

Food security in focus around Council table with potential Food Charter

Food insecurity is a problem that often flies under the radar in Aurora, but it is prevalent nonetheless ? and Council is laying the groundwork to tackle the issue head-on.

Last week, Council unanimously approved a motion from Councillor Sandra Humfryes, one which calls on the Town to look at the possibility of developing a Food Charter for Aurora and the creation of a Food Security Advisory Committee with an aim of facilitating ?better access to quality, safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food for all residents.?

These goals include expanding community gardens throughout Aurora and looking at programs to make home gardening, including window gardening for those who don't have a yard, easier and more accessible.

Such a committee, Councillor Humfryes added, would ?foster support for local food security initiatives such as backyard gardening programs and container gardening programs that ensure greater food security and food literacy in Aurora.?

?This speaks to how we, as a community, can work together to meet our social, environmental, health and wellness goals,? she said. ?[A Food Charter] can be with the citizen-led volunteer group or advisory committee.?

Through her work at Welcome Table, a weekly meal program for low-income Aurorans facilitated by volunteers from several local churches as well as community members at large, Councillor Humfryes says she has seen the prevalence of food insecurity within the community and anything one can do to help is a win.

Supporting the motion was Kasie Colbeck, an Aurora resident who is co-lead of Project Let-Ups, a multi-phase project aimed at fostering community gardening at all levels, increasing education on food security, and giving residents the tools they need to not only grow food for themselves but share the excess with residents in need through food pantries.

?Food security means the ability to access healthy food that you need when you need it,? said Ms. Colbeck. ?Project Let-Ups helps to foster food security and food literacy by increasing access to fresh produce for more people. It also builds a sense of community through shared learning.

?We hope to increase awareness of local food insecurity, develop a better understanding of where our food comes from and really create a good sense of community and giving back, as well as a sense of pride and increased education. I am looking for the Town of Aurora to essentially adopt this program, like other municipalities have, in future years and help promote and raise awareness around gardening and giving back.?

Councillor Humfryes' motion was unanimously approved by Council, with members agreeing that there is a renewed appetite to learn more about food production and gardening.

?I think it is very good educationally for people to know how to grow their own food,? said Councillor Rachel Gilliland, noting that community groups such as the York Region Food Network are working towards the same goal. ?Maybe there is some collaborating with the York Region Food Network.?

The possibility of developing a seed bank, she added, was an idea worth exploring but she sought assurances that the Town going down this road wouldn't end up competing with businesses that provide like services.

?It is a delicate balance of how the municipality gets involved and what that looks like,? she concluded. ?At the same time, I think teaching people how to be self-sustaining and being able to grow their own food is great. If this is strictly about that, this is great. As far as collaborating, I would hope that staff would look into other local organizations that already do something like this and how the Town can collaborate with [other groups].?

In supporting the motion, Mayor Tom Mrakas placed particular emphasis in the development of the potential Food Charter.

“It is time the Town of Aurora looks at developing a Food Charter. At the end of the day, a Food Charter is just a statement of values, principles and priorities for sustainable food systems? and food security for all,” he said. “I think it is important that our Town has that implemented.

“We need to move in this direction and I like the idea of how we can provide a seed program. I think some of the things we heard from the delegate today about how we're working with those who are less fortunate in our communities, such as Welcoming Arms, and providing them with the knowledge of how they can grow food and provide them with the start-up to do that, I think is an exemplary way to speak about that? what the Town is about and how we can make sure that all of us work together as we move forward? especially at this time. I am looking forward to seeing what comes back from staff.”

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter