Centers:** Farm worker housing integrated into towns, and villages, ensuring access to community services, infrastructure, and transportation, while maintaining proximity to farms.
- **Flexibility for Farmers:** A flexible housing model that accommodates diverse farm needs, offering both on-site housing where necessary and off-site communal housing in nearby settlement areas, supported by infrastructure and services.

Recommendation 4: Establish a municipal on-farm worker housing navigator service and technical guide for farmers and agri-businesses to access building approvals and permits.

To facilitate building on-farm worker housing, municipalities should lead in developing a two-part program consisting of a Navigator Service dedicated to assisting farmers with approvals, building permits, and regulatory requirements. A Technical Guide should inform municipal staff and farmers on all aspects of on-farm worker housing, including zoning, public health, tax implications, and other regulatory considerations.

Context: Farmers would benefit from assistance in navigating the complex approval and building permit processes required for on-farm worker housing. While many farmers have a clear business case for developing this housing, navigating regulatory hurdles and obtaining necessary permits remains a challenge. A Navigator Service (or concierge service) and Technical Guide would help streamline the approval process, ensuring that both municipal staff and farmers have the information and support needed to facilitate on-farm worker housing.

This service should be run in partnership between municipalities and local chapters of general farm organizations (such as Ontario Federation of Agriculture, Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario, and National Farms Union-Ontario). Municipal economic development staff should be involved to help lead or support this service by providing information on incentives (such as CIPs), government supports, and plain language explanations of the process.

ACTION STEPS

- **Navigator Service:** A farm, planning, or municipal entity to take leadership in applying for Ontario's Rural Economic Development (RED) program funding to create a pilot project with a team comprising planners, building officials (CBOs), and provincial approval experts to provide farmers with direct assistance in navigating the housing approval process.
- **Technical Guide Development:** The Province, in collaboration with appropriate stakeholders, including farm sector groups such as Ontario Fruits and Vegetable Growers Association (ORVGA), should develop a technical guide covering zoning, health and safety, servicing, hydrogeological concerns, landlord/tenant regulations, and tax considerations for on-farm worker housing.
- **Training and Knowledge Sharing:** Once Navigator Services have been successfully piloted, municipalities should organize engagement and training sessions. Farm organizations, the Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI), and other stakeholders should lead these sessions to share insights, best practices and foster broader adoption of the program across Ontario.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- Streamlined Approval Processes: Farmers receive tailored assistance in navigating the approvals and permit process, reducing delays and confusion related to on-farm worker housing.
- Enhanced Municipal Capacity: Municipal staff better equipped to support on-farm worker housing approvals, leading to more efficient processing of applications.
- Comprehensive Resource for Farmers: Farmers have access to a detailed technical guide that helps them understand the full scope of regulations, ensuring that they can develop housing that meets the required standards.



Municipal Capacity and Planning Processes

Recommendation 5: Province provide additional sectoral guidance including best management practices for housing in agricultural areas.

The Province should take the lead in developing comprehensive guidance and best management practices for housing in agricultural areas, ensuring it reflects the diverse local contexts across Ontario. This document should serve multiple audiences—municipal staff, farmers, elected officials, and industry professionals—offering clear, plain-language guidance on housing policies, such as ARUs and farm worker housing. The guidance should support consistent and efficient policy implementation across lower-tier jurisdictions and be adaptable to local and regional needs.

Context: Municipalities often face challenges in interpreting and implementing agricultural housing policies, leading to inconsistent application of rules - particularly for ARUs and on-farm worker housing. Research indicates a guidance document is necessary for municipalities and other key audiences such as farmers, elected officials, and industry professionals. The guidance document can also serve as an educational tool for multiple stakeholders, fostering better understanding and application of housing policies.

ACTION STEPS

- **Collaboration:** The Province should develop the guidance document in collaboration with agricultural, municipal, and planning organizations (e.g., Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA), and OPPI) and include input from diverse rural communities to reflect regional differences.
- **MDS Compliance Guidance:** Provincial guidance should ensure that housing policies, including ARUs, align with Minimum Distance Separation (MDS) guidelines. Strengthening adherence to MDS is essential for balancing residential development with the protection of livestock operations and farmland.
- **Consideration of NEP Policies:** The Niagara Escarpment Plan (NEP) imposes additional restrictions on new housing in rural areas, particularly for ARUs and secondary dwelling units. While these policies aim to protect the escarpment and its natural environment, they should be reviewed to determine if additional flexibility pertaining to ARU's is warranted to address housing needs while maintaining environmental protections.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- **Consistent Policies:** Greater consistency in housing policies across municipalities and better-informed stakeholders, leading to reduced delays and greater clarity related to housing policy implementation.
- **Increased Capacity:** Enhanced capacity of municipalities, farmers, and decision-makers to manage housing needs in agricultural areas, supporting long-term rural development.

Recommendation 6: Province deliver educational programs to support the implementation of housing policies in agricultural areas.

The Province should develop and deliver a range of educational programs—including workshops, webinars, roundtables, and presentations at major events—to support the implementation of housing policies in agricultural areas. These programs should ensure the effective dissemination and application of provincial guidance, providing actionable insights tailored to municipalities, farmers, and industry professionals.

Context: Following the development of provincial guidance on housing policies for agricultural areas, targeted educational programs will be essential. These programs should focus on two key audiences – municipal planners and agricultural stakeholders (including farmers and elected officials). The goal is to ensure comprehensive understanding of the new guidance and provide practical strategies for implementing policies, particularly regarding ARUs and on-farm worker housing.

This recommendation aligns with the Navigator Service for On-Farm Worker Housing (Recommendation 4) and various technical and educational resources. A provincial website should be established to provide general guidance, while linking to local-specific resources.

ACTION STEPS

- **Content Development:** The Province, in collaboration with appropriate farm organizations and municipal/planning bodies (e.g., ROMA, OPPI), should develop content tailored to municipal planners and agricultural stakeholders. Education materials should be designed for multiple formats to ensure accessibility.
- **Delivery:** Offer in-person and online formats, such as workshops, webinars, and roundtables, to maximize accessibility and reach.
- **Support Materials:** Provide follow-up resources, including best management practice (BMP) toolkits, FAQs, and contact information, to support ongoing learning and application beyond initial sessions.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- Improved understanding and application of new housing policies among municipalities and agricultural organizations.
- Enhanced capacity for municipalities to apply policies effectively and consistently.
- Strengthened collaboration between municipal planners and the agricultural community, promoting uniform policy implementation across jurisdictions.

Recommendation 7: Province enhance municipal capacity for agricultural planning and launch a Planning Modernization Fund.

Enhancing municipal capacity for agricultural planning and policy conformity can be supported by providing resources for staff training, creating an Agricultural Advisory Committee, and modernizing zoning by-laws and Official Plans. Establishing a new provincial Planning Modernization Fund would provide municipalities with the necessary resources to ensure their policies align with provincial policy, including provisions for farm worker housing and ARUs.

Context: Effective agricultural planning is essential for balancing the preservation of agricultural land with the need to accommodate farm worker housing, ARUs, and broader infrastructure needs. Many municipalities, particularly those with limited resources, face challenges in addressing these issues in a timely and consistent manner. Improving municipal capacity is important not only for agricultural planning but also for updating local zoning and planning policies to conform with updated provincial policies and the unique housing requirements of the agricultural sector.

ACTION STEPS

- **Zoning Modernization:** The Province should implement a Planning Modernization Fund to help municipalities review and update outdated ZBLs and OPs.
- **Staff Training and Mentorship:** Develop regular training programs and mentorship opportunities for municipal planners. Led by the Province, in partnership with professional organizations (e.g., OPPI) and agricultural groups, training should focus on agricultural planning, rural housing policies, and the integration of housing solutions such as ARUs and farm worker housing.
- **Agricultural Advisory Committees:** Municipalities are encouraged to establish Agricultural Advisory Committees to provide expert advice on agricultural land use planning and housing policies, ensuring local needs are represented in decision-making. Local circumstances may determine whether these committees are best established at the lower-tier, upper-tier, or both levels of municipal governance to ensure effective participation and representation.
- **Building on Existing Recommendations:** The Province and municipalities should implement strategies from the *Enhancing Municipal Capacity to Support Agriculture in the Greenbelt* report, focusing on inter-municipal collaboration, strengthening provincial-municipal relationships, enhancing planner training resources, and improving engagement with the agricultural community. By investing in municipal capacity Ontario can ensure its agricultural land use and housing policies effectively support both farmland preservation and the housing needs of the agricultural sector.¹¹⁹

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- **Increased Capacity:** Improved municipal capacity to address the housing and infrastructure needs of rural and agricultural communities.
- **Cross-sectoral Collaboration:** Stronger collaboration between municipalities, agricultural organizations, and provincial authorities to ensure effective agricultural land use and housing policies.
- **Agriculture-friendly Housing Policies:** Modernized Zoning By-laws and Official Plans that reflect the current housing needs of farm workers and rural residents, while preserving agricultural land.

119. Caldwell et al. (2021). *Enhancing Municipal Capacity to Support Agriculture in the Greenbelt*. https://www.greenbelt.ca/municipal_capacity

Recommendation 8: Municipalities integrate agricultural housing needs into multiple strategies.

Municipal agricultural strategies and housing strategies should both incorporate specific policies and actions that address the housing needs of the agriculture sector and rural communities. This integration will ensure that the housing needs of farm families, farm workers, and agri-food sector employees are recognized and addressed in municipal plans with the goal of enhancing the sustainability of rural and agricultural communities.

Context: Municipal strategies often overlook the housing needs of the agricultural sector, including those of farm families, farm workers, and the broader agri-food industry. During a workshop for this report, participants debated whether housing should be incorporated into municipal agricultural strategies or whether agriculture should be incorporated into municipal housing strategies. The consensus was that both approaches are necessary to address housing shortages effectively.

With the new 2024 PPS direction to expand agricultural systems planning and requiring agricultural impact assessments in municipal planning processes, now is the ideal time to strengthen the focus on housing for agriculture. Engaging agricultural stakeholders is critical to ensuring housing strategies reflect local context and needs.

ACTION STEPS

- **Incorporate Housing into Agricultural Strategies:** Ensure municipal agricultural strategies explicitly address the housing needs of the agricultural workforce and the broader agri-business sector.
- **Expand Housing Strategies to Include Agriculture:** Municipalities preparing housing strategies in response to provincial mandates should recognize the unique housing needs of the agricultural sector, including farm families, workers and rural residents working for agri-food business, and develop policies that support housing solutions.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Municipalities to seek input from agricultural organizations such as the OFA, CFFO and the NFU, and other farm sector groups to ensure that housing strategies respond to local agricultural needs.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- **Integrated Planning:** Municipal agricultural and housing strategies that comprehensively address the housing needs of agricultural workers, farm families, and the broader rural community.
- **Potential for Increased Housing Availability:** Improved alignment of housing policies for agricultural and agri-food sector workers, which could support the sustainability of agriculture and rural economic development over time.
- **Collaboration with Agricultural Organizations:** Stronger collaboration between municipalities and agricultural organizations, leading to more effective housing policies that respond to the unique needs of the agricultural workforce.

Infrastructure and Servicing for Rural Areas and Agricultural Areas

Recommendation 9: Municipalities develop a rural infrastructure strategy to support agricultural and housing needs.

Municipalities, and in particular upper-tier governments, should lead the development of a comprehensive rural infrastructure planning strategy to support rural communities. The strategies should address the infrastructure needs of agricultural housing and ARUs and identify areas suitable for housing, establish clear servicing guidelines, and, where available, align with regional infrastructure master plans to ensure consistency. The Province should provide guidance, resources, and technical support as needed. Guidelines should also consider the use of private services where public infrastructure is unavailable, ensuring water resource protection while discouraging non-agricultural housing outside settlement boundaries.

Context: Rural infrastructure planning is essential to support agricultural operations and housing permitted outside settlement boundaries, such as farm residences, farm worker housing, temporary worker housing, and ARUs. General housing development outside of settlement areas is discouraged in an effort to protect agricultural land, hydrological systems and natural resources. For the types of housing allowed in these areas, infrastructure and servicing considerations—such as water, sewer, fire services, schools, active transportation, and municipal service capacity—are critical. A higher-level planning approach is needed to ensure that rural infrastructure aligns with these specific housing needs, without putting undue pressure on existing services or allowing unplanned development.

ACTION STEPS

- **Infrastructure Assessment:** Municipalities, with provincial input as needed, should conduct a detailed assessment of rural infrastructure capacity, focusing on water and wastewater services, fire protection, and schools. The assessment should identify areas suitable for farm housing, temporary worker housing, and ARUs, while recognizing the limitations for other types of residential development.
- **Higher-Level Planning Approach:** Develop an infrastructure planning strategy led by local municipalities and/or upper-tier municipalities, depending on their planning authority. Prioritize agricultural housing needs and include solutions for servicing areas where public infrastructure may not be available or sufficient. Ensure upper-tier municipalities provide support where needed.
- **Servicing Guidelines for Agricultural Housing:** Develop clear servicing guidelines for farm housing, temporary worker housing, and ARUs, including the use of private services, where appropriate, while reinforcing the discouragement of general residential development outside settlement boundaries.
- **Provincial Funding:** The increasing costs of water and wastewater treatment facilities pose significant challenges for smaller or slower-growing municipalities. Provincial infrastructure funding will be critical to ensure rural communities can invest in servicing their towns and villages, support land use efficiency and future density, and reduce development pressure on agricultural land.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- A structured, infrastructure plan that directs housing development for farm workers, temporary workers, and ARUs to areas with sufficient infrastructure servicing capacity to support it.
- Improved infrastructure capacity in rural areas to support agricultural housing needs without encouraging widespread development outside of settlement boundaries.
- Clear servicing guidelines that help manage pressure on rural services, particularly where private service solutions are needed for permitted agricultural housing.



Land and Environmental Protection for Agricultural Sustainability

Recommendation 10: Municipalities plan for sustainable housing development and complete communities in rural and urban areas.

The Province and municipalities should actively communicate the benefits and cost savings associated with repurposing existing residential and non-residential buildings for housing, implementing as-of-right zoning to support gentle intensification in settlement areas, and investing in infrastructure to enable sustainable housing development. Additionally, municipalities should integrate complete community principles into municipal plans, while the Province should offer financial programs and incentives to direct growth toward existing settlement areas, supporting rural and agricultural viability.

Context: As Ontario's rural and urban settlement areas face growing housing pressures a strategic approach is needed to optimize existing infrastructure, support building renovations, and foster complete communities. Rural communities can benefit from programs that convert vacant or decommissioned residential and non-residential structures into affordable housing, while urban settlements can use as-of-right zoning and targeted infrastructure investments to intensify housing while protecting agricultural land. In hamlets, gentle intensification—such as allowing up to fourplexes (served by private systems, if needed)—can be explored to provide additional housing options for farm workers, where appropriate.

There is concern that broad interpretations of rural policies in the PPS 2024 have, in some cases, facilitated rural subdivision proposals that fragment farmland and encourage housing types, such as large estate lots, that do not meet the critical needs of farm labour or affordable housing. The complete community model, which integrates housing, employment, and local food production, is key to supporting agricultural economies, preserving farmland, and meeting rural housing demands in the context of climate change.

ACTION STEPS

- **Renovation and Repurposing Programs:** The Province, with municipal input, should establish programs offering financial incentives (grants, low-interest loans) to encourage the renovation of vacant or decommissioned residential and non-residential buildings for housing. Municipalities can update zoning by-laws to support conversions while ensuring health, safety, and infrastructure needs are met.
- **As-of-Right Zoning and Capacity Assessments:** Municipalities, with provincial support, should apply as-of-right zoning for gentle intensification in rural and urban settlement areas where feasible, focusing on housing forms like ARUs and fourplexes. Municipalities should assess local servicing capacity, secure funding for necessary infrastructure upgrades, and conduct hydrogeological reviews for intensified areas relying on private services.
- **Infrastructure Investment for Urban Intensification:** Municipalities and the Province should collaborate on infrastructure assessments and targeted investments in urban centers, towns, and villages, focusing on capacity needs for water, sewer, and transportation. These efforts aim to support sustainable housing intensification and reduce development pressure on agricultural lands.
- **Complete Community Principles in Official Plans:** Municipalities should update the appropriate plans to incorporate complete community principles, promoting compact development in towns and villages that integrates housing, local food systems, employment, and essential services. Collaborate with agricultural organizations to align housing and infrastructure investments with agricultural sector needs.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- **Cost-Effective Housing Solutions:** Affordable housing options in both rural and urban areas, utilizing existing buildings and minimizing environmental impacts.
- **Enhanced Housing Diversity and Density:** Increased housing options through gentle intensification, better utilizing settlement areas and improving access for farm workers and rural residents.
- **Farmland and Environmental Protection:** Concentrating housing in designated settlement areas will preserve farmland, supporting the agricultural sector and minimizing low urban density.
- **Resilient Complete Communities:** Strengthened rural and urban economies with access to housing, local food systems, and essential services, fostering integrated and sustainable living environments.

Recommendation 11: Municipalities reexamine surplus dwelling severance policies to protect agricultural land and prevent fragmentation.

The Province and municipalities should reexamine and consider limiting permissions for surplus dwelling severance policies to prevent farmland fragmentation and protect agricultural land. From a long-term agricultural perspective, the best approach may be to remove these policies entirely from the PPS, the Greenbelt Plan, and municipal planning. At a minimum, municipalities must strictly adhere to existing policies to mitigate farmland loss.

Context: Surplus dwelling severances can contribute to farmland fragmentation, reducing its long-term viability and increasing pressures for non-agricultural development. Workshop participants suggested restricting permissions for surplus dwelling severances in municipal Official Plans and provincial planning policies. Given the challenges municipalities face in implementing these changes independently, support from the provincial government, along with potential revisions to the PPS and the Greenbelt Plan, is necessary. At times, municipalities may interpret greater flexibility in existing rules, resulting in severances that do not align with provincial direction. Education and advocacy is essential to achieving these changes.

ACTION STEPS

- **Policy Review and Removal:** The Province should conduct a comprehensive review of surplus dwelling severance policies within the PPS, Greenbelt Plan, and municipal planning documents, with the goal of removing or limiting these permissions to safeguard farmland. As a minimum, municipalities need to adhere to existing policies. Farm organizations and municipalities can provide input and advocate for revisions that prioritize long-term agricultural sustainability.
- **Provincial and Municipal Collaboration:** Work collaboratively with the provincial government and municipalities to align official plans with provincial agricultural protection goals.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- **Farmland Protection:** A reduction in the fragmentation of farmland and improved protection for long-term agricultural viability.
- **Alignment with Agricultural Goals:** Municipal planning documents that better align with provincial policies focused on agricultural land preservation.
- **Sustainable Land Use Practices:** A stronger emphasis on sustainable land use practices that prioritize the preservation of agricultural land base and long-term viability of the agri-food sector.



Economic and Community Development in Rural Areas

Recommendation 12: Municipalities provide incentives through Community Improvement Plans (CIPs) to promote affordable and rental housing for the agricultural sector and broader rural community.

Municipalities can promote the use of Community Improvement Plans (CIPs) to provide incentives for the development of rental and affordable housing. These incentives could include grants, loans, tax breaks, or other forms of financial support, particularly for housing development in towns and villages, with a focus on underused spaces (e.g., above commercial stores). This initiative would help address the housing needs of agricultural workers, agri-food businesses, and the broader rural community.

Context: There is a pressing need for affordable rental housing in rural communities across the province, including in areas that support agricultural and agri-food businesses. One potential strategy to address this need is through CIPs offering a flexible, locally driven tool that enables municipalities to direct incentives towards specific housing needs. Local businesses may also benefit from the increase in foot traffic and economic activity that accompanies residential growth above stores or in other underused spaces such as vacant lots, decommissioned industrial sites, or unused municipal or commercial buildings.

ACTION STEPS

- **Develop Incentive Programs:** Municipalities should create or expand CIPs to include specific incentives for the development of rental and affordable housing. These incentives can focus on underutilized spaces, such as above commercial buildings, or encourage new development in targeted areas.
- **Target Rural Communities:** Municipalities, with provincial input, should direct incentives toward towns and villages in agricultural regions across the province, with particular emphasis on Greenbelt municipalities, where the demand for worker housing and affordable rental units is high.
- **Collaboration with Stakeholders:** Work with local businesses, developers, and agricultural organizations to identify key opportunities for housing development and ensure that incentive programs meet local housing needs.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- **Increased Rental Housing Availability:** More affordable rental housing options in rural areas, addressing the housing needs of agricultural workers, agri-food businesses, and rural residents.
- **Revitalized Towns and Villages:** Enhanced economic activity in rural communities as residential development brings more people to local businesses.
- **Support for Agricultural Sector:** Housing that meets the needs of farm workers and agri-food sector employees, supporting the growth and sustainability of rural economies.

Recommendation 13: Municipalities collaborate to improve data collection and analysis to track agricultural and agri-food sector housing needs.

Municipalities should collaborate to create a comprehensive agricultural housing needs database to better understand the housing needs and experiences of farmers and agricultural workers. The database should include information on the uptake of ARUs and other housing forms on farms (e.g., garden suites, on-farm worker housing). Collaboration with the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) and ROMA, should leverage cloud-based permitting systems to collect data and provide a clearer picture of housing activity in agricultural areas.

Context: Accurate data on agricultural housing is essential for informed decision-making and policy development. Currently there is lack of comprehensive data on the housing needs of farmers, agricultural workers, and agri-food sector employees, as well as the uptake of available housing options across these groups. Where upper-tier municipalities remain involved in planning-related functions, they may support data collection efforts — for example, by tracking ARU building permits — and collaborate with local municipalities to identify housing trends and needs for farms and farmworker housing. Better access to data will provide a clearer understanding of housing activity in agricultural areas, supporting more effective policy direction and resource allocation.

ACTION STEPS

- **Cloud-Based Data Collection:** Utilize cloud-based permitting systems to collect data on new residential units in agricultural areas. This will create a baseline for data-driven decision-making and policy direction.
- **Pilot Program:** Implement a pilot project in one County or Region to refine data collection methods and demonstrate the value of this information for broader application.
- **Collaboration with MPAC and ROMA:** The Province to work with MPAC, ROMA, and municipalities to centralize data collection efforts and ensure that the system is aligned with provincial and municipal data needs and policy goals.
- **Funding and Maintenance of the Database:** Initial funding could potentially be sourced from provincial grants or partnerships with agricultural organizations and municipal associations, with ongoing maintenance managed by a designated provincial or municipal body.
- Additionally, the cost of accessing the database should be managed to prevent financial barriers for stakeholders. Strategies to address this could include subsidized access for smaller municipalities and agricultural organizations or open-access data portals for publicly accessible information. Leveraging existing data from key organizations, such as the Rural Ontario Institute's Community Wellbeing Dashboard,¹²⁰ could help fill some of these data gaps and provide municipalities with tools to better understand and address housing issues.

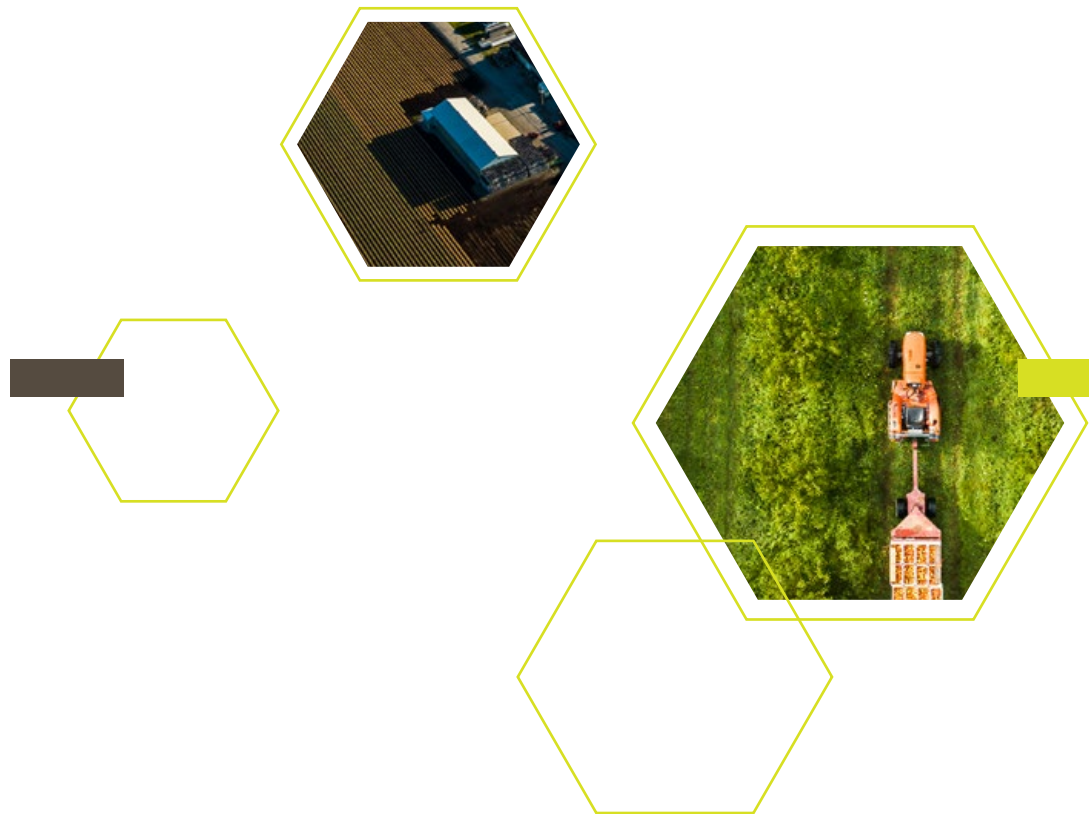
120. <https://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/wellbeing-dashboard>

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- **Data-Driven Decision Making:** Municipalities have access to accurate data on agricultural housing needs, supporting more informed policy and planning decisions.
- **Baseline for Agricultural Housing:** Establishing a data baseline for housing activity in agricultural areas will help track trends, monitor the uptake of ARUs, and assess the real needs of the agricultural sector.
- **Improved Collaboration:** Enhanced collaboration between municipalities, MPAC, and ROMA, leading to better-aligned policy direction and resource allocation for agricultural housing.

Conclusion

The recommendations outlined in this chapter are essential to addressing the ongoing challenges faced by Ontario's agricultural sector, particularly around housing for farm workers, agri-food businesses, and rural residents. Enhancing municipal capacity, modernizing zoning by-laws, and aligning provincial policies will help create sustainable housing solutions that support both agricultural operations and community development. The balance between protecting agricultural land and managing change is complex, but with the right tools, including innovative housing strategies, streamlined approval processes, and the integration of complete communities, the long-term viability of Ontario's agricultural landscape can be supported.





8

Conclusions

This study examined the relationship between housing and agricultural viability in rural Ontario, with a specific focus on the Greenbelt. Recognizing that a stable, accessible housing supply is essential for sustaining a productive agricultural sector, the research aimed to explore how current housing policies impact agriculture and how these policies can be adapted to meet the needs of farm families, agricultural workers, and rural community members.

Through a comprehensive literature review, case studies, and consultations with farmers, planners, and policymakers, the project identified key housing challenges facing rural communities and proposed actionable steps to support both agricultural sustainability and rural community vitality within the Greenbelt and Ontario's rural landscape.

The Greenbelt, established to protect valuable agricultural land and critical ecosystems and shape urban growth by supporting complete communities, plays a pivotal role in balancing housing and land preservation.

This research acknowledges the unique pressures within the Greenbelt and rural Ontario, where housing needs intersect with policies designed to protect farmland and foster a thriving agricultural economy. The findings from this study are intended to inform policymakers, planners, and community stakeholders of the necessary steps to address these housing challenges while upholding the Greenbelt's core goals.

This objective was pursued through a literature review, expert workshop, and case studies in Durham Region, Niagara Region, and Huron County, each offering unique insights into the intersection of housing needs and agricultural development. These approaches highlighted the importance of regional context in shaping effective policy solutions, as areas face distinct challenges, such as urban encroachment, farmworker housing shortages, and rising land costs.

The study's analysis of provincial and municipal planning policies demonstrated how housing policies can both support and hinder agricultural sustainability. Findings underscored the need for flexible housing solutions, especially for farmworker housing in regions with specialized, labour-intensive agriculture.

Overriding Conclusions

The research revealed several overarching conclusions:

1. The Greenbelt's Role in Balancing Housing and Agricultural Protection

The Greenbelt has been essential in protecting agricultural land and containing urban development, but growing housing needs, particularly for farm workers and rural communities, call for thoughtful policy updates. While housing is important, maintaining an agricultural-first approach is crucial to ensuring long-term food production. Flexible and innovative housing solutions must support farm families and workers, but these efforts must not compromise one of the Greenbelt Plan's core objectives of protecting farmland for future generations.

2. Protecting Farmland Is Essential

Across all case studies, the protection of prime agricultural land was a recurring priority. Farmland fragmentation, driven by urban expansion and scattered residential development, poses a significant threat to Ontario's agricultural future. Both provincial and municipal officials must remain vigilant in safeguarding this limited resource.

3. Housing Flexibility and Innovation Are Needed

The agricultural sector requires flexible housing solutions that cater to both family-owned farms and larger operations relying on temporary or seasonal workers. The promotion of ARUs and innovative housing models such as modular homes could be used to alleviate housing shortages without compromising agricultural land.

4. Municipal and Provincial Collaboration Is Key

The research highlighted the importance of multi-level governance. Municipalities, provincial agencies, and agricultural organizations must work together not only to streamline housing policies but also to coordinate on infrastructure investments, resource sharing, and community planning. Effective collaboration can ensure that housing policies are both practical and supportive of agricultural viability while addressing broader needs, such as transportation, utilities and broadband connectivity, social services, and environmental management, in rural communities.

5. Balancing Agricultural and Community Needs

While protecting farmland is paramount, rural communities must also have access to housing that supports broader social and economic development. Achieving this balance will require careful consideration of land-use policies, infrastructure investment, and long-term rural planning strategies.

6. Agri-food Business Housing Needs

Focusing on complete communities makes rural areas more attractive places where people want to live and work, which is vital for supporting Ontario's agri-food business sector. As operations expand, the need for housing extends beyond on-farm accommodations, requiring affordable, available housing in nearby towns and villages. This approach strengthens both the agricultural workforce and rural communities, ensuring the growth of agri-food businesses while protecting valuable agricultural land.

Suggestions for Future Research

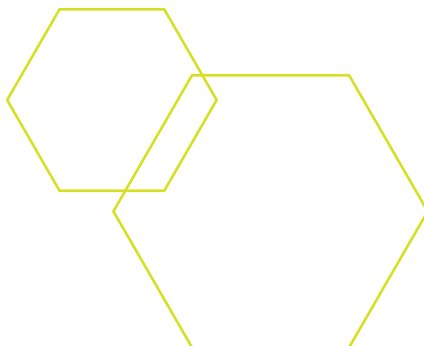
While this study provides valuable insights into housing needs and policies affecting rural and agricultural communities within the Greenbelt and beyond, further research would help deepen our understanding and address emerging challenges. Longitudinal studies could assess the long-term impacts of housing policies on agriculture and rural communities. Additionally, more in-depth case study analysis could highlight unique regional approaches and identify effective, context-specific solutions. Examining innovative housing models, such as cooperative or modular housing, would also offer practical guidance for sustainable housing solutions that support agriculture. Finally, exploring the social and economic implications of rural housing shortages—such as workforce retention and attraction challenges and rural youth migration—would enhance our understanding of how housing intersects with broader goals for sustainable rural development and agricultural protection.

Aggregated and comprehensive data collection at a provincial level would strengthen evidence-based decision-making. Standardized farmer surveys and centralized data systems could provide sector-specific insights into housing needs, uncovering the preferences and experiences of farmers across various types of agriculture. This targeted feedback would provide a clearer understanding of the most viable housing solutions by sector, supporting tailored, impactful policies that respond directly to the needs of Ontario's diverse agricultural community.

Additionally, future research could explore the intersection between on-farm ARUs and their potential use as short-term accommodations (STAs). Understanding how municipalities manage this issue, and the implications for succession planning, farm labour housing, and agri-tourism, would provide valuable guidance for policy development.

To build on the findings of this report, future work could focus on converting the recommendations into a policy framework or guideline document. This resource could be shared with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH) and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) to inform the upcoming review of the Greenbelt Plan and other provincial initiatives. Such a document would provide concrete, actionable steps for aligning housing policies with agricultural protection goals across Ontario.

In conclusion, this study provides a roadmap for addressing the housing needs of Ontario's agricultural and rural communities while ensuring the continued protection and viability of farmland. The recommendations in this report offer tangible steps for municipalities, the provincial government, and stakeholders to foster resilient agricultural systems and rural communities, with a focus on creating housing solutions that support agricultural areas and protect farmland.



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Appendix 1:

Interview Participants

Acs, Erik – Regional Planner, Niagara

Alderman, Aimee – Planner, Niagara-on-the-Lake (NOTL)

Clarington Agricultural Advisory Committee Members – Meeting with several farmers, August 8, 2024

DeVos, Allison – Agriculture Economic Development Specialist, Region of Durham

Elliott, Lori – Huron Member Services Representative, Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA)

Jennings, Sylvia – Planner, Municipality of Clarington

Lee, Richard – Executive Director, Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers

McIntosh, Celina – Planner, South Huron

Morawetz, Mitch – Farmer, Consulting Planner, and former Planner, Municipality of Clarington

Rops, Marty – Credit Union Branch Manager and Regional Manager (retired)

Torrey, Mark – Durham Member Services Representative, Ontario Federation of Agriculture

Van Amersfoort, Denise – Huron County Planner

Van Hoffen, Len – Vineyard Manager, National Farmers Union (NFU) member, NOTL

Wallace, Ethan – Farmer and Board Member, Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA)

Watson, Michael – Farmer and National Farmers Union (NFU) member, NOTL

Appendix 2:

Advisory Committee Members

Acs, Erik – Manager, Community Planning, Niagara Region

Best, Jennifer – Director of Growth Services, Bradford West Gwillimbury

DeMarchi-Meyers, Anna – Agricultural Liaison Office, Halton Region

De Vos, Allison – Agriculture Economic Development Specialist, Invest Durham

Gerassime, Ester – Ontario Chamber of Commerce's Infrastructure Policy Council

Sharman, Danielle – Ontario Federation of Agriculture

Sinclair, Ellen – Rural Ontario Institute

Taylor, Scott – Director of Planning and Development, Grey County

Thompson, David – Farm Labour and Special Projects Manager, National Farmers Union – Ontario

Turvey, John – Senior Policy Advisor (Land Use), OMAFRA



Possibility grows here.

