

Agriculture Master Plan

Phase 1 What We Heard Report



Executive Summary

Phase 1 of the engagement process extended from January 30 to April 10. Local producers, processors, landowners, distributors and consumers could share their insights and provide feedback on how Sturgeon County can address local needs through agriculture-related initiatives. Throughout the course of this phase, we heard from 202 individuals.



Sturgeon County's commitment to excellence in agriculture has led them to initiate the development of the Sturgeon County Agriculture Master Plan. This plan will guide Sturgeon County agriculture-related initiatives from 2025-2034. This strategic endeavor reflects a dedicated effort to foster sustainable growth, innovation, diversification and resilience within the agricultural sector.

Phase I engagement efforts spanned three months, inviting interest holders to share their feedback through an online survey, interviews and a range of workshops. Participants shared their ideas, potential actions, and concerns regarding the future of agriculture in Sturgeon County, ensuring that the plan reflects the community's needs and aspirations. The top 10 overarching themes garnered from the engagement process are outlined below.

- » **Limitations for farm operations due to regulatory policies and bureaucracy:** Participants were adamant about the need to limit government involvement in farm operations and fewer restrictions to allow more autonomy for farmers.
- » **Support for small family farms:** There is a desire for more substantial support and initiatives to help sustain and promote small family farms, which have been noted through engagement as vital to the local agricultural community.
- » **Urban development concerns:** Engagement participants expressed concerns about urban development encroaching on agricultural lands, impacting the availability, access and productivity of local farmland.
- » **Water supply management:** Issues related to water supply, including the quality and availability of water for agricultural purposes, were commonly noted as prominent challenges throughout the engagement process.

- » **Infrastructure needs:** There is a call for better infrastructure support, particularly regarding roads and water systems, to aid farming operations.
- » **Economic pressures:** Participants discussed the economic challenges faced by agriculture producers, including high costs of operations and the financial viability of farming under current economic conditions.
- » **Technological advancements:** The adoption and impact of new agricultural technologies were frequently discussed, with a focus on the challenges and the opportunities they present regarding the changing agricultural landscape.
- » **Land use and preservation of farmland:** The need to protect high-quality crop lands from being repurposed for non-agricultural uses was a major theme, with a strong emphasis on maintaining the integrity of farmland.
- » **Educational and community engagement:** There was a notable desire for more agricultural education and community engagement to enhance agricultural literacy and foster a connection between the community and agricultural practices.
- » **Climate change and environmental concerns:** Participants are worried about the impacts of climate change on agricultural production, stressing the need for strategies to manage and mitigate the effects of drought and other extreme weather events.

Throughout the engagement process, a common underlying sentiment emerged regarding the desire to limit the influence of government policies and regulations on farm operations. Participants emphasized their own expertise and experience as sufficient to ensure the sustainability of their farms.

These findings reflect a community deeply engaged with the issues facing agriculture in Sturgeon County, showing a strong interest to support and sustain local agricultural practices amid growing challenges.

How We Engaged

From January 30 to April 10 the Sturgeon County Agriculture Master Plan received **500+ ideas**, with communication impressions reaching **39,900 potential interest holders**, **180+ community hours**, and **202 active participants** across the survey, workshops, and interviews.

The engagement process used a series of distinct tactics, including:

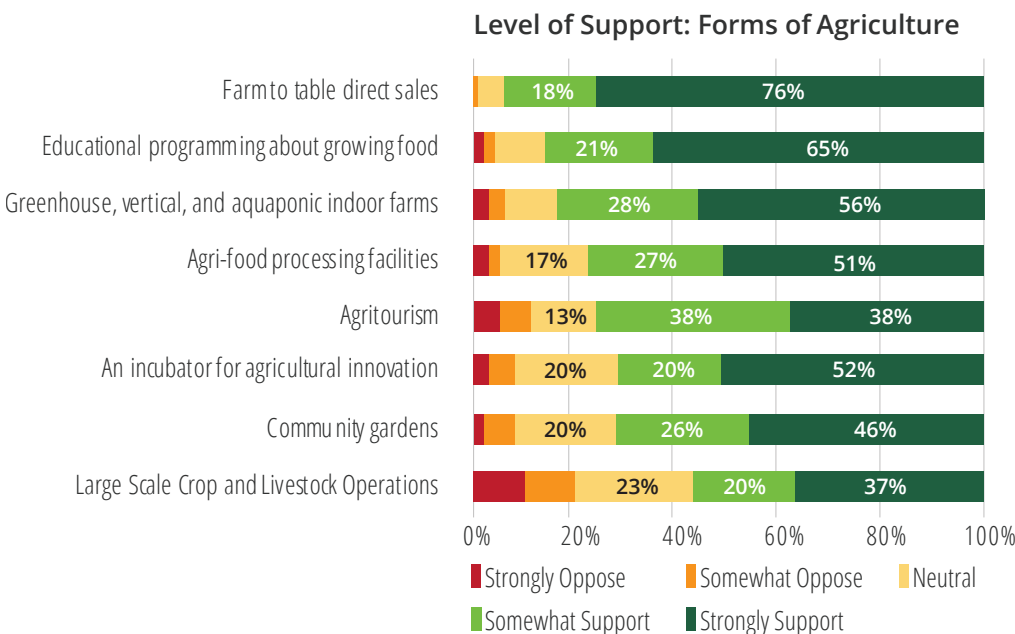
- » Data Walk Workshops: 60 participants
- » Online Survey: 105 responses
- » Experience Interviews: 10 participants
- » Validation Workshops: 27 participants
- » Project Webpage: 568 visitors

What We Heard

Online Survey

The approach to online engagement gave residents an opportunity to share their insights for action in a way that allowed for 24/7 access with a relatively minimal investment in time. This enabled the project team to gain a broader variety of insights into the ways that Sturgeon County can bolster the local agriculture sector. We asked local producers, processors, landowners, distributors and consumers about the agricultural activities they partake in, what initiatives they believe are most important, the barriers to agriculture they have noticed in the county, their level of support for various forms of agriculture along with their ideas for the future. This comprehensive approach ensured that we heard diverse perspectives and gathered a variety of suggestions for enhancing the agricultural landscape of Sturgeon County.

What is your level of support for these forms of agriculture in Sturgeon County?



We heard from

202

participants over three months of engagement.

Engagement opportunities were communicated using the following:

- » The Sturgeon County AMP project webpage with 568 visitors
- » Email invitations to 80 key interest holders
- » Dynamic social media campaign reaching over 39,900 impressions
- » E-Newsletter promotions delivered directly to 1,361 subscribers
- » Newsletter feature in Spring edition of County Connections reaching 6,718 households and over twenty thousand residents
- » Billboard & Letterboard signage at the following locations:
 - » Sturgeon Road and Starkey Road
 - » Cardiff Road east of Highway 2
 - » Cardiff Road and Highway 28
 - » Gibbons Area and Excelsior
 - » County and Highway 642
 - » Redwater
 - » Calahoo
 - » Highway 642 near elevators west of Morinville
 - » Lily Lake Road and Legal Road
 - » Cardiff

What are the most important current or future issues for Sturgeon County's agriculture industry?

Theme	# Occurances	Description
Keep farmland intact	21	Limiting the subdivision of land and what that means for farming operations and equipment access
Protect high quality crop lands	19	Concerns about destroying valuable crop lands for alternative uses
Urban Sprawl	17	Increased number of subdivisions are concerning people who have an agricultural/rural focus
Less rules/regulations for farmers	13	Farmers want to be free to continue farming without interference - less restrictive policy
Land use by-law changes	9	Negative sentiments about the bylaw changes

Indicative Quotes

"Maintaining agricultural land use; including protecting high quality crop land from development. Community agricultural events, there seems to be general lack of ag focused events for the greater community to participate in eq. fairs, odd unusual sales, cattle/horse shows/rodeo, ag based tradeshows"

"To keep agriculture land as farm land and not something else does not produce agriculture products"

"Urban sprawl and industrial development devastating agriculture land and driving up land prices. Foreign and corporate entities are buying up those lands at an alarming rate on speculation. The lack of arable acres is driving the agriculture producers out of business. No Farms no Food"

"Less obstacles such as needing permits for absolutely every. Less government in our lives."

"Continue to put the needs of farmers at the forefront of any future land use rules or regulations."

What can Sturgeon County do to support agriculture?

Theme	# Occurances	Description
Less rules and regulations	15	Participants suggested letting farmers do what they know is best on their own lands - less restrictive policy
Protect high quality crop lands	9	Limit the degradation of valuable crop lands for alternative uses
Keep farmland in tact	9	Limit the subdivision of land to better facilitate farming operations and equipment access
Education	8	School curriculum and capacity building for new residents regarding rural/agricultural practices
Tax increases	8	Stop/limit tax increases (Carbon tax etc.) - people want lower taxes

Indicative Quotes

"Stop centralized control. We do not need government overreach. Farmers are capable of running their own businesses."

"Stop letting people turn farmland into other lands that stop producing agriculture products"

"To educate Urban or any peoples in regards to when moving out to acreages with the farming practices workings and what to expect at certain times of the crop season as so they are aware as not to cause strife and to remind them they moved out into an agriculture community. Bottom line is to sustain agriculture as it is!"

"Keep taxes low, stop rezoning farms into residential"

Data Walks Workshops

In the datawalks workshops, the engagement team used a dynamic mix of data, visual examples and real-time visualization related to the AMP, to gather reflections and insights about participants' relationships to the data.

Datawalks workshop themes and participant reflections included the following:



Farm Operator Demographics: The impact of changing demographics on the agricultural community was a pressing issue defined during the Data Walks workshops. Concerns about the sale or transfer of small farms and a risk of knowledge loss as the aging population transitions into retirement were highlighted as reasons to improve opportunities for new entrants into farming.



Farm Operations: The dominance of larger, profit-driven operations and the increasing presence of foreign-owned farms were key themes highlighted for farm operations. This trend raised apprehensions about the displacement of traditional farms and the decline of family-owned operations, underscoring the transformation of farming from a way of life to a business enterprise.



Crop Production: High costs and profitability concerns were issues that dominated conversations about crop production, highlighting the importance of profit and opportunity within the market. The impacts of new technology and innovation also surfaced, suggesting that improved technological advancements and practices can potentially have an influence on reshaping the agricultural landscape.



Agricultural Technology: Challenges presented by emerging technologies in agricultural practices included the unequal access to new technology, particularly affecting smaller family-owned farms due to financial constraints and the need for improved broadband infrastructure. Both of the top themes play a role in the adoption of new technology.



Infrastructure and Services: Equal levels of support were shown for various themes related to infrastructure expansion and its potential impact on agriculture. These included the need for broadband internet and fiber optics expansion, concerns about bridge widths with load restrictions, and the importance of technology to enhance data collection and reporting.



Natural Environment: Significant themes regarding agri-environmental issues included concerns about government overreach in agricultural policies, emphasizing the need for balanced regulations that support farmers. Additionally, climate change events such as the frequency of droughts and water access were highlighted as significant challenges impacting agricultural production.



Agricultural Land Use: Conflicts between agricultural activities and residential preferences were highlighted as a key issue for agricultural land use, particularly in areas zoned for large subdivisions. Additionally, concerns were identified in areas designated for heavy industry and gravel extraction although some participants also highlighted opportunities to collaborate with industries to explore carbon capture initiatives.



Livestock Farms: The majority of the areas for improvement shared by participants were actions that are outside of the County's control. Considerations such as the reduction of provincial and federal taxes and the direction of the market related to the agricultural industry.

Validation workshops

The second round of workshops were designed to encourage feedback on emerging topic areas and potential actions for consideration in the AMP. This step sought to understand what may be missing and what actions had the most significant impact on the lives and agricultural operations of participants.

Five of the possible actions have received significant support during the Validation Workshops, providing a strong foundation for potential priorities captured within the Agriculture Master Plan. Participants were also asked to share their thoughts about gaps or missing elements as the project team moves forward with action development. The possible actions with the highest levels of support and most common gaps are listed below:

Actions with highest levels of support

- » Clearly state the right to specific farming practices within agricultural areas
- » Clarify to all residents the reasonable operations to expect from farms within the agricultural areas
- » On-farm agricultural value-added processing facilities provided with a unique tax assessment category with a tax rate lower than the commercial rate
- » Prime agricultural areas are to be defined and promoted in accordance with approved provincial policies
- » Substantiate the use of setbacks from existing commercial farming operations (CFO) to subdivisions for residential uses

Top 5 gaps

- » Preserve and support the long term sustainability of small farms
- » Landowner engagement
- » Our land our choice: Participants emphasized the importance of land ownership and decision-making rights for agricultural producers
- » Better grader operators and grading quality to ensure that farm equipment can move around the County to support operations
- » Consultation with local producers during road design

Next steps

Following the submission of this report, the project team will prepare the launch of the follow-up survey and begin planning for the information sessions by incorporating feedback gained throughout the engagement process reported here within. The follow-up survey will be available from July 3 - 31, 2024 through the project webpage. The information sessions are anticipated to be held in November 2024, with further details to be made available in fall 2024.

Input from this process will be analyzed with all other input and be used to draft an actionable Agriculture Master Plan framework.

For more information on the project and to stay up to date on this process, please visit:, please visit:

<https://www.sturgeoncounty.ca/government-engagement/engagement/ag-master-plan/>

Thank you to all who participated! We are grateful for your time and appreciate the energy you have put into planning for the future of agriculture in Sturgeon County.