

Addressing income struggles is key to battling food insecurity: YRFN

As important as food banks are to communities like Aurora, addressing income inequality will be the key to tackling food insecurity, according to the York Region Food Network.

Addressing the income gap will be an integral pillar in a new and refreshed York Region Food Charter which is now nearing completion.

York Region's first Food Charter was published in 2013 and a lot has happened in the subsequent decade, including climate change, the pandemic, and the ongoing affordability crisis.

Now it is time to look at this again to re-examine all of our values, our goals, come back to that and try to figure out how to move forward, says Morgan Sage, Food Policy Coordinator for the York Region Food Network.

This document has been a great way to bring people together and have these conversations around food in this completely different landscape we're working within right now, says Sage.

Later this month, Aurora Council will consider making a commitment to support the new York Region Food Charter and a recommendation from staff to work with local agencies and York Region in pursuit of food security for Aurora residents.

While Robin McDougall, Director of Community Services for the Town of Aurora, says the Federal government has a lead policy role on many of these matters, the municipal level can tackle the issue through public health delivery, food inspection, nutritional health promotion, zoning policies, and waste management.

All have an impact on food security, but given the government structure for Aurora, York Region holds most of the responsibility for the policies that govern each of these areas, said McDougall in a report to Council. Aurora certainly has a responsibility in planning, zoning, waste management, water supply and recreation. Indirectly, Aurora can support the other areas of responsibility (housing, public health, transportation, and social services) but lacks the resources to lead them and Aurora relies on the Region.

Among the ways Aurora has stepped up to help address food security, said McDougall, are the installation of mini food pantries placed in four areas of Aurora in conjunction with the Aurora Food Pantry and the Aurora Seniors' Centre; community gardens recently approved the incoming John Abel Park in the Town's northeast; and food donations encouraged at numerous annual community events.

Considering that food security relies on a healthy food system, Aurora cannot provide food security alone. Aurora has an integral role; however, it depends on the Region, Provincial and Federal governments, to support the local communities, she said, adding that it would be more valuable for Aurora to sign onto the York Region Food Charter rather than a Made-in-Aurora plan. Aurora could commit to taking action to achieve the Charter's vision in our organization and the community we serve.

A staff recommendation to endorse the Charter was approved by Council at this month's Committee of the Whole meeting without discussion and will be up for ratification at the April 23 Council meeting.

Work on the Region's new Charter continues at pace and Sage says they are seeking endorsement of the finished product from the Regional Council this fall.

The new document is based on five key pillars including Income, Community & Culture, Health & Wellbeing, Agrifood, and Environmental Stewardship, but that lead pillar will prove to be a keystone for the whole, she notes.

There is agreement in our consultation that food insecurity is a major problem, she says. That goes without saying, but it is

interesting because it has been across-the-board with community members emphasizing food insecurity now. It's also the policy-makers saying food insecurity is an issue and we need to talk about it ? and when it comes to food insecurity, when you get down to the nitty-gritty of it, you get down to income.

?When it came to updating the Charter, we knew we had to make income the central focus because, in the past, when you talk about food insecurity, the solution that some people come up with is, 'Hey, let's have increased food bank hours,' or 'Let's have a community fridge.' Those are fantastic community assets and 100 per cent we need those because there are people right now struggling in our community, but if we're talking about a long-term solution, we need income solutions so everyone has the ability to purchase what they want, what's culturally acceptable to them, what fits their food preferences, and do that all with dignity as well.?

As Sage has worked on the issue of food security and the Charter's development, she says she's found ?loads of misconceptions? about what food insecurity actually means. People come at the problem with well-intentioned solutions like suggesting people grow their own veggies and micro-greens where they can, but those offerings don't really get down to the roots.

?If people want to grow something in their backyard or grow something in their kitchen, people should have the right to access that and have the knowledge to be able to do that. Even in our Charter, we talk about knowledge and sharing as one of our key pillars. We want to make sure people have the ability and knowledge to do that,? says Sage. ?One of the major things that [we have struggled with in the Emergency Food Sector is] we sometimes struggle to get the point to stick with people that food insecurity is an income issue and we have been saying it for years and years ? and people still come forward with these solutions for food banks; that's not to say anything negative about food banks, which are a much-needed resource in the community, but the root cause of food insecurity is income and that's the message we've had issues getting to stick.

?This Charter is meant to be a guiding document for the entirety of the food system. I'm really excited to actually share it out into the world because we've had a lot of conversations both within specialized sectors within the food system, but we have really been trying to bring those conversations together and make sure it is reflective of York Region and our food system.

?Communities want the Charter to be actionable. As we continue to develop it and continue to edit and bring all those consultation pieces, we'll make sure that there're actions community can take? at different levels and organizations can take as well.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter