



StandOurGround.ca NEWSLETTER

Issue 013 - August 2026

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**Save our
Communities
from Urban
Sprawl!!**

Mayor Mike Tarnowski responds to StandOurGround's query

Following the publication of a [CBC News article](#) by Benjamin Lopez Steven and Janyce McGregor on June 11, 2026, we sent a copy to Russell Mayor Mike Tarnowski with the comment: *"Why we need to protect farmland – looking for leadership from our local government."*

Mayor Tarnowski responded to the article. We then replied to his comments, after which he provided a further clarification. The correspondence is reproduced below.

Canada has lost millions of hectares of farmland. Where is it all going?

Federal food security strategy running up against high land costs, fewer young farmers

Standing on his 66-hectare fruit farm about an hour from Toronto, Charles Stevens shares the eye-popping figure a developer once offered him for his land: \$16 million.

Stevens turned it down. His farm, Wilmot Orchards, boasts some of the best soil in the country and is located in a microclimate that he says allows him to grow fruit better than anywhere else in Canada.

For that reason, Stevens went further than simply turning down the payday. He and his family worked with the [Ontario Farmland Trust](#) to place an easement on the property so that for the next 999 years it can only be used to grow food.

"I want my younger generation and the generations down the road to not have to buy their blueberries from Panama or some foreign country that may not feed us. Are we always going to get fed by the United States? I don't think so," Stevens said.

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Plan Ahead and Save the Date!

Russell Township All-Candidates Bilingual Municipal Meeting

Date: September 15, 2026

Time: 6:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.

Location: Russell Arena (1084
Concession Street)

Assemblée municipale bilingue de tous les candidats de la Municipalité de Russell

Date : 15 septembre 2026

Heure : de 18 h 30 à 21 h 30

Lieu : Aréna de Russell
(1084, rue Concession)

But Stevens knows he's running up against a trend in Canada: According to the [2021 Census of Agriculture](#), Canadian farms reported a 3.2 per cent decrease in total farm area from 2016 — more than two million hectares.

The [Canadian Federation of Agriculture](#) says since 2001, there has been a loss of 8.5 per cent or more than five million hectares — roughly the size of Nova Scotia.

The Carney government's recently released [National Food Security Strategy](#) is aiming to spend billions over a decade to produce more food in Canada, but it comes at a time when Canadian farmers continue to lose land and struggle to convince the next generation to take up the mantle.

Tyler McCann, a Quebec beef farmer and managing director of the Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute, told CBC's *The House* that there's "no debate" that Canada is farming less land.

"Certainly urban expansion in Toronto, but also in Regina and in Saskatoon and in Winnipeg, is taking productive, profitable land out of production because that land has got a higher value when there's a home or a factory or a big box store sitting on top of it," he said.

The problem with losing the land is not about Canadians struggling to feed themselves, McCann said, since Canada imports a lot of food already. However, the decline does make Canada's food system "more precarious the more we take this strategic asset away."

Government and industry stakeholders say changes are coming to how New Brunswick manages and protects its farmland.

Stevens believes that "risk management is the key to agriculture," and he's deeply concerned about farmland being lost to urban expansion. About a kilometre away from his farm, a development is underway.

"They could do that 10 miles north of here and not disrupt the major food growing area," Stevens said. "But no, because of the way municipalities are done and the sewage and the rest of it, they just grow out.

"Now there's 319 acres [129 hectares] of farmland in Ontario that is lost every day," he added, citing an analysis of [Statistics Canada data](#). "When that happens, in 100 years time there will not be any farmland left in Ontario if that isn't stopped."

Going after foreign ownership

One way the Ontario government is trying to protect its farmland and strengthen food security is by restricting foreign ownership. The province [introduced its bill](#) on the matter earlier this year, mirroring legislation in the three Prairie provinces, Prince Edward Island and Quebec.

Trevor Jones, Ontario's agriculture minister, told *The House* that the threat he saw and needed to assess is to the province's ability "to continue to be able to provide food for ourselves domestically."

"People think about economic drivers [such] as the auto sector, the parts sector, technology, mining. But agri-food in business is over \$52 billion. It's actually the biggest part of the pie," Jones said.

Ontario Minister of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness Trevor Jones speaks during question period at Queen's Park in Toronto on Oct. 20, 2025. (Laura Proctor/The Canadian Press)

But McCann pushed back on the significance of foreign ownership of farmland. Instead, he argued most of it is bought by farmers trying to grow or consolidate their businesses to become more efficient.

"The pressure on farmland prices is, by and large across the country, driven by farmers buying the farm next door," McCann said. "We like to think it's foreign money or it's institutional money, but the reality is today the drivers are farmers buying farmland."

Asked about urban development, Jones said the province is keeping an eye on that issue as well, and processes such as agricultural impact assessments balance the needs of communities and infrastructure.

"I trust in the collective that if we control the means of production, we control the questions of balance, we'll get it right because our communities will not be wrong," Jones said. "I'd rather have that be in our hands than anywhere else."

Losing the next generation of farmers

Back at Wilmot Orchards, Stevens said it took him 13 years to plan his retirement. Though his daughter Courtney loves the farm, she wanted to be a photographer. Today, she uses her skills to help with marketing the business.

To manage the apple orchard and pick-your-own blueberry business, Stevens needed to find someone else. Ian Parker is now the farm's general manager and owns shares in the business. Growing up, he also worked at the farm's blueberry booth in the summer.

"A lot of farms around here are going for \$100,000 an acre [nearly \$250,000 per hectare] or more," Parker said. "That doesn't really pencil out over my lifespan. So unless I have an absolute drive to own a chunk of land and then will it down to my children, that's not really my game plan. I'd rather just actually grow crops."

According to Statistics Canada, the average value of an acre of farmland in Canada has **risen by 43 per cent since 2021**, from \$3,947 to \$5,643, or nearly \$14,000 per hectare. The average value of an acre in Ontario is just under four times that amount.

That represents a significant roadblock for young farmers trying to enter the industry, and it shows. There are **fewer than 23,000 young farm operators** in Canada, according to a House of Commons report. The average age is 56.

"Even if you are blessed with a farm in the family, what you're expecting is your family to make a significant concession and sell the land potentially far below market value in order to make that viable," McCann said.

"You get into this really tense issue around how do you deal with that generational transfer of wealth from one generation to the other. So I think this is an issue for anyone trying to get into the farm business today."

The federal National Food Security Strategy is trying to resolve this problem by doubling the guaranteed loan limit and extending terms of the Canadian Agricultural Loans Act to *"better support new entrants, as well as intergenerational farm transfers."*

Ottawa also intends to establish a \$1-billion Agrifood Project Finance Fund, funded and delivered by Farm Credit Canada, that's *"dedicated to catalyzing value-added, capital intensive high-potential projects for the Canadian agri-food industry."*

Justine Hendricks, CEO of Farm Credit Canada (FCC), told The House that the ability to continue older farmers' legacies is *"very much top of mind."*

FCC is getting creative to keep farming dreams within reach, offering a new kind of transition loan that offers debt which is more manageable for someone just starting out.

"We've created a guarantee where we can split out the transfer of the asset to the seller over a longer period of time," Hendricks said. "To the buyer, what [that] translates into is that the debt you take on over time is lesser in the early years."

Now that he's managing Wilmot Orchards, Parker said his hope is to *"make a life, not a living, really."*

"I've always had a passion just for food in general, so might as well start at the ground up."



Our Mayor's Response

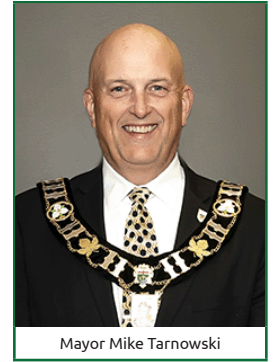
"Thank you for sharing the article and for continuing to advocate for the protection of agricultural land, our rural character, history and culture. These are important parts of our Township and must remain part of our long-term planning decisions.

The article raises legitimate concerns about the loss and rising cost of farmland, the challenges facing younger farmers and the future of agriculture. Municipalities have an important role, although many of these issues also require action from the provincial and federal governments.

Our local data shows a somewhat different trend. Based on the most recent countywide Official Plan land inventory available, Russell Township had approximately 577 more acres designated Agriculture in 2022 than it did in 2015. While some agricultural lands were included in village boundary expansions, other lands previously designated Rural were redesignated Agriculture. The countywide data shows a similar trend.

Growth brings both challenges and opportunities. Council must consider agricultural protection, infrastructure, housing, affordability, municipal services and quality of life together, while working within provincial legislation and the UCPR planning framework. Members of Council may not always agree on individual decisions, but I believe each member is trying to make decisions they feel are in the best interests of the community as a whole, both in the short and the long term.

Please continue to share any information or data you believe should be considered. Council should always remain open to reviewing its approach when new evidence supports a better decision."



Mayor Mike Tarnowski

Follow-up with further clarification by our Mayor

"For clarity, my original response was directly related to the CBC article you shared and to your question about how the Township can help protect farmland.

The figure I provided refers specifically to land designated Agriculture under the most recent countywide Official Plan land inventory. It was intended to provide local and regional context to the broader farmland trends discussed in the article.

I was not suggesting that changing a planning designation creates new farmland, or that the number of acres designated Agriculture tells the whole story. Soil quality, active agricultural use and the long-term viability of farming are also important when considering how effectively farmland is being protected.

My point was that the local data provides relevant context and shows a different trend from the broader national picture presented in the article."

StandOurGround's response

We are quite surprised that the Mayor is reporting that Russell Township has 577 more acres designated as agricultural land between 2015 and 2022!

We are seeing more prime farmland being swallowed up for residential and industrial development around the settlement areas and we know that the tax revenue from residential subdivisions is higher than from the equivalent size of agricultural land.

We are seeing an increase in cropland as forests are clearcut to grow more crops, often paid for by developers that have already purchased the land and are having the farmer remove the trees prior to the start of development. This eventually removes farmland, displaces wildlife habitats and eventually removes the most productive soils.

We have tried to remind Township that agriculture and the agr-food business remain as Township's largest industries, yet they face serious threats from U.S. and the rapid purchase of prime farmland by developers.

Township's latest Official Plan says almost nothing about agriculture (our biggest industry). There is a minor note in section 3.3.2 but otherwise agriculture is ignored. A glance at the table of contents, section 4 - Land Use Designations, says it all.

StandOurGround.ca welcomes your feedback, counterarguments, photographs, and written submissions for our Newsletter. Kindly inform us if you would like your Letter to the Editor to remain anonymous.

 standourground.ca

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