

Food advocates come together to question the need of local food banks

By Brock Weir

It's a question that has been asked before, but experts and users have yet to come to a common consensus; but food advocates are coming together in Aurora this week hoping to answer the question of whether food banks are past their best-before date.

It is a question that will be posed to a panel of experts this Thursday, June 19. Bringing together dieticians, activists from the food bank organization Freedom 90, and representatives from a Community Food Centre, the discussion focuses on food charity.

Food charity is touted as tangible evidence of a caring community and it offers the opportunity to reduce waste by matching surplus food with those who need it supposedly a win-win situation, offers up the York Region Food Network in a statement. In practice, emergency food charity has created an inefficient food distribution system, negatively impacting our environment, economy and community. This new distribution system, designed for poor people, mainly provides food high in salt, fat, and sugar, and does nothing to shift policies and actions to ensure a just and sustainable food system.

Speaking to The Auroran last week, Joan Stonehocker, Executive Director of the York Region Food Network, gave her opinion of the question that will be asked this week, likening the situation to a can of peaches. It might have a best before date of June 18, she said, but it won't necessarily be bad on June 19.

We still have it, we can still eat the peaches, but maybe we should be looking at where to go to next, said Ms. Stonehocker. Food banks are necessary because people don't have enough money to buy food and they go hungry, and have less money for other necessities in their lives if we didn't have food banks. They are a valuable service to people living in poverty, but is it the best way to do it? No.

Part of the work of the York Region Food Network is to provide healthy food systems to people living throughout the Region. In focusing on developing policies surrounding healthy food, they question whether Food Banks can be a part of the system and, if so, how they can best fit.

Among the panellists, representatives from Community Food Centres be on hand to look at how people can be empowered by using food as a way to have a voice in our communities.

In community food centres, you have staff that are there and available while you are doing a healthy food component, learning how to cook, how to grow your own food, and you are being mindful of where your food comes from and that whole process of how it integrates into our lives and whether we have a fair and just food system.

One voice which will not be at the table, however, is Aurora's primary food bank, the Aurora Food Pantry. For them, the answer to the question posed by the York Region Food Network is a resounding no. It is a no which they feel would be shared by each volunteer working in their Industrial Parkway facility, as well as the 400 clients they serve regularly.

From the perspective of Pantry volunteer John Sergeant, organizations opposing food banks came in via a path cleared by many food bank volunteers and that need that brought them there in the first place, is still something they strive to fill.

It is readily available, it helps people when they are down in need, said Mr. Sergeant. Poverty is not going away.

Operated primarily by volunteers, Mr. Sergeant says they funnel their resources and donations directly into serving the clients that need them.

They are more into giving out food vouchers, he said. These people are all creating full-time jobs. When I approached [the Network] on the question, I said, that is a pretty catchy slogan on your behalf, but what about the people that these Pantries serve?

Thursday's Panel Discussion will take place at the York Region Food Network, 350 Industrial Parkway South,

from 7 ? 8 p.m.