

## Rob Black heads new organization touted as the 'unified voice' for rural Ontarians

by Chris Daponte

**GUELPH-ERAMOSA** - Though still in its infancy, the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) seems to be making a difference already for rural leaders throughout the province.

Formed on April 1 through the amalgamation of The Centre for Rural Leadership (TCRL) and The Ontario Rural Council (TORC), the institute aims to provide support, through training and development, for key issues facing rural Ontarians.

"Our goal overall, is to help people," said chief executive officer Rob Black, of Fergus. And while farmers make up a significant portion of its clientele, Black says the institute deals with "a lot more than just agricultural issues."

Now living in Fergus, Black was born and raised on a farm and brings to ROI 25 years of experience with various agricultural organizations, where he served as a speaker, trainer and workshop leader.

He earned a Bachelor of Science in agriculture degree from Guelph University before attending Queen's University, where he earned a Bachelor of Education degree.

His previous jobs include executive director of TCRL, general manager of the former Ontario Soybean Growers group, executive director of 4-H Ontario and more than 15 years in various management positions with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA).

Guelph-Eramosa Mayor and ROI board member Chris White says much of the credit for ROI's early success should be given to Black, but the CEO is quick to deflect any praise.

"I just get the opportunity to work with these guys. It's

great," Black said of the ROI's six staff members. He added, "We've got a stellar board ... individuals who are passionate about rural issues."

Black said he is pleasantly surprised at the level of awareness that exists around ROI, considering the organization's relatively brief existence.

"We've received lots of positive feedback about the amalgamation," he said. "It just makes a lot of sense."

He explained TCRL brought the leadership component, while TORC is renowned for engaging stakeholders on issues and policy.

Jim Whaley, chairman of the 12-member volunteer ROI board, agrees.

"It sometimes feels like a long time coming, but we're here," Whaley said of the amalgamation. That both TCRL and TORC "had strong boards before," will only enhance the work now done at ROI, he added, noting most board members have many years of experience.

Whaley said there is already an "impressive network" of rural leaders in existence and they, as well as newcomers, are responding well to the merger.

Rob Hannam, vice chairman of the ROI board, said members expect the new organization will help rural residents acquire the skills and confidence they need to become active in their community. "Anyone who has a passion for rural Ontario should get involved," said Hannam.

The decision to locate the ROI headquarters in the Gencor building on Highway 6 north of Guelph was an easy one, Black said, noting the office is the right size, in a great location in Wellington

County and where several stakeholders are also located.

"It's a perfect fit," Black said.

White, also the chairman of the Rural Ontario Municipal Association, called the ROI grand opening on June 1 "a very historic day for this province."

He noted within two weeks of its inception, Progressive

issues, including the controversial Green Energy Act.

The organization can also help with issues like loans and organize forums and discussions, he added.

And the ROI works closely with municipalities as well.

"The municipal sector is going to be a key stakeholder for sure," Ragetlie said.

### The programs

huge time commitment. She said organizers try to keep registration fees low and the information as accessible and local as possible.

The three components of the Steps to Leadership program are the "Step Up to Leadership" workshop, "Leading Edge First Steps" and "Leading Edge Next Steps."

The "Leading Edge Summit," offered to graduates of the program as well as next generation and current rural leaders, offers the opportunity to network with community, organization and business leaders from across Ontario.

### AALP

Kathie MacDonald, communications manager and coordinator of the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program (AALP), said ROI staff are pumped about the recent amalgamation.

"It's an exciting time," MacDonald said.

Now in its 25th year, the AALP has produced graduates with backgrounds ranging from farmers to business owners to politicians.

"They're current and emerging leaders" already involved in some form or another in their community, Black explained.

There have been 13 classes



Rural Ontario Institute team members, from left, include: administration manager Michele Hill, director of policy and stakeholder engagement Norman Ragetlie, communications manager and AALP coordinator Kathie MacDonald, manager of leadership programs Alicia Evans, project manager Marnie Kloppenburg and CEO Rob Black.

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for rural Ontario  
should get involved."**

- Rob Hannam, vice chairman of the ROI board

Conservative leader Tim Hudak had contacted the ROI to discuss issues.

"This is a must-have for Ontario. There's nothing else like this," White said. "Rural Ontario needs a more unified voice."

### Working with individuals and municipalities

Norman Ragetlie, director of policy and stakeholder engagement, explained the ROI tries to help rural residents articulate their concerns and bring their voice "to the corridors of government" on myriad

Project manager Alicia Evans, who oversees the "Steps to Leadership" program - a collaborative project between ROI, 4-H Ontario and the Foundation for Rural Living - said youths, emerging leaders and established leaders at least 16 years of age are all welcome in the program.

"It's really about trying to engage people in their community," Evans said.

Currently in its second year, Steps to Leadership involves three separate programs, which Evans stressed do not involve a

offered every other year - 353 alumni and each class consists of about 30 people and takes 48 days total to complete eight three-day seminars and two study tours; one in North America and one international.

There is an application process for the program, which comes with an \$8,500 tuition fee (sponsorship can help lower the cost).

AALP study topics covered include:

- government and political systems;
- marketing and economics;
- national and international trade;
- communication and organization skills;
- decision making;
- consumer and social issues;
- working with the media;
- trends in the agri-food industry and rural society; and
- globalization and the dynamics of change.

Whether they want to join a program or simply just have a question, ROI officials want residents, municipalities, businesses and organizations to know they have somewhere to turn to address concerns about their rural community.

For more information call 519-826-4204 or visit ruralontarioinstitute.ca.

# New group strengthens rural voice

Two rural organizations have been amalgamated to deliver leadership training and policy debate

BY JOHN GREIG

*Ontario Farmer*

**A** new rural organization aims to provide a third party perspective to issues in rural Ontario.

The Rural Ontario Institute pulls together the Centre for Rural Leadership and The Ontario Rural Council (TORC) into one new organization which will deliver leadership training, but will also help to moderate issues, and could push forward issues through policy statements and white papers.

The Centre For Rural Leadership was responsible for its signature program the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program, which provides a 19-month program to help teach



**Rob Black**

skills to agriculture leaders, along with several other training programs delivered in rural communities.

The Ontario Rural Council was a kind of clearing house for agriculture issues, which held events which brought together people to discuss certain rural issues, such as health care.

Last year the two organizations were brought together, and their boards worked to amal-

gamate them, ROI's chair Jim Whaley said at the recent launch of the organization.

ROI executive director Rob Black says the organization aims to connect to more of the issues with its network of more than 300 AALP graduates across the province.

The hope is that the network that the Centre for Rural Leadership already has in place will help ROI better connect to rural communities than did TORC.

"We want to have a third party perspective," he said. "We'll have to know when we can help move issues forward. Some issues we might not play a role in."

He says the organization will work with other organization including general farm organizations, and rural groups such as the Rural Ontario Municipal Association.

"We want to be the go-to organization for all things rural."

