

Municipality could find additional ways to combat affordability through revised Food Charter

A revised York Region Food Charter could provide the Town of Aurora with further opportunities to help combat food insecurity.

The updated York Region Food Charter is slated to be presented to local lawmakers in Council Chambers this week.

According to a report before Council by Phil Rose, Aurora's Manager of Cultural Services, the Food Charter is a living document that is regularly refreshed to meet community needs. The revisions, he says, provide further opportunities for municipalities like Aurora to collaborate with stakeholders like the York Region Food Council and other levels of government to make a real difference.

The Food Charter is a vision of thriving urban and rural communities where residents, organizations, businesses and governments work together to create a resilient food system that fosters healthy communities and values food sovereignty, says Rose.

The process of updating the Food Charter focused on ensuring it reflects the voices, needs, and priorities of diverse communities and the current challenges facing the agri-food sector, says Rose. Over 10 months, five rounds of community consultations were conducted using a mix of surveys, focus groups, and public events. Nearly 300 community members and sector representatives contributed their insights.

Aurora Council has previously endorsed the principles of the Food Charter and initiatives reflecting this commitment have already rolled out, particularly the installation of miniature food pantries in select municipal locations, including Town Hall, and the development of community gardens in Aurora's northeast, the latest being at John Abel Park.

The Action Document identifies aspirational initiatives that the Town can choose to advance in collaboration with other groups, such as the York Region Food Council, York Region, the business community, and other public-facing organizations, says Rose. The Town will seek meaningful partnerships that help create a resilient food system that fosters healthy communities. As new opportunities become available, staff will bring them forward during budget deliberations.

Potential future opportunities outlined by the York Region Food Council in their Action Document are wide-ranging and are divided into six categories: Equity, Social Justice, and Food Security; Health & Wellbeing; Local Agri-Food Sector; Environmental Stewardship; Knowledge and Sharing; and Community and Culture.

Under Equity, Social Justice, and Food Insecurity, the document calls for support towards partners with the creation of advocacy tools and training geared towards municipal, provincial and federal governments [and using] these tools to support the development of robust policies that ensure adequate incomes so that all York Region residents have equitable access to food, and empower people with lived experience of food insecurity and poverty to create systems change through peer advocacy while offering the appropriate support and infrastructure.

The pillar of Health & Wellbeing calls for further coordination between different levels of government to support access to food, including affordable housing, employment and transit policies; the support of dignified food access, including fresh food vouchers, low-cost markets and more; and further funding to school food programs.

The Local Agri-Food Sector category advocates for underscoring how food is produced, the promotion of jobs within the agri-food sector as viable career paths; and community events to highlight agriculture. Here, the Action Plan also calls for increased access to land for individuals, communities, new farmers, and especially equity-deserving groups who face additional barriers to land through farm incubators, ways to match prospective growers with available land, and more.

There are further calls for communities to invest more in food-growing spaces close to where people live under the Environmental

Stewardship banner, as is the suggestion to further circular economy initiatives in a bid to support sustainability.

Food literacy is key under Knowledge & Sharing, as is the establishment of lending libraries for kitchen equipment and garden tools, a need the Aurora Public Library stepped up to help address last year through its new 'Library of Things' program.

These themes spill over to Community & Culture where suggested actions include the creation of a knowledge hub and support network to share ideas, and support community organizations in 'cooking and serving culturally-appropriate food or meals.'

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