

The Real Dirt on Farmer Lisa

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I must admit I've not seen many films about farmlands and agriculture, but this story about not-so-angelic organics saddened me. I thought I might see a classic story of overcoming challenges as a community tries to save a heritage farm in a small place called Kempttown. But it is more of a documentary about a fallen agricultural angel that will make audiences feel betrayed, confused and sad.

The dirt in this story is political, and the fallen agricultural angel is a farmer named Lisa. *The Real Dirt on Farmer Lisa* is a slow-paced but gripping Ontario-made documentary that demonstrates the many ways that Lisa has agriculture and farming in her blood. We follow her path from graduation from an agricultural university that used to own a Kempttown Agricultural College to being a powerful politician responsible for agriculture, food and rural affairs. Her dream job is to ensure the sustainability of agriculture and provide business opportunities for farmers as well as economic growth and opportunities in rural communities. But as all farmers know, there's also some dirty work to be dealt with.

Lisa is no pushover. Her impressive accomplishments are varied and plentiful. For example, we see how she once was at the helm of a government body responsible for ensuring that farmers have access to information, including information about the government's efforts to protect farmland and prevent any transfers of land that would add to the increasing loss of Ontario farmland. She fought for the environment and green energy. She's an alumnus of an advanced agricultural leadership program and was a general manager of a provincial dairy goat cooperative. This is a farmer with a long history of being an active and engaged citizen, working with many community organizations such as a 4-H Foundation and being vice-chair of an agri-food education organization that celebrates all things food and farming. Not only that, she lives on a 120-year-old farm with a small herd of goats. Here we have a true blue champion of farmers and agriculture.

The documentary also covers some of Farmer Lisa's promises made in the media about how she wants to continue to champion agricultural interests and ensure that farmers' voices are heard. We hear her say things like: "This particular [agricultural] industry had been ignored for far too long, and it's time that [farmers] can have confidence that they have a government that is listening and acting now." She even introduces legislation to support agricultural experts in their field of work. Farmer Lisa is obviously outstanding in her own field.

But the documentary is no field of dreams, even though it can sometimes touch places in the heart. Audiences will be well-fed on platitudes, but it's a bitter harvest. That's because Farmer Lisa suddenly has an opportunity to support farming and to save farmland and heritage farm buildings in Kempttown. Will she dig down deep into her rural roots and her responsibility to protect farmland or will she sow the grapes of wrath? All I can say is that audiences will be shocked at her response to a flurry of letters and requests from concerned citizens, a farmers' union, agricultural co-operatives, an ecological farmers

association, Canadian organic growers and food scholars among others. If anyone can assist them, it's Farmer Lisa.

Spoiler alert: after the many months of appeals for her to save the Kemppatown farmland and support local green initiatives, Farmer Lisa simply says over and over again that "I can't assist you". No more commitment to farmers' access to information; no more fighting for the environment or green energy; no more celebrating all things food and farming. Her rural roots don't seem to run very deep at all and her commitment to agriculture, farmers and rural communities even less so. And yet Farmer Lisa then decides to travel all the way to Kemppatown to announce financial support for the creation of an Agri-Food Youth Entrepreneurship Program to teach youth some skills in agri-food entrepreneurship. These young entrepreneurs will also be able to learn how politicians work when they look out their agri-food classroom windows and watch as Lisa paves over prime agricultural land and bulldozes heritage farm buildings to build a prison no one asked for and many do not want. The irony will build the kind of skepticism, distrust and disappointment that farmers need when faced with certain Ontario politicians.