

## **Framework for an Agriculture and Food Hub in the Rouge National Urban Park**

This document outlines our vision for a Non-profit Agriculture and Food Hub (Agri-Food Hub) at the new Rouge National Urban Park. Our proposal presents the realistic possibilities of initiating a wide variety of flourishing farming practices on the agricultural lands within the Park. The Agri-Food Hub will manage and provide diverse local foods, education, engaging farm experiences, and help support a vibrant farming community in the Park while promoting the long-term use and preservation of this agricultural land.

The planned Agri-Food Hub's mission is to conserve our agricultural heritage and educate Park visitors by promoting understanding and respect for sustainable local farming and food processing. While we do not intend to dictate methodology to existing leaseholders, our vision for the Agri-Food Hub is to:

- Enable, promote, and sustain a vibrant and responsible farming and food community within the Park;
- Provide appealing and informative visitor experiences;
- Actively connect the future with the past, the city with the farm, and personal with communal well-being.

### **Agri-Food Hub Activities**

Working in concert with Rouge National Urban Park Management, the core of this Plan is to create a Non-Profit Agri-Food Hub organization to administer and manage the agricultural lands in the Rouge National Urban Park. Its primary functions will be to:

- Manage the agricultural lands within the Park's boundaries by supporting both the current leaseholders (a Parks Canada mandate) and by providing opportunities for new farmers who add value to the Park by maintaining the practices of sustainable farming in Ontario, attracting visitors, and increasing local food production and availability;
- Increase the diversity of farm types, sizes, and crops grown in the park;
- Sustain the Park's farmers with educational, technical, financial, and marketing support;
- Facilitate opportunities for park visitors and local communities to connect with the Park's farming community to learn about, discover, and celebrate farming through farm tours, festivals, and work opportunities;
- Connect the public to food production through a farmers' market, workshops, research, and partnerships;
- Invite urban neighbours to participate in the benefits of rural agriculture through special events, employment opportunities, and distribution of fresh quality food to low-income neighbours;
- Develop incubator farms and demonstration farms for educational purposes;

- Curate, validate, and demonstrate the heritage of agriculture and farming in Canada by the First Nations, early pioneers, and more recent practitioners;
- Work with other Park stakeholders in the development of the rural landscape including: tree-planting, trail development, and Park experiences;
- Engage additional stakeholders to invest in agricultural services, educational facilities, tourism resources, and healing activities in the Park.

### **The National Park as Partner**

We envision the Agri-Food Hub as similar to the [Countryside Initiative](#) that operates in partnership with the Cuyahoga Valley National Park near Cleveland, Ohio. This is a successful model we can learn from and build upon. Their first lesson was that farmers require long-term leases. A second lesson was recognizing that agriculture does not currently generate sufficient income for lessees to make major land and housing improvements. Prior to leasing, the landowner (Parks Canada) must first bring the farmland up to a reasonable state of productivity; and housing up to local standards. The Park will be responsible for:

- Rehabilitating soil, drainage, compaction, fertility and windbreak issues (since each site likely requires at least 5-years of soil restoration, commencing this process must become a priority);
- Repairing or rebuilding farmhouses and their services;
- Providing agricultural land for the Agri-Food Hub to develop educational demonstration farms and conduct agricultural and food related research.

### **A Variety of Benefits**

The Agri-Food Hub will inform and inspire millions of Park visitors, new generations of farmers, food producers, and local food lovers of all ages from the GTA, Ontario, Canada, and the World. The agricultural land will be used for a variety of purposes including conventional agriculture, mixed crop farms, working demonstration farms, wholesale and farm markets, agriculture and food education, along with processing, storage, and research facilities. All this will help position the Rouge National Urban Park as a major tourism destination.

### **This Agri-Food Hub undertaking is being led by:**

- David Cohlmeier, market gardener and Agricultural Consultant
- Gary Hoyer, Professor and Culinary Consultant, George Brown College
- Peter Mitchell, Rural Lands Research Associate at the University of Guelph
- Jamie Laidlaw, associate with many agriculture-friendly Foundations
- Geoff Cape who inspires and enables greener cities with Evergreen

### **And with the support of your esteemed name and title ...**

We look forward to developing this Plan to make the Non-Profit Agri-Food Hub a sustainable and well-managed reality for the Rouge National Urban Park!

## Appendix: A Preliminary Plan for the Agri-Food Hub

This section describes activities the Agri-Food Hub will undertake after operating parameters have been fully defined. It addresses the values, goals, objectives, assets, and resources that will make this proposal a success.

### Goals and Objectives of the Agri-Food Hub:

Create a matrix for an Advisory Committee, and then populate this matrix

Build a working relationship with current leaseholders

(Ontario has such a serious shortage of farmers we cannot afford to lose more.)

Identify prospective production-oriented farmers

Honour and create spiritual connections with our Aboriginal heritage

Partner with First Nations to relearn ways to feed the North

Build relationships with other Park stakeholders to create trails, plant windbreaks, rebuild fencerows and establish wildlife corridors.

**Create** a matrix to populate with successful farm enterprises, such as:

Fresh vegetables and flowers

and pick-your-own

Storage vegetables

Greenhouse crops and  
transplants

Fruits, nuts and berries

Eggs, dairy, honey

Seed production and trials

Cash crops

Specialty grains and pulse

Oil seeds and fibers

Corn, soy and wheat

Flours and oils

Small animals

(chicken, pig, sheep, goat)

Large animal (demonstrations)

(beef, dairy cows)

Animal breeding and trials

**Maintain** existing corn and soy farms while gradually introducing:

- Culturally diverse production gardens, farms and processors
- Professional development for farmers and processors
  - explain bookkeeping, accounting, business planning, cash flow, cost of production, marketing, financial ratios, food and farm safety, nutrient/water management, and plant/animal health
- Chef experiences and artisanal processing training
- Research plots to trial new crops and methods
- Farm experiences and animated farm tours that attract visitors with
  - guided and self-guided tours (walking, bicycle, bus, and car) describing the benefits of environmental diversity, and the variety of steps needed to bring food to consumers

**Develop:**

- Farm supply and service businesses
- Farm community support facilities
- Visitor and tourist support businesses
  - Shops, B&B's, and a Park Inn
- Demonstration farms for:
  - Families and youth
  - Public schools
  - High school training farm(s)
  - College training farm(s)
  - Culinary School demonstration farm(s)
  - Incubator farms with FarmStart
  - Demonstration facility for artisanal food processing training
  - University research facility
  - Outdoor Farm Show with demonstrations of conventional, organic, biodynamic, and permaculture agricultural models

**Form relationships** with appropriate stakeholders and Agri-Food Hub users:

- Historians who wish to recreate homestead demonstrations of
  - First Nations methods – pre-contact, missionary, and reserves
  - Pioneer, late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> and late 20<sup>th</sup> century
- Communities and institutions that wish to grow their own foods:
  - Senior associations that wish to participate in garden activities
  - Mental health associations that wish to maintain PTSD and therapy garden(s)
  - Physical therapy associations that will maintain a therapy garden(s)
  - Corrections associations that will provide a training garden
  - Other appropriate associations
- Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS) demonstration area
  - Ontario Farmland Trust, MaRS, CSI, B-corporations, the 3-P's

**Facilities** to be formed and developed:

- Farm supply and repair businesses
- Farmers' market, CSA, retail, and shared delivery
- Food hub: refrigeration, storage, and processing:
  - Pickling, curing, drying, canning, freezing, *su vide* (vacuum)
  - flour mill and oil pressing
- Community centre and education/presentation centre
- Tourist amenities
- Bio-energy growing and production demonstration
- Urban waste compost production to share with communities
- University evaluation and research plots and facilities
- Government facility for determining and sharing best practices
  - of soil remediation, flavour, nutrition and profitability
- Grower Association Centres

**Other Initiatives:**

- Provide informative signage, apps, maps, brochures, and website
- Operate land stewardship programs
- Initiate soil carbon sequestering projects
- Promote cooking classes, recipes, and experiences
- Introduce shelf-life, nutrition, and sensory improvements
- Create and build mid-scale labour-saving tools and implements
- Improve efficient energy production and energy use
- Plan and incorporate effective transportation and distribution
- Assemble a food and agriculture resource database
- Promote and initiate urban and communal food projects
- Design fashionable clothing that uses local farm-grown fibers
- Narrate stories in publications, TV, radio and social media
- Launch entertaining and informative theater and video performances
- Organize and promote fundraising events