

Area's agri-business campaign emphasizes local buying

by Mark Ball

Bob King hopes to plant a seed that Monroe County's agriculture is a precious resource. King, director of Monroe Community College's Agriculture and Life Science Institute, is spearheading a campaign that will demonstrate the benefits of agriculture and promote buying locally.

King said the farming outlook, in this region, is more positive than many residents would guess.

"The market here is viable," said King. "I think farmers are finding that the market has really moved right into their backyards."

King credits both unique natural conditions specific to this area and a

strong demographic mix. King said Rochester's character as a metropolitan region keeps locals excited about agriculture and helps introduce farmers to the latest available technologies. The soil and climate also contribute to making this county ideal for vegetable and fruit farming.

King said the area's uniqueness is evident in a closer look at local farms. First, women run 50 percent of local farms. Second, educational levels of Monroe County farmers are on average equivalent to an associate's degree. Third, county farms have a strong diversity in business strategies and products.

"Most of these people are business oriented with different operational

philosophies," King said. "I wouldn't call them average in terms of their background."

That doesn't mean that the Monroe County farmer isn't without his challenges. King said the county is losing almost 700 acres of farmland a year, which is better than in years past. The three most daunting issues facing local agriculture are: development, lack of profitability and lack of adequate drainage.

To meet those challenges, King said the trend is more niche farms and more high production farms.

"Farmers are having to become marketers," King said, pointing to an increase in agri-tainment which is turning farms into

entertainment destinations. King said Monroe County is poised for more success stories.

The timing is also right from a national perspective. Due to outside safety threats and an increase in health awareness, people want to know more about the food they eat. One way to do this is to seek out locally grown produce. King said this trend is evident in college campus dining halls and other positive signs for the future of agriculture can be found on local college campuses.

"We're witnessing a resurgence by young people to get exposure to agriculture," said King. MCC is planning to meet this growing need. The college is getting ready to launch an associate's degree program in agricultural science in late 2008.

About the program

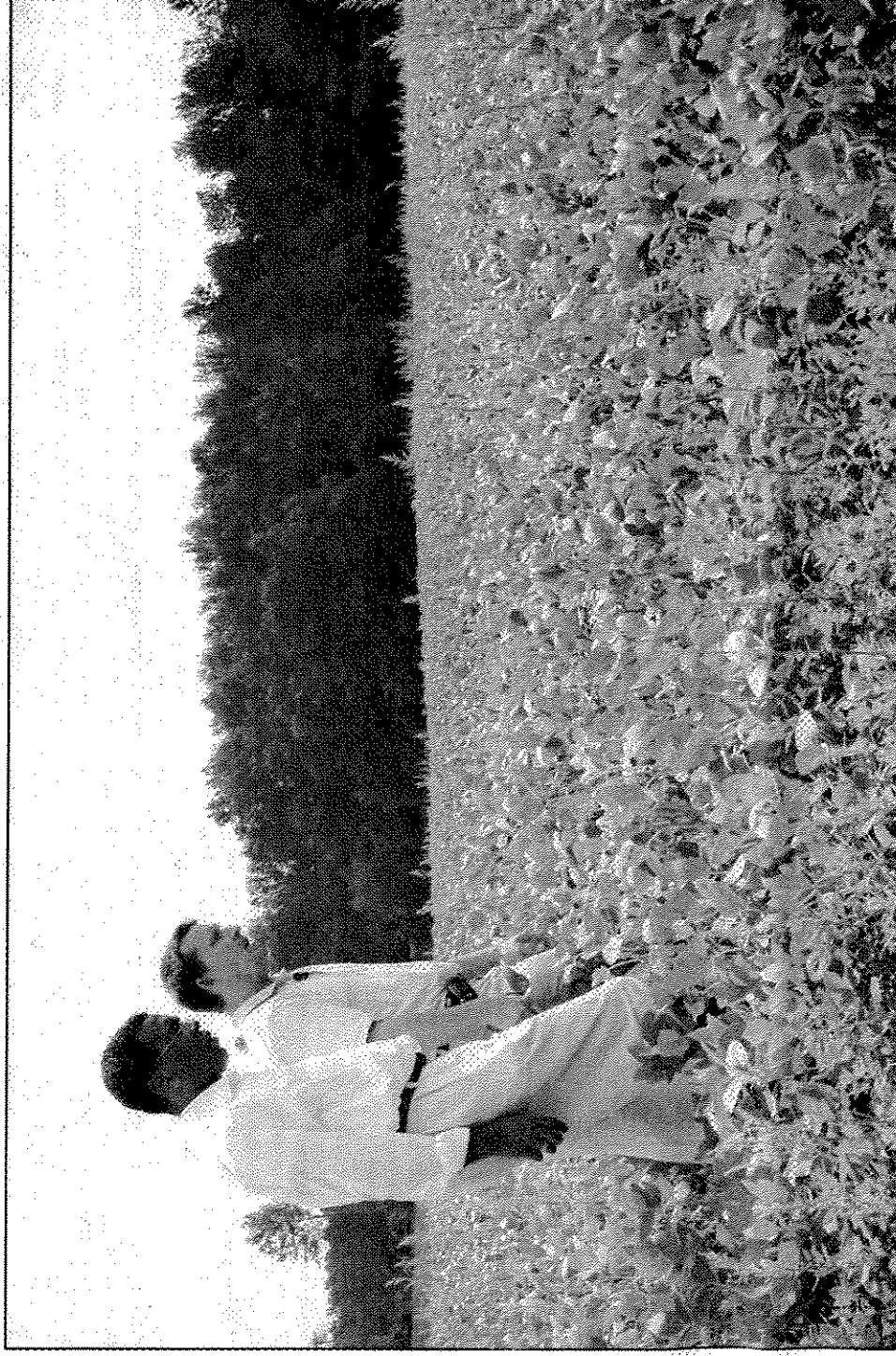
The Agriculture and Life Sciences Institute advocates on issues relating to land use, offers marketing education and provides academic instruction for existing and future agri-business professionals, such as farmers, winery operators and employees of companies involved in renewable energy resources, as well as landowners to apply knowledge to their specific area of interest.

King's top five proactive tips

Before coming to MCC's Agriculture and Life Science Institute, Bob King was an extension agent for Cornell Cooperative Extension. In addition to a wealth of professional experience, King earned his PhD in agriculture education from Penn State.

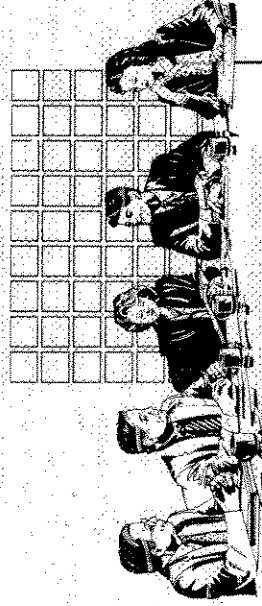
Here are King's top five tips for improving the local agricultural scene:

1. Buy local. It is an opportunity to vote with your dollar.
2. Get involved in local politics. Be active when your town is engaged in comprehensive planning.
3. Know your neighbors and reach out to your local farmers.
4. Be patient with farm equipment traveling along the road.
5. Educate your children on the history and importance of agriculture.



Bob King's advocacy for agriculture takes him right to the farm. Here he's being interviewed by TV Channel 8 reporter Kevin Jolly as they walk together in a field of soybeans at Martin Farms in Brockport. Provided photo by Ray Treat, MCC.

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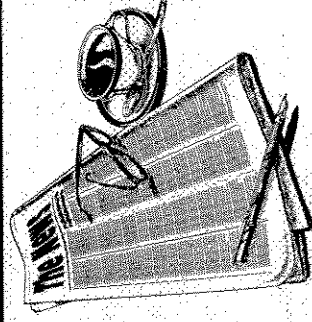
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