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Local farmers' markets the answer

Markets are an important part of the community fabric while easing consumers' fears about buying safe, healthy food

The Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation announced recently a new Greenbelt Farmers' Markets Program aimed at attracting more Greenbelt farmers to the growing number of markets in and around the region.

The foundation is investing \$200,000 this year to boost the size of markets and the range of local products sold with the aim of increasing financial returns for Greenbelt farmers.

The foundation met with market managers, many of whom are farmers themselves, as the first step in determining how to increase the success of these markets: more farmer participation was expressed again and again as the number one need.

While there has been an unprecedented explosion of farmers' markets in Ontario, public demand is still outgrowing the number of markets that exist and the number of farmers at those markets.

In a recent poll conducted by the Greenbelt Foundation, 42 per cent of respondents say they specifically shop at their farmers' market for local foods and 91 per cent say that if given the choice, they would prefer to buy local.

"Consumers are ripe for fresh, local food and this is creating enormous possibilities for farmers in the Greenbelt: now is the time to go to market," said Burkhard Mausberg, president of the Greenbelt Foundation.

Ontario is home to the world's

largest and most diverse Greenbelt and this diversity is reflected in the foods we buy and eat. Fortunately, variety and quality come naturally in the Greenbelt. From the Niagara tender fruit areas, to the vegetable crops of the Holland Marsh to the livestock pastures of Durham Region, Greenbelt farmers offer a full range of products that enhances the consumers' market experience. And what a market it is.

With over eight million residents and growing, the Golden Horseshoe is the most densely populated area in the country, representing a huge potential customer base with the possibility of providing more business to local farmers.

But the benefits, to grower and buyer alike, don't stop there. The farmers' market is the answer to two of the top concerns of Ontarians: food security and food safety.

The Greenbelt is essential for securing a local food source. It produces, if none of it was exported, enough food to feed all of Ontario. And getting to know exactly where our food comes from, shaking the hands of those who planted it and harvested it, goes a long way to settling people's minds on the issue of food safety.

With over 60 nearby Greenbelt farmers' markets to visit, consumers have a choice to reduce their travel, thereby reducing their carbon footprint and the emissions that pollute air and water and cause climate



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change.

As people become more educated about the food they eat, the farmers' market provides the perfect backdrop for the interaction between the market-savvy farmer and an increasingly sophisticated shopper.

These relationships also have greater implications for the community at large: "Successful farmers' markets are a great example of rural-urban partnership. Ideally, markets facilitate effective access to strong sales opportunities for local producers, and increase awareness and availability of healthy, fresh foods for city dwellers. Farmers' markets build loyal support for our farmers, and also create terrific places for neighbours to come together, offering many benefits to communities both in and out of the city. You could say that these markets actually 'grow' great neighbourhoods," said Anne Freeman, Dufferin Grove Farmers' Market manager.

With this wealth of benefits in mind, the Greenbelt Foundation will continue to expand this program and roll out further initiatives in anticipation of the 2008 harvest season. The program will also look at facilitating and strengthening the relationship between the local municipality and the farmers' market.

Markets that have enjoyed strong municipal support reported that such support contributed to the success or

failure of their market. But the reverse is also true.

"Farmers' Markets provide local municipalities with an excellent opportunity to showcase their locally grown products. Markets are an important component of the local economy and municipalities can play a key role in promoting the markets within their jurisdiction to ensure their viability and sustainability," said Marlene Werry, Rural Economic Development Officer with the Regional Municipality of Durham.

For more information, or to become a participating grower in the Greenbelt Farmers' Markets Program, please contact Laura Alderson, co-ordinator, at (416) 960-0001 ext. 303 or by e-mail at lalderson@OurGreenbelt.ca.

Ontario's Greenbelt is 1.8 million acres of protected land that wraps around the Golden Horseshoe and runs north to the tip of the Bruce Peninsula. It encompasses the Niagara Escarpment, the Oak Ridges Moraine, Rouge Park, some 7,000 farms and hundreds of rural towns and villages. The Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation began its work in June 2005 as an independent, charitable foundation with a mandate to promote and sustain our Greenbelt as a beneficial, valuable, and permanent feature, enhancing the quality of life for all residents of Ontario.