

Agricultural Advisory Committee Report

Background:

The Mississippi Mills Agricultural Advisory Committee (AAC) has been aware that Mississippi Mills was planning to complete a LEAR evaluation of the Prime Agricultural areas in the municipality from their involvement in OPA21. Their request and expectation were to be involved in the advisory committee to the project. This was not an unrealistic expectation given the two guiding documents put forward by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA), emphasized the need for input by an advisory committee with agricultural expertise. In addition, most other LEAR projects to date have brought an advisory committee into the process early on to help with the application of the technique.

Current Status:

The AAC first became aware, at the Special Committee of the Whole Meeting on Thursday, March 25th, that the OFFICIAL PLAN AMENDMENT No. 29 had been completed by consultants hired by Mississippi Mills. It is unclear how many members of council were aware this project had commenced. The AAC requested a meeting be convened to discuss their role in the LEAR project.

An AAC meeting convened on April 22 with guests John O'Neill, OMAFRA representative, Julie Stewart, Lanark County planner, Mayor Lowry, Mississippi Mills CAO, Ken Kelly, Marc Rivet, Senior Planner for J.L. Richards & Associates Limited and Gabrielle Snow, planner for J.L. Richards & Associates Limited.

Mr. O'Neill and Ms. Stewart were informative about their roles in the process.

Mr. Rivet conceded that an Advisory Committee could have been utilized in the process but offered no explanation as to why they were not.

Mr. Kelly informed the committee that council had not requested an Advisory Committee or AAC input, however it remains unclear to the AAC members how council could have requested input when the first reference to work having commenced on amendment 29 was when the completed document was presented March 25th at the Special Committee of the Whole meeting.

That document contains the methodology used to develop the final LEAR Model and to validate it. Several assumptions need to be evaluated and established at the outset and during the process. A "boots on the ground" approach by those who know and understand the affected landowners and land is of great value.

For example.

1. What values should be attributed to the Land Evaluation (LE) and the Area Review (AR) portions of the evaluation? OMAFRA suggests that the LE be no less than 50%. The example LEARs chose 50-65%. J.L. Richards chose 70%. Why? This significantly devalues the worth of the activities on the lands.
2. The AR component was developed without any local knowledge of the agri-businesses. There are a significant number of specialty operations that will not be reviewed with an effort to ensure that the land around them is protected.

3. There does not appear to have been any sensitivity analysis carried out during the process. A Threshold Score of 65 was established. This number greatly affects the amount of Prime Agricultural Land included or excluded. What was the result if the value was set at 66? Would that have included the lands that appear to be excluded adjacent to the LEAR selected lands?
4. There will be unique examples within and outside the included area that need to be reviewed by members of the community familiar with the agricultural community. Why was this not done before the study was presented to Council?

Next Actions

1. The AAC is concerned about the study process and would like discussion of several values and assumptions that were made in carrying out the study.
2. The AAC would like to be able to review in detail the results to date and carry out a representative review of landowners, both within and outside the fabric.
3. Committee considers that a Presentation and an Open House are not sufficient to inform the landowners in the municipality.
4. Considering that spring is a critical time for local agricultural experts, further actions by Council, staff, and J.L.Richards should be halted until such time that an advisory committee can be established.

Recommendations

1. That a LEAR working group be developed comprised of the Ag Advisory Committee members plus the Council representatives from Ramsay and Pakenham Wards plus ad hoc members from the agricultural community.
2. That the working group be supported;
 - i. in meeting with the consultant to better understand the specific assumptions made in developing the study
 - ii. In reviewing the map products developed by the project
 - iii. In reviewing a representative set of properties to validate the study to date or recommend changes in the assumptions.
 - iv. In developing an appropriate communication to the affected landowners to ensure that they know and understand the changes and possible effects on their properties.
 - v. In contacting a selection of landowners affected by this study.
3. That the Indigenous community be consulted as part of the process.
4. That a direct mailing be made to inform landowners of these changes.
5. That this report be presented to Council

A Report from the Mississippi Mills Agricultural Advisory Committee

April 27, 2021