

No one mentioned Aylmer Meat Packers Inc. during a recent panel discussion in Elmwood about the future of small abattoirs.

That happened only later when a retired hog farmer approached me with a quiet word in my ear about what dangers might follow if the push against new Ontario meat inspection rules goes too far. Odd in a way no one mentioned Aylmer Meats during the public part of the meeting when there were so many references to Maple Leaf Foods.

There was a whole lot of talk about corporate agendas squashing "little guys." Let's not ignore it. There is a corporate agenda that needs regulation.

The hunger for revenue among publicly traded corporations does seem to cloud their perspective about social and environmental responsibility: witness the financial meltdown of 2008 or British Petroleum's Gulf of Mexico fiasco. And it's true that Maple Leaf screwed up badly when it and the federal government meat inspection system allowed the distribution of fatally contaminated cold cuts that killed 21 people in August of 2008. Company president Michael McCain has admitted as much.

But that's really only part of the reason Ontario's small meat processing and handling firms face strict new regulations today. Adoption of the Food Safety and Quality Act and associated regulations can be traced directly to a 2004 investigation of the relatively small Aylmer Meats operation and the judicial inquiry that followed.

Allegations against Aylmer about the illegal use of injured or deadstock animals for human food translated directly into Ontario's current rules. In the end, company president Butch Clare pleaded guilty to distributing improperly labelled meat and received fines totalling \$15,000, online Canadian Food Inspection Agency records show. You can be certain that many of the 275 people who attended the Elmwood meeting know all this.

In the interests of full disclosure, I should point out that I chaired the discussion that night in Elmwood of a panel that included: Chatham-area sausage maker and hog farmer Louis Roesch, Owen Sound local food retailer Anne Finlay-Stewart, Grey County livestock

farmer Judy Trimble and Bruce-Grey local food coordinator Freeman Boyd. The event was organized by the Malcolm Women's Institute with support from both the local Federation of Agriculture and National Farmers Union.

There are active talks between the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) and the Ontario Independent Meat Processors where Roesch is a delegate. He told the Elmwood crowd he hopes for progress soon in so far confidential discussions with provincial officials. Roesch spoke mainly about a distinction between cosmetics and the actual health impact of existing rules.

Several butchers came to talk about the oppressive, costly nature of their encounters with OMAFRA inspectors, often over what they consider to be minor factors in the preparation of healthy food. The corporate agenda crowd was out in force and gave me new appreciation for

Roberts rules of order, particularly after 160 minutes as people kept lining up at the floor microphone and the public address system crackled under the influence of a passing thunderstorm. All this on the night when the Hawks finally took the cup.

No doubt there are problems with OMAFRA's new regime and the application to small operators of uniform regulations devised for large-scale meat handling operations.

It has riled up too many sensible people to be simply the routine objection of newly-regulated business operators.

The agency introduced changes in 2005 and has been slow to reach small-scale processors who have only lately begun to experience the new regime. It also appears to have done a poor job of introducing and explaining itself. That's odd because communications was an important point of emphasis in Mr. Justice Roland Haines's report which included an entire chapter on the subject. And yet a four-page ministry "info-sheet" handed around at Elmwood bears the date June 2010, as if communications were some sort of afterthought.

Haines also recommended provincial government financial assistance to help businesses implement the new regulations. The only funding referred to in the ministry brochure, however, pays for technical and business assessments, not capital investment for renovations or new equipment.

The most sensible suggestions of the evening came from Freeman Boyd, a former chicken farmer and University of Guelph philosophy teacher who now heads the region's growing local food network. Boyd called for tiered regulations by plant size. He wants rules that measure food safety facilities against actual hazards.

That also reflects Haines' report findings which argues for meat packing rules based on scientific evidence.

It really doesn't make sense for the province to regulate neighbourhood butchers in the same way as Maple Leaf Foods. At the same time, it's equally important that all meat processors, whether large or small, understand and meet regulatory standards that protect the public from tainted food.