

## Winterfresh will keep community fed into spring, throughout year

Winterfresh, the primary annual fundraiser for the York Region Food Network, brought in record numbers last month and now that the numbers are in, the support will help them address food insecurity throughout York Region not only in the spring, but throughout the balance of 2025.

All food programs offered by the York Region Food Network (YRFN) are now seeing high demand, only underscoring the issue of food insecurity in the community, according to YRFN Executive Director Kate Greavette.

The \$45,000 raised through the trivia gala held at Stonehaven Banquet Hall will help get them through what they are anticipating to be a really rough year just with what's happening internationally, with the tariffs and predicting unpredictability.

Folks are feeling a lot of uncertainty, so we are expecting the demand for our services will continue to increase, and having the success of Winterfresh gives us a little confidence as we try to plan out the rest of our programs for the year, just knowing we have the support of the community and are able, hopefully, to meet demand for our services.

Providing a snapshot of current needs, Greavette says their Sunrise Social Breakfast every Tuesday morning serves more than 100 meals each week, and their Affordable Food Market is also seeing a growth in demand.

A Farmers' Market-style format, the Markets sees the York Region Food Network sell produce secured at wholesale rates at various venues, turning this savings over to the consumer.

It's a much more affordable way to get fresh produce than stores and it just helps people. If they are living with a tight income right now, it gives them a little more flexibility to purchase the fresh foods that they need. Anyone can come and join us, so there is no paperwork or means test for people to access the service, and we're really able to customize it, says Greavette. We have quite a number of cultural offerings happening at the Market and we're bringing in other community supports. We have different organizations who come in and do outreach at the Market, so it is this kind of community space where people can come in and learn what else is going on in the community and to ensure they get all their needs met.

We'll be putting the funds towards our fresh food initiatives, and this is our breakfast program, affordable food markets, and our Good Food Box programs. We'll really make sure the funds raised in Winterfresh go right back out to those programs to support people with fresh produce access. The neat thing about those programs, too, is we're really conscious about sourcing them from York Region and Ontario as much as possible. We're trying to use those funds to have those positive impacts in our food economy as well by purchasing from local farmers and just making sure we're supporting the local economy.

Looking ahead to the Spring, it is shaping up to be a busy season for the YRFN as they continue outreach and aim to re-launch programs that had been put on the backburner at the start of the Global Pandemic.

Once again, they're rolling out a Good Food Challenge offering seed planting kits at a number of York Region libraries, including King, Newmarket, Whitchurch-Stouffville, East Gwillimbury and Vaughan, seed swapping programs, and re-launching their Community Cooking classes at their Industrial Parkway South headquarters.

It's also a time for the YRFN to solidify Region-wide policies to address food insecurity in the short-, medium-, and long-term.

We have actually updated our York Region Food Charter and that has been approved from the York Region Food Council and now we're working at trying to get that out into the community to seek endorsements. We're chatting with municipal governments, the Regional government, other community organizations and leaders trying to get the Food Charter endorsed. With that Food Charter, there is also a supporting tool kit of how we can actually put the Food Charter into action. It's a little bit of everything that anyone can do from businesses to organizations, to elected officials, and municipal staff of how we can actually make sure food is at the

forefront of what we're thinking about and considered in decisions," says Greavette. "There are so many things that influence a healthy food system and this is our way of trying to get others to think about it and what actions they can take to foster that healthy community we're all looking for.

"The other piece we will be launching this year is the York Region Food System Report Card; this is another initiative from our York Region Food Council and it has been a really just amazing project, a lot of different input from community stakeholders. It is to really start that dialogue of what we need in order to improve the food system, make sure everyone has access to food and make sure that everything is supported around the food economy, really considering that agricultural piece, considering the composting and waste management access, and just kind of gets into details around student nutrition programs, urban agriculture lands, community gardens, and it is a really comprehensive guide to give us a big picture lens of what's happening in York Region around the food system, and that will be a document we can all work from as we go forward to try and improve.

"The Food Council is really working in tandem with York Region Food Network and their community-based food organizations to try and make sure we have the research and the tools that we need, to see that longer change and those policy changes we really need to see in order for food insecurity to decrease in our neighbourhood."

**By Brock Weir**