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**Subject:** Draft Agritourism Market Analysis and Preliminary Recommendations

**Staff Report No.:** DS-035-26

**Department/** Development Services Commission / Office of the CAO

**Commission:**

**Date:** June 17, 2026

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**Recommendation:**

1) That Council receive Report DS-035-26 for information.

**Report Highlights**

- The Agritourism Market Analysis confirms that Stouffville is well positioned to expand agritourism activity due to its agricultural base, proximity within the GTA, and strong consumer demand.
- While policy frameworks are supportive in principle to develop on-farm agritourism experiences, implementation is constrained by zoning gaps, complex approvals, and environmental regulations.
- There are key growth opportunities for on-farm accommodations, year-round programming, and coordinated destination development.
- Updating zoning, streamlining approvals, and enhancing municipal supports will be critical to enabling agritourism growth.
- Findings from the Market Analysis will directly inform the preparation of the Agritourism Strategy and Toolkit, including policy recommendations, zoning considerations, and practical implementation guidance for operators and staff.

## **1. Purpose:**

The Agritourism Strategy and Toolkit Development project was initiated in March of 2026. This report presents findings from the Draft Agritourism Research Summary and Market Analysis and outlines preliminary directions to support the development of an Agritourism Strategy and Toolkit for the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville.

## **2. Background:**

The Town retained Bannikin Consulting and initiated an agritourism research project in March 2026 to better understand the current state of agritourism, identify opportunities and constraints, and support diversification of the rural economy to support farmers and protect farmland.

The project includes:

- Policy and regulatory review
- Stakeholder engagement (operators, residents, key informants)
- Market analysis and visitor trends
- Identification of opportunities and barriers

Agritourism is broadly defined as farm-based tourism experiences connected to agricultural production, including activities such as farm markets, u-pick activities, events, accommodations, and educational programming.

The initiative aligns with broader municipal and regional priorities to:

- Support farm viability
- Strengthen local food systems
- Enhance sustainable tourism and economic development
- Preserve rural character

Between the Provincial Plans (Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, and Greenbelt Plan), the Town's Official Plan and Zoning By-law, there is a complex set of regulations that agritourism operators must navigate.

Together, the Official Plan, 2025-2028 Stouffville Visitor Plan, Council's 2022-2026 Strategic Plan, and Economic Development Strategy 2021-2025 provide a strong and consistent policy foundation for agritourism as a tool to support agricultural viability, attract investment, grow tourism, and contribute to a more balanced tax base. The development of a Stouffville Agritourism Strategy and Toolkit will help translate this existing and

complex policy direction into practical, investment-ready guidance, supporting responsible agritourism business growth, increasing ICI-supported economic activity, and helping to reduce the long-term residential tax burden associated with supporting growth in the Town.

### **3. Analysis:**

#### **3.1 Market Analysis Scope and Methodology**

The Agritourism Market Analysis draws on a combination of policy and legislative review, best practices research, market trend analysis, stakeholder interviews, surveys, community engagement activities, and a Regional Assessment Model (RAM). Engagement activities included consultations with existing and prospective agritourism operators, residents, and regional partners, to ensure findings are grounded in local experience and market realities.

#### **3.2 What We've Heard**

Overall, Stouffville residents and agricultural operators strongly support agritourism as a way to preserve rural identity, strengthen local food systems, and connect urban populations with farming, while emphasizing the need for sustainable and community-focused growth. Agricultural operators see significant economic and diversification opportunities but face barriers such as complex municipal approvals, labour shortages, infrastructure costs, and regulatory challenges. Survey results indicate existing businesses are established and growing, and that there are prospective operators with an interest in investing in agritourism in Stouffville. Key opportunities include leveraging proximity within the Greater Toronto Area, expanding year-round experiences, improving marketing and coordination, and providing clearer guidance and support, while major concerns focus on regulatory complexity, infrastructure, and maintaining the rural character of the community.

#### **3.3 Market Demand and Visitor Characteristics**

The analysis confirms strong and growing demand for agritourism experiences, driven by proximity within the Greater Toronto Area, consumer interest in local food, experiential travel, and short-break destinations. Primary visitor segments include food-motivated visitors seeking curated, high-quality experiences and families seeking accessible, packaged, and educational farm-based activities. Tourism trends include growth in wellness and nature-based experiences and increasing reliance on digital discovery and

booking platforms. These trends align well with Stouffville's rural assets and proximity to urban markets.

Current visitation data into the Village of Stouffville indicates that the historic downtown is attracting a fair-share of the broader GTA tourism market, with an estimated capture of approximately 135,000 total visits annually. The analysis identifies potential to increase this capture through expanded offerings, improved coordination, and destination development.

### **3.4 Agricultural Asset Base and Existing Supply**

Stouffville benefits from a diverse agricultural base that is well-suited to agritourism, with an over-representation of greenhouse, nursery, orchard, and vegetable operations compared to regional averages. These farm types lend themselves to high-engagement activities such as seasonal harvest experiences, workshops, farm retail, and educational programming.

The Market Analysis identifies approximately 32 agritourism and on-farm diversified use operations in Stouffville offering a range of activities. While the sector is substantial, supply is uneven across categories, with notable gaps in farm-based accommodations, cafés and dining experiences, and destination-scale offerings.

### **3.5 Policy and Regulatory Considerations**

The analysis confirms that Stouffville's Official Plan and Provincial planning framework are permissive of agritourism in principle; however, implementation is often constrained by regulatory complexity and zoning limitations. The current Zoning By-law does not comprehensively define or enable agritourism and on-farm diversified uses, creating uncertainty for operators and necessitating site-specific approvals.

The regulations regarding on-farm diversified uses and associated guidelines require clarification for potential operators to navigate successfully and determine early in the process whether their concept is achievable under the current policy framework.

The ongoing Comprehensive Zoning By-law Update represents a key opportunity to align zoning permissions with Official Plan policy, reduce regulatory barriers, and provide clearer, more consistent pathways for agritourism development while maintaining compatibility with environmental protection requirements.

### **3.6 Key Barriers to Agritourism Development**

The Agritourism Market Analysis identifies several recurring barriers that constrain agritourism growth in Stouffville despite strong market demand and a supportive policy

framework. These barriers are largely structural and regulatory in nature and can be addressed through improved policy clarity, zoning alignment, and coordinated implementation.

- **Regulatory Complexity and Zoning Limitations**

While agritourism and on-farm diversified uses are supported in principle through Provincial policy and the Town's Official Plan, the current Comprehensive Zoning By-law does not clearly define or comprehensively permit these uses. As a result, many agritourism proposals require site-specific approvals, minor variances, or rezonings, creating uncertainty, increased costs, and longer timelines for operators and investors.

- **Environmental and Provincial Policy Constraints**

Much of Stouffville's agricultural land base is subject to the Greenbelt Plan and Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan. While these frameworks permit agritourism and on-farm diversified uses, strict environmental protection requirements, setbacks, and compatibility tests add complexity to project planning and approvals. These constraints can deter smaller operators or those without access to specialized planning expertise.

- **Operational and Business Challenges**

Existing and prospective operators identified operational barriers including labour availability, insurance costs, infrastructure limitations, signage restrictions, and compliance with health and safety regulations. Although the Growing Agritourism Act, 2024 provides liability protections, operators remain responsible for meeting a wide range of regulatory requirements, which can be difficult to navigate without clear guidance.

- **Fragmented Sector and Limited Coordination**

The Market Analysis notes that Stouffville's agritourism sector is substantial but fragmented, with limited coordination between farms, experiences, and supporting services. This limits the ability to create connected visitor itineraries, shared marketing, and destination-level experiences, constraining the Town's ability to capture a larger share of the regional agritourism market.

- **Information Gaps and Process Uncertainty**

Stakeholder engagement revealed gaps in understanding around what agritourism uses are permitted, how to navigate municipal approvals, and how Provincial and municipal policies are applied in practice. This uncertainty can discourage investment, delay expansion plans, and result in missed market opportunities, particularly for new or smaller operators.

### **3.7 Key Preliminary Recommendations**

The Market Analysis identifies several preliminary recommendations for Stouffville, including:

#### **Policies and Processes**

- Confirm Economic Development as the primary intake point and concierge guide for current and prospective agritourism operators, with clear connections across planning, building, by-law, fire, health, and other relevant departments.
- Confirm a clear definition of a farm in the context of agritourism eligibility criteria.
- Expand and clarify as-of-right zoning permissions, reducing reliance on site-specific rezoning and minor variance applications. Permitted uses to be confirmed through the Strategy.

#### **Destination Management**

- Develop a more coordinated destination wayfinding and signage approach.
- Continue to enhance the unified destination brand Discover Stouffville and create visitor-facing elements for Stouffville's agritourism identity, supported by consistent marketing assets that operators can use, to strengthen recognition of Stouffville as an agritourism destination beyond individual operator marketing.
- Improve infrastructure that supports visitor movement and connected experiences across Stouffville, including roads, cycling linkages, etc.
- Develop itineraries, routes, and experiences that connect farms.
- Explore establishment of a Municipal Accommodation Tax and use Town portion of funds to support agritourism.

### **Additional Business Supports**

- Offer business modelling support to help operators design viable agritourism models that combine complementary revenue streams.
- **Strengthen relationships** with organizations such as Central Counties Tourism, Agritourism Ontario, Culinary Tourism Alliance, tourism partners, and agricultural organizations to connect local operators with external expertise, training, and promotional opportunities.
- Continue to coordinate networking and peer-learning opportunities for agritourism operators, farms, restaurants, chefs, and tourism businesses to strengthen collaboration and farm-to-fork connections across food and tourism systems.
- Explore tools that support reinvestment in rural businesses, such as an on-farm diversified use tax subclass, rural Community Improvement Plan incentives, or other targeted financial supports, where feasible.

### **3.8 Next Steps**

Findings from the Market Analysis will be integrated into the development of the Agritourism Strategy and Toolkits, including recommendations for policy clarity, zoning alignment, and practical implementation supports for operators. The Agritourism Strategy and Toolkit materials are anticipated to be brought forward to Council in September for endorsement. Recommended Zoning By-law amendments will be considered through the Town's ongoing Comprehensive Zoning By-law Review (Re-Zone and Re-Design) project.

## **4. Options:**

### **4.1 Option A (Recommended)**

That Council receive Report DS-035-26 for information.

## **5. Financial Implications:**

The project is proceeding within the Council approved 2026 budget allocated for the Agritourism Strategy and Toolkit Development initiative. There are no additional financial implications associated with this information report.

## 6. Broader Intergovernmental Impacts and/or Considerations:

The Region of York Economic Strategy Division is contributing financially to the budget for this project. In addition to the Stouffville-based toolkit, the consultant will be producing a York Region-based toolkit as part of the project. Creating the two toolkits simultaneously will leverage synergy between the Town and the Region. The toolkits will align with York Region's Agriculture and Agri-Food Sector Strategy. Regional staff will be providing input and resources on the project as part of the steering committee.

## 7. Communication:

Town Staff has launched a project webpage ([www.townofws.ca/agritourism](http://www.townofws.ca/agritourism)) to promote the initiative and keep the public informed about engagement opportunities. An industry survey was set up in early May to collect input from farmers in York Region who own or operate an agritourism business (i.e. current), as well as those who are interested in starting an agritourism business on their farm or are considering investing in an agritourism business (i.e., prospective) in York Region. In collaboration with Bannikin, Town Staff hosted two Farm Table Talks which were focused discussions with local farmers. One session was held virtually on May 7, 2026, and the second was in person at King Cole Ducks on May 12, 2026.

An Agritourism Open House was also held on May 12, 2026, at the Town Offices, inviting members of the public to share their feedback on agritourism in the community and identify opportunities for growth in Stouffville's agritourism sector. A survey aimed at residents will supplement the input gathered from the Open House.

Additional input will be gathered through upcoming community events, as well as an online resident survey available throughout the month of June. The industry survey will remain open until the end of June to allow for continued feedback from the local business community. A third Farm Table Talk is planned for mid-July to provide an additional opportunity for engagement with Stouffville farmers.

## 8. Alignment with Strategic Plan:

### 1. A Town that Grows

A Town that grows in support of complete communities

### 2. A Healthy and Greener Town

Increase Offerings and Opportunities for Active Living

### 3. An Engaging Town

Increase Community Engagement & Outreach

**9. Attachments:**

Attachment No. 1 – Agritourism: Draft Research Summary and Market Analysis

**10. Related Reports:**

[May 6, 2026 – DS-016-26 Agritourism Strategy and Toolkit Project Kickoff](#)

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**Review Confirmation:**

Reviewing Division	Review Required?				Reviewed By
Finance	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	
Legal	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	
Communications	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	
Clerks	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	