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Ontario needs to embrace greenbelt: Zimmerman

Allan Benner *The St. Catharines Standard*

Grape Growers of Ontario president Debbie Zimmerman says Ontario has more to gain by embracing greenbelt legislation, rather than looking for ways to circumvent it.

"Supporting the greenbelt for us means giving us an economic leg up. It doesn't mean dismantling the greenbelt. It means supporting it to help growers and farmers within the greenbelt be economically sustainable," she said.

Instead, the provincial government's Restoring Ontario's Competitiveness Act Bill 66 initially included a schedule that opponents say could have been used to skirt environmental protections such as the Greenbelt Act - until it was removed from the legislation last week in response to a public outcry.

"What we're hoping is that the government takes what it has, which is the greenbelt and the opportunity to maintain that land base, but treat it as it should be treated as an economic engine for the province," she said.

"They need to recognize that it's an economic engine that can be even more successful."

For instance, she said, more people visit Niagara wineries and vineyards every year than Napa Valley, Calif.

Jeff Burch Grape Growers of Ontario president Debbie Zimmerman is urging the provincial government to use greenbelt legislation to grow Ontario's wine industry. Debbie Zimmerman Bob Tymczyszyn The St. Catharines Standard file photo

"We need to take advantage of that, to use that economic tourism and all the aspects that go with it," Zimmerman added. "Dismantling the greenbelt would do us no good at all."

Niagara Centre MPP Jeff Burch credited opposition from municipalities across Ontario for compelling the Tory's to remove the reference to environmental protections from the legislation.

However, he chastised Niagara Region councillors for failing to take a stronger stand on the issue.

Niagara councillors approved a motion supporting Bill 66 at their Jan. 17 meeting, while also calling on the province to consult with municipalities and recognize the need to keep environmental protections in place.

"Niagara Region needs to reflect on what happened last week. They came up with what I would consider a very timid motion. It really didn't say anything at all. It was probably the most timid motion I'm aware of in the province of Ontario," Burch said.

"I hope they take a look at this and take a

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look at what other regions did when they stood up to the government. The lesson here is that if there is bad legislation, if there's enough opposition we can stop it."

Grape Growers of Ontario and Ontario Federation of Agriculture added their voices to the opposition to the legislation, and sent letters to provincial ministries outlining the potential impact it could have on agriculture industries.

In her letter to Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Steve Clark, Zimmerman wrote that reducing red tape to help businesses create jobs should not "come at the expense of the Greenbelt Act, which is an essential piece of legislation for farmers across all commodity groups within the greenbelt."

She said the grape and wine industry has thrived under the Greenbelt Act, created an economic impact of \$4.4 billion, \$258 million in provincial taxes and more than 18,000 jobs.

In an interview, Zimmerman said the government's recent efforts to modernize retail sales of products such as wine - potentially allowing the sale of alcoholic beverages in convenience stores - may also present an opportunity to develop policies that will help grow sales of Ontario-grown wine.

"The way to do that is to support the greenbelt with an economic strategy," she said.

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