

Town set to take over management of the Aurora Farmers' Market

The Town of Aurora will take over the day-to-day management of the Aurora Farmers' Market next year in a new funding model approved by Council.

Local lawmakers last week approved a \$23,922 increase in the Aurora Farmers' Market's allocated funding as part of the 2026 Budget. This funding, along with a contribution of \$13,500 from the Market itself, will be used to fund the positions of a Market Coordinator, a Seasonal Supervisor Support Assistant and Operations Coordinator under the Town umbrella.

The management shift was pitched to Council earlier this month at the start of budget deliberations by Market Manager Cathy Williams who said while the growth of the Market in recent years has been "incredible," it's brought about "increasing administrative, operational, and communication demands."

"Our Market Coordinator is retiring after this season and the workload " vendor management, logistics, social media, volunteer coordination, and regulatory compliance " has grown beyond what a volunteer board can sustain. Simply put, we've reached our limits of what a volunteer-run structure can manage," said Williams.

"Our Board proudly served this community for over a decade, but we are now operating with just five active members down from nine. Recruitment has proven difficult as administrative and logistical workload has become too demanding for volunteers alone, therefore likely discouraging others from volunteering on the Board. We are also seeing an increased need for expertise in risk management and health and safety compliance " areas that require professional oversight. While our commitment has never wavered, the reality is that the structure that once worked no longer fits the needs of today's market."

The present situation is "urgent," she added, and without staffing supports in the season ahead, the Market "cannot continue beyond the 2025 season in its current form."

"Without this partnership, the Market would have to scale back " fewer vendors, fewer community activities, and diminished programming," said Williams. "We have worked with Town Staff regarding this proposal and we are respectfully requesting that the Town transition to the Market Staffing structure to come under Town Management. This would include Town employees managing day-to-day operations, vendor applications, compliance, insurance, communications, and social media."

A Market Coordinator would be needed for about 12 hours a week, an Operations Coordinator eight, and a Social Media coordinator for two, she added.

"We're asking the Town to consider supporting a shift in our structure from a working board to a governance board. This would allow us to focus on oversight, approving vendors, ensuring compliance with Farmers Market Ontario standards, and guiding programming," said Williams, noting similar models have been adopted in other York Region municipalities. "This partnership would ensure the long-term sustainability of the Farmers Market and safeguard its role as a cultural and economic asset for the Town. It would support local small businesses and farmers, sustain weekly cultural programming and entertainment, strengthen community connections, and align directly with the Town's strategic priorities of community vitality, economic development, and food security.

"Without this support, the future of the Aurora farmers market beyond 2025 is uncertain. A closure or even a scaled back version would represent a significant loss to our community, economically, socially, and culturally."

Support was found across the Council table which approved a Budget Amendment brought forward by Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese to establish the requested model.

"I do believe this is the right step forward," said Robin McDougall, Aurora's Director of Operations, last week. "It's a good

opportunity to evaluate 2026 in the governance model that we're looking to move ahead with. They still retain responsibility and oversight of the Farmers' Market; we are just there to support from a staffing structure. They have worked hand-in-hand with Shelley Ware, our Special Events Supervisor, on developing this structure and we're confident that it would be a useful exercise to go through next year and we'll learn from it as well.?

While Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she was in favour of the move, she did not approve of the funding coming from the Town's Tax Rate Stabilization Reserves. Mayor Tom Mrakas, however, argued it was an appropriate funding source.

?We've done it with the Windrows, we've done it with many pilot projects,? he said. ?This is exactly what the Reserve is supposed to be used for ? a defined pilot. It's a small amount and in 2027, if the pilot works, we can?make those adjustments moving forward into operations.?

Councillors too were looking to the future.

?I'm in support of this and the increased oversight and giving the Market what it needs to also expand,? said Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, adding, in future years, he would like to see funding come from the Community Services Department.

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland added that, in her view, the shift was an example of how the Town can support its own local economy ? and residents at large.

?This is what we love ? keeping things centralized and local and being able to connect with our local community, walk in the park with your kids, and if we are going to be investing in any of our community partners, to me, this seems to be the place,? she said. ?It's been really the heart of what makes us still such a small town.?

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