

Brome County NEWS



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West Bolton looking to revitalize agriculture

In search of innovative market-based solution

By Ann Davidson

Market-based solutions for sustainable agricultural development was at the centre of an information meeting organized by West Bolton town council on Saturday, November 21. As a continuum to the town's commitment to protect its rural heritage, and respectful of the recently published strategic plan that cites protection of the landscape and its farms, council is determined to include the citizens in the process of revitalizing agriculture and are seeking innovative ways to meet that goal.

With more than 50 people in attendance, the meeting served as a platform for guest speakers with relevant expertise in analysis, business development, and agricultural technology to inform citizens about support and financial assistance programs to farmers. As well, several specific models were presented by experts in the industry. As animator of the meeting, Councilor Jacques Drolet also called for candidates to sit on an agricultural committee.

Drolet explained that looking back at the success of the farming predecessors has been an important exercise in terms of knowing how best to go forward.

Though the municipality's role is as a facilitator, it is willing to assist agricultural businesses during their journey along with the support from the CLD, MRC Brome-Missisquoi, and the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries. He is convinced that if the community works together West Bolton could develop its own enviable branding.

"Not only can our fields be developed successfully, our forests are also a key element of our rural heritage," Drolet said.

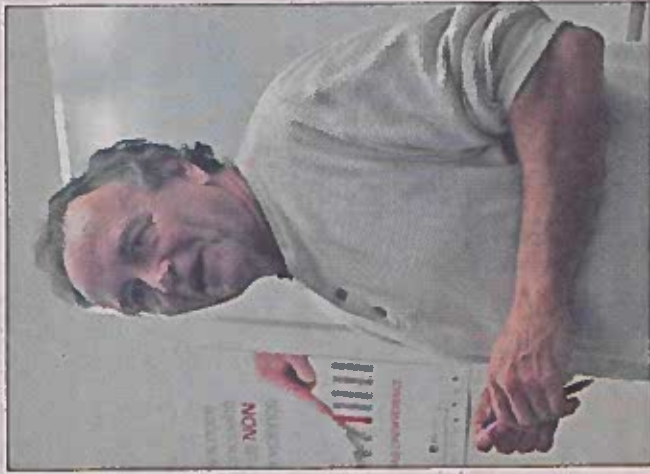
Working closely with the MRC Brome-Missisquoi, Tania Szymanski, coordinator and counsellor in rural development at the CLD Brome-Missisquoi, explained that there are many services that include financial support. It's about knowing where to go and making sure to have a solid business plan to present. Though the CLD has a certain amount of funds to distribute as seed money, she says it is the gateway to start-ups and will work with candidates and the other relevant agencies.

While explaining the role of Réseau Agriconsells, Karl Hébert said that his organization is responsible for adminis-

trating the programs outlined by the MPAQ. He describes the organization like a "big uncle paying part of the farmer's invoice." Depending on the focus areas, eligible activities, targeted clientele, and government priorities, the advisory service can allot between 50 per cent and 90 per cent of the cost. Issues such as fertilizing, drainage, and crop rotation are important considerations along with soil testing. But again, he emphasized the management aspect of going into business, citing the benefits of a long-term plan. Hébert also mentioned that they can help landowners/farmers when it comes to succession and transfer of property, making it possible for parents to leave the farming business to their offspring. "A farm is not only about the land, the livestock, the machinery. It's about the people."

Hébert explained that the federal and provincial governments work together to give farmers the opportunity to get help in the development of a solid business plan by paying for part of the cost. Up to

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Bruce Smith, PhD, is a specialist in agriculture and soil technology and is hoping to rejuvenate traditional farming in West Bolton by establishing a new model that could include several landowners.

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\$30,000 is available to assist them in three specific services and activities of intervention that are agro-environmental in nature, management related and/or technical needs. Details about the program can be obtained at 1-800-680-1858.

An extensive list of resources along with key specialists that aspiring farmers should know about was issued by Leslie Carbonneau, agent with the "Banque de Terres" (land banks) program at the MRC Brome-Missisquoi. Drolet says that it will be made available on the West Bolton website this week.

The land bank service will pair aspiring farmers with landowners by custom or rental agreements, partnerships, transfer, mentoring. The project aims both to increase the accessibility of land to young farmers and maintain the vitality of agricultural regions. The services of a field coordinator who is responsible for contacting owners and aspiring farmers is made available and a member of the team will accompany participants of the program at the legal level for the conclusion of an agreement.

Two models of farming were presented to the group that highlighted the value of local production. Alain Valois of Bio-Malte spoke to the advantages of bar-

ley production given the number of breweries and distilleries that are producing beer and whiskey, while West Bolton resident Phillippe O'Brien mentioned that a group of citizens have been developing a new farming plan that could result in a non-profit organization or a co-op system.

Bruce Smith, an expert in small-scale agriculture and a specialist in soil management, is adamant that with the growing demand for grass-fed beef, West Bolton soils are ideal for pastures. He and forestry expert Tony Rotherham, along with O'Brien, are looking for land owners in the area of Brill, Argyle, and Mountain roads who would be interested in an animal-based unit. Citing the Badgers' Highland business as the pioneer in a developing market, he says that the municipality needs to provide a certain critical mass to allow meat producers to get into the market. He was referring to cattle, sheep, and pigs, but agreed that deer could be a consideration as well. They want to preserve agriculture while generating employment.

Smith's first step is to hold a meeting next week with interested parties in order to build a viable business plan.