

January 29, 2025

Subject: Urgent Appeal to Save the Ontario Agri-Food Venture Centre (OAFVC)

Economic growth, viability, and sustainability are crucial to any community, and the Ontario Agri-Food Venture Centre (OAFVC) is the link that binds it together for Northumberland County.

Dear County Councillor

I am writing to you as a small business owner and a dedicated resident of our community to urgently appeal for your support in preserving the Ontario Agri-Food Venture Centre (OAFVC). As a visible minority woman entrepreneur, I have relied heavily on the OAFVC to manufacture my vegetable condiment, and without this invaluable facility, my business would face insurmountable challenges.

The OAFVC offers more than just a kitchen; it provides a comprehensive suite of services that are essential for small businesses like mine to thrive. These services include access to state-of-the-art food processing equipment, industry standard cleaning, business development support, and vital connections to local markets. The OAFVC has been instrumental in helping small food entrepreneurs scale their businesses and meet Canada Food Inspection Agency's stringent food safety standards.

Comparison with Commercial Kitchens:

- ✚ The average cost of renting a commercial kitchen in Northumberland ranges from \$25 to \$40 per hour. For small businesses operating on tight budgets, these costs can quickly become unsustainable. Additionally, these fees cover only the use of basic equipment. Entrepreneurs must also incur additional costs for logistics, such as transportation and storage, as well as investments in necessary equipment like labelling and date coding machines.
- ✚ Small business startups often face significant challenges in accessing funding to cover these initial investments. Add to this the institutional barriers that exist for visible minorities and women entrepreneurs. This financial strain can make it difficult for new businesses to get off the ground and sustain operations.

- ✚ By contrast, the OAFVC's subsidized rates include comprehensive support services. When I spend 4 hours at the OAFVC, this time encompasses not only manufacturing but also crucial support activities like labelling, date coding, testing, and affordable storage for leftovers. This integrated approach reduces the need for separate investments in specialized equipment and ensures that products meet high standards of sanitization and quality control.

Lack of Comparable Facilities:

- ✚ A search for similar facilities in the region reveals that there are few, if any, options that provide the same level of comprehensive support as the OAFVC. Most commercial kitchens offer purely rental spaces without the ancillary services vital for small-scale food producers, forcing entrepreneurs to manage additional logistical and quality control challenges independently.
- ✚ Other agri-food incubators in Ontario, such as the Toronto Food Business Incubator, charge significantly higher fees and are often located far from Northumberland, making them less accessible for local businesses. These incubators also typically do not provide the same breadth of support services, which further increases operational complexities and costs for small businesses.

Economic Impact:

- ✚ The OAFVC has been a catalyst for local economic growth, supporting over 160 small businesses since its inception. The facility has created jobs and fostered innovation in the agri-food sector.
- ✚ Loss of vital jobs in the community; provided internship positions to young and up-and-coming graduates.
- ✚ Small businesses travel from all over the county and beyond to utilize the OAFVC's state-of-the-art facilities. This clearly demonstrates the facility's wider reach and reputation, emphasizing its unique value and the potential loss to a broader business community if it were to close. It underscores the regional significance of the OAFVC.
- ✚ Success stories include businesses like Basoli Sauces, which has created a range of delicious sauces and chutneys using traditional recipes and fresh, handpicked ingredients, adding food diversity to the county. Another example is Oat and Mill,

an award-winning company which produces a plant base ice cream and other iced products that showcases the quality and variety of products being produced at the OAFVC.

Personal Impact:

- ✚ My sauce and condiment business, Verano Food Holdings, relies heavily on locally sourced inputs from small businesses such as Market and Smor, Burnham Family Farms, Moore's Orchard, Cranbrook Farms, and Cold Springs Organics. This local sourcing supports these small businesses and helps strengthen our community's economy by keeping money within the local area and fostering relationships among local producers.
- ✚ My business is in the start-up phase of growth. My vision is to have the Verano Food Holdings brand recognized across Canada. The support and resources provided by the OAFVC are essential in achieving this vision and ensuring my business's growth and success. My success is Cobourg's success. Northumberland has lost multiple manufacturing enterprises over the last decade, resulting in a significant blow to its economic fortunes. Closing the OAFVC would be shutting off the valve to the economic inflows that come from small business enterprises. We would lose the opportunity for all that accompanies new business, including increased revenue from taxes and job creation.

A reduction in funding to the OAFVC to save money in the short term could have long-term negative consequences for our local economy. Small businesses are often touted as the engine of our economy, and it would be counterproductive to force the shuttering of a service that was established to promote and support them.

I bear witness to the level of support at each and every interaction with the OAFVC, and for this, I appeal to you by adding my name to the petition to keep this vital link to the community thriving.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I hope you will join me in advocating for the preservation of the Ontario Agri-Food Venture Centre; for without it I fear we will regress.

Sincerely,

Beverley Shepherd
Verano Food Holdings