

Public talks lead to 'surprising' findings for York Region Food Charter



By Brock Weir

Residents of York Region want to get back to nature.

That is the word stemming from ongoing consultations on the York Region Food Charter, a document spearheaded and led in collaboration between the York Region Food Network and the Region of York, to identify common values and objectives related to food and food production at the community level.

Council is expected to formally endorse the Charter this week.

The charter focuses on five pillars: health and wellbeing, economic opportunities, environmental sustainability, social justice and education.

After the document was finalized just over a year ago, it has been making the rounds, gaining momentum, and through further community consultation, has yielded some surprising results.

'Across the board, community gardens and nutritional programs came up,' said Kate Greavette of the York Region Food Charter Working Group. 'This was somewhat surprising because York Region does have an urban/rural mix to it, so I think we were all a little surprised that these programs were consistent across the board.'

With this feedback, she said, the program has been working with groups, such as York Region's Seeds For Change to work with schools such as Rick Hansen Public School, Our Lady of Grace Catholic Elementary School, and Hartman Public School to begin school gardens, both in outdoor spaces and planters within the school.

According to Ms. Greavette, one of the main objectives of the Charter was to bring together groups that don't normally work together on daily basis, beyond the producer and consumer, to also waste managers to identify inefficiencies in the food systems and where there are problems in the 'food system' as a whole.

'People are starting to look at food differently and starting to seize opportunities to grow things closer to home or seek out local producers. It might be going to the local farmers' market. It might be going to the local farm and embracing it. Another benefit through this discussion is there is often an increase in programs and policy initiatives which often leads to greater access to safe, culturally appropriate food in the community. People see food as a valuable thing; it is not a cheap commodity and it has a lot of meaning to it.'

While they have seen great strides in awareness since the York Region Food Charter was brought to fruition, they are realistic about their goals. The brains behind the plan do not expect drastic change with everyone suddenly thinking differently and shopping local, she says. Moreover, it is about raising awareness so people open their eyes to seeing opportunities out there to shop and consume local, as ?motivate them, encourage them and support them in their quest to do so.?

?People want to use food as a destination,? she said, noting people who make a day out of visiting the Aurora Farmers' Market. ?There is a lot of culinary and agri-tourism within it, and it is something we, as a working group are really keen to see happen more in the community.?