



Long-Term Thinking
for Today's Issues

The CFFO Newsletter

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Focus on District Leadership

Building a better district association

Peter VanderZaag is a busy man. In addition to running a potato farm, VanderZaag is also involved in international potato breeding initiatives, short-term mission work and federal politics. He also knows a thing or two about running a successful district association.

VanderZaag and his fellow directors at the Simcoe Christian Farmers Association have created a steady stream of annual activity to serve local farmers. And they have done it in a way that is cost-effective and which puts the CFFO's messages in front of a wider audience.

One of the most prominent events the Simcoe CFA participates in is an annual Agricultural Knowledge Forum, held in cooperation with other farm organizations and local municipalities. VanderZaag points out that the Simcoe CFA has been in the leadership chair on this event and has designed most of the agendas and identified the majority of the speakers. The event usually costs about \$5,000, including a free dinner for those attending, but the cost is largely underwritten by local sponsors. Last year's topic allowed local farmers to discuss how they could produce their own on-farm energy and displace what they purchase. Approximately 150 people attended.

VanderZaag says "it's all about building bridges with others and partnering with key people. The spin-offs have been great: I gained an opportunity to speak about my vision for development north of Toronto, at a meeting of municipal and provincial politicians. It was only by invitation."

The Simcoe CFA has also worked closely with three local conservation authorities. The district association has been actively giving the authorities farm-based input, which in turn gains publicity for the local CFFO chapter. In return, representatives from the conservation authorities attend the district association's annual meetings and provide reports.

VanderZaag says "it has helped us to gain a broader profile. And it has allowed us to present the CFFO Vision document to the authorities, plus outline our views on environmental payments."

A major focus of the Simcoe CFA has been to provide a good annual meeting. Rather than creating a boring situation in which people feel duty-bound to attend, the Simcoe CFA's annual meetings tend to be all-day affairs with up to 50 members attending. According to VanderZaag, "the format is to involve as many members as

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CFFO Seminar Series 2006
Environmental Farm Plan
Small Farm Canada

possible in making presentations. In the morning we provide an overview of farming, with farm-level discussions in the afternoon."

Finally, the Simcoe CFA has hosted summer picnics over the past seven years. The association generally has a musical group and offers good food in a good facility. Attendance has ranged from 80 to 150 people for the annual event.

VanderZaag offers the following tips for those involved in district leadership:

- **Be sure to involve other organizations and groups in your plans.** VanderZaag says, "there is great synergy in doing it that way, both in financial resources and ideas. To not include others is one of the biggest mistakes we can make at the district level."
- **Be sure to involve both spouses in district work.** VanderZaag says "it has to be both content oriented, plus light. It has to be broad-based in theme and also a burning issue. You have to think of your clientele when planning events."
- **Be sure to impose no financial hardships for those attending events.** VanderZaag says "get sponsors to pay for everything. If you do a project well, sponsors are anxious to be involved with your efforts."
- **Be sure to make your events and meetings fun.** VanderZaag says "it has to be a nice place, a nice facility. And it should be all catered and taken care of so that everyone can have a good time."
- **Be sure to keep local boards dynamic.** VanderZaag says "you have to allow for philosophical discussions, as well as the business. It's the drawing card for involving people."
- **Be sure to have a good mix of people on your local board and don't waste their time.** VanderZaag says "remember that people can't volunteer too much. They're all involved in other things. It has to be worth their time so that they will make time on their schedules. It has to be fun at the board level and in the planning stages."

Getting the basics right at the district level

*By Henry Stevens
President, Wellington
Christian Farmers Association*

The long term success of the CFFO as a grass roots organization depends directly on the success of its districts. Some districts are better positioned to be active than others, but there are a few key things that all districts, regardless of location, can accomplish.

A district needs to begin with an interested, enthusiastic board that wants to see the district thrive. If board members are not keen on building the local district, how can we expect other members to become interested?

The best way to keep your members informed of what you are doing locally is to put out a quarterly newsletter. In Wellington, we have found this to be very effective. Keep it short but interesting enough to keep the readers' attention.

In Wellington, we try to have three public interest meetings a year, along with our annual banquet and a summer picnic/barbeque. In 2004 we consciously moved our meetings out of churches. Making the change to new locations exposes more people to the local association and

helps create opportunities to encourage membership in the CFFO. To help cover the costs associated with these moves, we have asked our local businesses to sponsor these events. We have met with very positive results. We invite our sponsors to come to our events and we recognize them publicly for their support.

Another important thing for building a strong district is to build a relationship with local media outlets. Get to know your editor, invite him or her to all your events, and issue news releases.

It is also very important to build a good relationship with local representatives to the provincial and federal governments. We meet with our elected members at least twice a year and keep them informed about CFFO policies and position statements.

Last, but not least, I cannot emphasize strongly enough how important it is for every district association to have representation at our provincial policy meetings. In doing so, your district association has direct input into policy development and first-hand knowledge of what is happening provincially.