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Feature Article - M

# Prison Farm Politics

By Jeff Green

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The pending closure of two prison farms located within the boundaries of the City of Kingston has brought some disparate groups from the city and Frontenac County together in opposition to the move.

Groups as disparate as public service unions, three local farm groups, a city councilor, and even a politician from the governing party that made the decision have all spoken out about the closings, how they could be reversed, and what would happen to the farmland if they were not.

They did so at a public meeting at St. Lawrence College on March 19. The meeting was called to discuss a decision by CORCAN, the job-training arm of Correction Services Canada (CSC), to close six farms that are located on the grounds of federal prisons across Canada, including the two in Kingston.

The decision followed a strategic review of CORCAN services, according to its CEO John Sargent, and they were “based not particularly on the operations of the farms. It was predicated on the intention that the training we give to the inmates will enable them to enter the job market when they get out”.

The six farms cost the CSC \$4 million each year to operate and Sargent said this money could be better spent on more directed training aimed at the existing job market. He did not say how the \$4 million per year would be spent in the future.

Ross Toller, the Regional Deputy Commissioner of Corrections (Ontario) said, “We have two years to consider alternatives. I assure you the reinvestment is devoted to public safety.”

Toller and Sargent both argued that employability of inmates upon their release is a key element in lowering recidivism rates.

MPP Randy Hillier from the neighbouring riding of Lanark Frontenac Lennox and Addington (LFL&A) said that he had spoken to Peter Van Loan, the federal minister in charge of Corrections, and reported that “There was no indication that these lands are going to be sold off; they will stay within Corrections Canada as leased farmland, unless they are needed for prison expansion. The other issue we discussed was abattoirs. The minister understood the importance of Wallace’s abattoir [which is located within the farm at the Pittsburgh Institution]. ... I am sure

there will be a place for Wallace's abattoir at Pittsburgh; the minister will find ways to keep that abattoir in our community."

The abattoir's role in the local food system is something that has been brought forward since the announced farm closures by local farm groups, particularly the Frontenac Cattleman's Association, whose members are dependent on Wallace Beef.

But Wallace Beef is not the only issue that was raised at the meeting. In spite of Hiller's assertion that the sale of the 800-acre Frontenac Institution farmland and the approximately 1200-acre Pittsburgh Institution farmland is not in the cards, many audience members speculated that the sale of the lands was imminent, and the Frontenac Institution lands are considered to have a value as housing and commercial land of around \$2 million.

Vicki Schmolka, Kingston City councilor and planning committee chair, said that although city council has not taken a position on the farm closings. She personally opposes them, calling it a "short-sighted move." She acknowledged the commercial interest in the Frontenac Institution lands, however.

"People have lusted after that property, but that does not mean it will happen. It would be subject to a public process. It is currently designated as prime farmland, and the provincial policy is that prime land should be kept agricultural. It is not a slam dunk," Schmolka said.

"If any of us owned the land, we wouldn't be able to develop it," said John Williamson from the Frontenac Federation of Agriculture. "The government should lead by example."

Among the farms and local food advocates in the room, the idea has arisen that if the prison farm program is indeed ended, the land could be used for co-operative farming projects as an urban agriculture project. This idea was promoted by Andrew McCann, who teaches a course in local food at St. Lawrence College.

Several former and current CSC employees and contractors questioned the basic assumption that the farms are not serving a rehabilitation function, however.

"The dairy farm at Frontenac is run as a very tight business. When compared with other farms it ranks in the top 80th percentile," said the veterinarian who helps ensure the health of the animals on the farm.

Others took the view that Corrections would not come up with viable alternatives to the farms. "The guys will be just sitting in their cells," said a former maintenance worker."

Kim Perry, from Local Family Farms in Verona, read out a letter from Chris Parmar, an inmate at Frontenac Institution who has worked at the farm for 2 years. Parmar started out driving tractors and cleaning the barns, and has worked his way up to doing computer work, logging orders, tracking inventory and photographing calves for registration, among other duties.

He wrote: "The Frontenac farm and other farms help offenders be more reliable,

responsible, have better work ethics and make them more ready to work in the community. I ask what your intentions are because I would really like to get some straight answers rather than the excuses we've been hearing where agriculture and farms are being blamed for so-called poor training skills," Parmar also said that Corrections "makes money" at the Frontenac Farm.

John Sargent from CSC acknowledged that the Frontenac Institution Farm, which supplies 4,000 litres of milk, and the egg supply for the Kingston prisons and some prisons in Quebec, is a profitable operation, even if the program as a whole is in debt.

"What do they even mean by debt? When they say that the six farms cost \$4 million or whatever, what are they counting? Where are the figures, what's in and what's out?" asked John Williamson, who added, "They say farming is a money-losing business. Well, welcome to my world. But I'll tell you something else. Eleven percent of the employment in this province is from farming, which makes it number two behind the auto industry, soon to be number one I suspect. So what are they talking about in terms of training for jobs?"

Scott Reid, federal MP from LFL&A and deputy house leader in the Harper government, said any reversal of the decision to close the farms would have to be made by federal politicians.

"I suspect that the public servants who did this would not reverse their decision. Ultimately all political decisions can be reversed or changed, but it becomes the job of politicians to make those kinds of decisions. So this is the realm that this is now in".