

## Fresh Food Market aims to make fruits and veggies more accessible amid rising costs



As costs rise and budgets become more limited, sometimes fresh fruits and vegetables become of an afterthought once all the staples are covered ? but a new community partnership aims to put greens front, centre, and accessible for all.

This week, in partnership between the Region of York, York Region Food Network, Welcoming Arms, and the Salvation Army's Northridge Community Church, Aurora will see the first of a series of new Fresh Food Markets.

An initiative that has been spearheaded in five other municipalities by the York Region Food Network (YRFN), Aurora is the latest community to benefit from the ongoing pilot project. Recent funding from the Region has allowed them to expand ? with Aurora being chosen as the next venue over similar bids from East Gwillimbury and Vaughan.

The aim of the Fresh Food Market is not to be a charitable initiative but simply to make locally-sourced produce more accessible and affordable for all.

?It's not a scarcity or a charity model,? says Chantal McCallum, Community Market Coordinator for the YRFN. ?These are definitely affordably priced or less than you would pay in a grocery store. I often hear, ?I don't want to take away from someone who needs it,? but this is not a charity model, it's not a scarcity model, we want to just really invite all to take part in an inclusive fresh food market. We're really focusing on dignity, respect and choice.?

Another objective is to locate these markets where people would most benefit and, such, they have partnered with Welcoming Arms, the ecumenical organization with the mission of providing services for community members in need, and the similarly-guided Northridge Community Church of the Salvation Army.

The first market will unfold this Wednesday, June 12, at the Trinity Anglican Church Rectory on Metcalfe Street, just north of Victoria, from 4 ? 5.30 p.m., just before guests arrive for their Welcome Table dinner service.

?I heard about this initiative a few months ago and thought it would be a great match with the programs we run here,? says Welcoming Arms Project Manager Sally Freitas. ?What we're doing here in all of our programs, really, is looking at increasing food security, whether it is through community meals or our drop-in program, which gives out grocery gift cards to eligible visitors. I

thought it would be a perfect match.

?It is a great opportunity for folks who are experiencing food insecurity to be able to come out, have access to fresh produce, and make their own choices. It's a little bit different than going to the food bank where it is very limited and sometimes those choices are made for you ? but in this case, come out, do some shopping, and participate in the marketplace, which is such an empowering experience in itself.?

The initiative, she adds, will add ?another layer? of food access in the community ? ?By the time you buy your bare minimum, do you have enough money left over for a red pepper or a nice head of romaine??

Following this week's inaugural market, the next event will take place at Northridge, located on Leslie Street just north of Wellington Street East, on June 26, again from 4 ? 5.30 p.m.

Additional dates at Welcoming Arms are July 10, August 14, and September 11, while Northridge will host further markets on July 24, August 28, and September 25.

Future dates will be determined down the road.

?We have been in a pilot phase since last year,? says McCallum. ?Since 2023, our funding from [the Region] has been a pilot project and this is a continuation of still another pilot project. Our funding is limited, but we're looking to extend it to the end of the year in December and to continue. There are still some unknowns around that on how we're going to move forward beyond our funding.

?We do a lot of evaluation during our markets, consistently getting the testimonials [so] the information is there, and it's making a difference. Our funders are looking for information which we will be gathering through these next many months until September, so we can get more funding.?

Expected to be up for sale at the markets this month include seasonal produce from local farms, as well as the YRFN's own gardens, such as leafy greens, greenhouse-grown items like tomatoes and cucumbers, and cabbage and other veggies from last fall's harvest.

**By Brock Weir**