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Sent: October 17, 2024 12:21 PM

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Subject: Waterloo EDC: Clarifying a Common Set of Facts About the Wilmot Land Assembly

Dear Council, Wilmot Mayor, CAO and Wilmot Department of Economic Development,

This email concerns media statements about the Wilmot Land Assembly by the President & CEO of Waterloo EDC, who also contributed to two previous statements by the Business and Economic Support Team of Waterloo Region (BestWR) claiming to address “a common set of facts” about the land assembly.

Regional economic development organizations can only exist as set out in section 109 of the Municipal Act, 2001. As special purpose government-appointed bodies, they are considered local boards by opencouncil.ca and must comply with all relevant provincial legislation and municipal policies, procedures, or bylaws.

To support municipal economic development departments, area CAOs recommend a partnership agreement and funding strategy with Waterloo EDC to their respective councils. On September 11, 2024, Wilmot council, upon staff’s recommendation approved the updated agreement and \$50,000/year in funding, with Waterloo EDC who receive \$2 million annually from the Region and area municipalities.

The Waterloo EDC’s President & CEO describe their activities as a Business-to-Business first point of contact for area municipal economic development departments, offering free concierge services to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to the Region of Waterloo. They meet with area CAOs at least twice a year, and the President & CEO claim to hold quarterly township meetings and meet monthly with the region’s area economic development teams.

How can elected officials in the Region of Waterloo, particularly Wilmot Council, condone the President & CEO of Waterloo EDC, who reports to them and is also under a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA), to continually speak to the media as a Waterloo EDC representative about the Wilmot land assembly on their behalf?

When making presentations, Waterloo EDC’s President & CEO often use the catchphrases: “Collaboration eats chaos for breakfast” and “Never walk past an old friend to greet a new one.”

Despite collaboration with various government levels and foreign businesses, there has been minimal to no engagement with the taxpaying public stakeholders funding Waterloo EDC's land assembly activities.

While embracing advanced manufacturing and innovative technologies is understandable, dismissing the agri-food sector, Canada's largest employer, as a mere loud 'distraction' is disrespectful. Additionally, Waterloo EDC seems to have moved from an old 94-acre Wilmot Employment Land friend to a new 770-acre mega-sized relationship.

Over the past few months, this Wilmot land assembly has served up a distasteful buffet of chaos for breakfast. What happened to Waterloo Region's nationally recognized collaborative "barn-raising spirit"?

While the President & CEO of Waterloo EDC claims there is an unbalanced narrative, here are "a common set of facts" that Waterloo EDC and concerned local farmers and taxpayers agree on.

FARMING IS A BUSINESS - Despite recent attempts by Waterloo EDC and BESTWR to dismiss farming from the region's economic discussions, farming remains a crucial and valued industry in Waterloo Region. Regional Chair Karen Redman is on record saying "Rural issues have economic importance for all of us. In a conversation with Waterloo Economic Development Corporation, CEO Tony LaMantia acknowledged that food production and processing is one of the five top drivers of our economy in the region. Protecting our rich farmland in Waterloo Region is a concern for farmers and everyone who eats and contributes to the quality of life that we all enjoy,"

PRIME FARMLAND - Waterloo EDC's own Food & Beverage promotional materials proudly highlight that Waterloo Region is 'Located in Canada's largest concentration of prime, Class 1 land' and 'home to 1,400 farms and 130+ regional food manufacturers - labelling Waterloo Region as "A food processing powerhouse.' Additionally, on page 9, section 1.6 of the consolidation of the Township of Wilmot Official Plan the first item listed under "Goals" is Agriculture, where it states the goal is: 'To preserve and protect a vital rural/agricultural area in the Township of Wilmot not only for the production of food and other products but also as an important component of the Township's economic base, a source of employment and as a basis for the Township's rural community.'

WILLING HOST COMMUNITIES - In a Jan 6, 2016 article in the Waterloo Chronicle the President & CEO of Waterloo EDC states 'The reality is it takes a community — a willing host community, good political leadership, the right business environment and talent' and he echos the same emphasis on the prerequisite for a community to being a 'willing host' in Waterloo EDC's LANDED podcast episode titled 'Tony's Take on Site Selection' published as recently as October of 2023. In April this year, Premier Doug Ford reiterated the same necessary condition for land acquisition: a community must be a 'willing host.'

TRANSPARENCY / SECRECY - The President & CEO of Waterloo EDC acknowledged he is bound by the same provincial NDA under review by the Region of Waterloo Council. While land readiness has been discussed at Waterloo EDC's annual public information sessions, rural stakeholders would

have been occupied with work including tasks such as tending fields and livestock. Waterloo EDC is accountable to Wilmot council, which holds numerous public meetings annually, providing a suitable forum for Waterloo EDC to ensure transparency about the Wilmot land assembly. At the 2024 International Plowing Match, Premier Doug Ford criticized the mishandling of this land assembly and disapproved of the secrecy.

POLITICIZATION – Waterloo EDC values democratic political stability for its global site selectors but criticizes elected representatives for questioning the mishandling of the Wilmot land assembly. Township and Regional councillors, as well as a provincial MPP, are seeking transparency and accountability, not ‘buckling’ in the face of opposition. The process is inherently political, with Waterloo EDC being a product of area municipal councils and the province funding the purchase of 770 acres of prime farmland. This exemplifies “wanting your cake and eating it too.”

It cannot be denied that creating future workforce opportunities and sustaining our economy is very challenging. The Regional Official Plan, which addresses the urgent need for employment lands, should not be portrayed as any less complex. The claim by the President & CEO of Waterloo EDC that “there’s no better option” than contributing to the extinction of Canada’s largest concentration of prime, Class 1 farmland is a selective and unfortunate interpretation of the Regional Official Plan.

In conclusion, while Waterloo EDC’s efforts to attract direct foreign investment and support economic development are commendable, it’s essential to support Wilmot’s economic development department’s stated goals of preserving and protecting vital rural/agricultural areas in the Township of Wilmot. The chaos due to the lack of transparency and failure to collaborate with the taxpaying public, who ultimately fund these activities, has led to an increasing sense of distrust and dissatisfaction with the process and those who’ve orchestrated it.

Whether it’s a government, a US-based consultancy like CANACRE, or foreign land site selectors, the sovereign rights of Canadians in Wilmot must always be prioritized. According to the position of Waterloo EDC, which is supported by the Premier of Ontario, Doug Ford, a community must be willing to host a land assembly. Wilmot is not.

Wilmot and the Regional Council must declare Wilmot Township as an unwilling host for a land assembly at the proposed location on prime farmland.

Regards,

Mike Rice

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I would like to have this correspondence added to the upcoming Council Agenda Package under correspondence to form part of the official record.