

An Open Letter to the Honourable Lisa Thompson, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
Please Stop the Transfer and Destruction of Landmark Heritage Farmland to Build a Prison

Monday, December 13, 2021

Via email: minister.omafra@ontario.ca

Dear Minister Thompson:

I am writing on behalf of the Kemptville Coalition Against the Proposed Prison. It has come to our attention that the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario (ARIO) is considering the transfer of the former Kemptville College farm property from the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs to the Ministry of the Solicitor General (SolGen), a move that will result in the destruction of heritage farmland in order to build the proposed 235-bed Eastern Ontario Correctional Complex. The targeted land has a century-long history of farming, education and agrotourism, and served as an agricultural hub for the Eastern Ontario farming community. As the minister responsible, we ask that you do not authorize the transfer of this property from your ministry to SolGen, and instead take a strong stand in support of preserving Ontario's farmland and agricultural heritage.

ARIO continues to own 182 acres of the lands comprising the former Kemptville Agricultural School (circa 1917) having sold approximately 633 acres to the Municipality of North Grenville in 2018 for the development of an Education and Community Centre, now referred to as the Kemptville Campus. The land still in ARIO's possession is a stone's throw from the campus and includes prime agricultural land, comprising mainly class 2 and 3 soils; it sits prominently at the south entrance to the small town of Kemptville. A large section of the property north of College Street will be paved over to build the proposed Eastern Ontario Correctional Complex, which will also result in the destruction of the numerous serviceable farm and heritage buildings on the site.

A 2014 report by former federal Minister of Agriculture Lyle Vanclief, and commissioned by the provincial government, recommended that the property be preserved in its entirety and transferred to the municipality, but sadly this did not come to pass. From a November 2019 media report in Ontario AgriNews, we do know that current mayor of North Grenville, Nancy Peckford, spoke to both your predecessor, Minister Ernie Hardeman, and our local MPP, Minister Steve Clark, about the municipality's interest in purchasing the remaining land and restoring it to its status as part of the Kemptville Campus. In an October 2020 story in Nation Valley News, Mayor Peckford confirmed that the municipality had asked for right of first refusal to buy the lands had they become surplus. We learned through a Freedom of Information request disclosure that the lands were not declared surplus, but instead quietly put on hold by SolGen in September 2019, almost a full year before plans to build the "Greater Ottawa Correctional Complex", renamed shortly thereafter the Eastern Ontario Correctional Complex, were made public.

The irreversible loss of this publicly owned agricultural land runs counter to your ministry's obligations including: the stewardship of Ontario's capacity to produce food locally – especially in the context of growing food insecurity and supply chain interruptions; fostering the sustainability and growth of the agri-food sector; and improving the resilience of rural communities. In this time of the climate crisis,

resilience must include climate resilience – the property sits within a floodplain – and the protection of arable land wherever possible.

There are many ways for this farmland to contribute to the sustainable growth of North Grenville’s agri-food and tourism sectors, and its local economy. The property could be transferred in whole to its rightful place as part of the Kemptville Campus, or leased to one or more farmer tenants, as is successfully done through the National Capital Commission in Ottawa. The existing buildings could be brought back into use to support farming projects and the A.M. Barr arena could once again be the centerpiece for rural shows and competitions. With the International Plowing Match coming to the site in September 2022, the up to 70,000 visitors projected to attend would be far more impressed to know the land will be preserved for agricultural uses, than to learn that it will be destroyed to make way for a prison complex.

The recent Auditor General’s report on Environmental Protection in Ontario paints a bleak picture. That trend needs to be reversed. We urge you to prevent the destruction of this agricultural land on the doorstep of our community. Please say no to the transfer of the Kemptville College farmland to SolGen and begin the process for meaningful consultation with key stakeholders, with the goal of preserving the site as an agricultural resource and an enduring symbol of the rich history of this community for generations to come.

Your sincerely,

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On behalf of the Coalition Against the Proposed Prison (Kemptville)
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