

The Regional Municipality of York

Committee of the Whole
Planning and Economic Development
June 11, 2020

Report of the Commissioner of Corporate Services and Chief Planner

2019 Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy Update

1. Recommendations

1. Council receive the 2019 Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy Update for information.
2. The Regional Clerk circulate this report to the Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs and local municipalities.

2. Summary

This report provides Council with an update on activities, partnerships and 2019 [Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy](#) achievements.

Key Points:

- The Terms of Reference for the Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee was updated with appointments made to the Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee for the 2019-2022 term
- The second year of Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy implementation is on track with nearly 90 per cent of actions either underway, planned or completed
- Agriculture and agri-food programming and stakeholder engagement reached over 3,000 participants and generated 140,000+ views on social media
- York Region partnered with York University to secure \$106,000 in funding for the first Food & Beverage Accelerator Program
- An industry led agri-food working group with members of the Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee and other industry experts has been established to look at challenges and opportunities for the sector in response to COVID-19
- 2020 agriculture and agri-food initiatives will strengthen stakeholder collaboration and build capacity in the industry for recovery post COVID-19

3. Background

The Agriculture and Agri-Food sector contributes \$2.7B to York Region's Gross Domestic Product

York Region's agri-food sector is home to more than 700 farm-based businesses and 270 food and beverage manufacturers and distributors that contribute to the Region's economic vitality. Based on the 2016 Census of Agriculture, the agri-food sector in York Region, from farms to processors, food retailers and restaurants, provides approximately 57,000 jobs, generating \$2.7 billion in Gross Domestic Product for York Region.

In 2017, Council approved the Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy to guide long-term growth of the Region's Agri-Food sector

York Region's [Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy](#) (the Strategy) endorsed by Council in [October 2017](#), sets direction for long-term growth of the agriculture and agri-food sector and guides development of policy and program initiatives.

The Strategy articulates a comprehensive set of objectives defined within five strategic goal areas and 45 action items to be implemented over five years. The five strategic goals are:

1. Strengthen communication and collaboration with York Region, local municipalities and the agri-food sector
2. Support the agri-food sector through integrated land use planning and economic development
3. Support increased capacity for value added agri-food processing and support services
4. Leverage location within the GTA and proximity to customers through direct farm marketing and meet demand for local food production
5. Provide support for business retention and expansion of primary agricultural production within York Region

Progress on the Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy initiatives is reported to Council as part of the annual update.

The Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee supports the Region in delivery of the Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy

The Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee (Advisory Committee), a volunteer advisory committee, was created by Regional Council in 2001 as a means to support the agricultural industry and promote healthy rural communities. The Advisory Committee plays an integral role in helping advance the objectives of the Strategy. Advisory Committee members provide advice to Regional Council and staff on agriculture, agri-food and rural

matters in York Region. The Advisory Committee is similar to agricultural advisory committees in the Regions of Halton, Peel and Durham.

The Terms of Reference for the Advisory Committee was updated in 2019 with newly appointed members representing the industry value chain

Regional staff initiated a review of the Terms of Reference with the Advisory Committee in August 2018. Changes to the Terms of Reference were necessary to reflect the connection of the Committee with the Strategy and to align its practices with those of other advisory committees at the Region. The revised Terms of Reference was approved at the [May 16, 2019](#) Regional Council meeting.

In [September 2019](#), Council appointed [members to the Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee](#) for the 2019-2022 term. The Advisory Committee members provide a balanced representation across the agri-food value chain including producers, input suppliers, food processors, distributors, and food retailers.

The Committee is composed of eleven members from across the Region, including two Council appointed ([December 13, 2018](#)) representatives:

- Councillor Avia Eek on behalf of Mayor Pellegrini, King Township
- Councillor Hugo Kroon on behalf of Mayor Lovatt, Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville

Orientation and the first meeting with the newly appointed Committee members was held on October 29, 2019. Committee meetings are held bi-monthly. To date, the group has held three meetings with administrative support provided by the Regional Clerks office.

York Region Planning and Economic Development staff work collaboratively with the Advisory Committee to execute the Strategy.

4. Analysis

Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy implementation is on track with nearly 90 per cent of the actions underway, planned or completed

The Strategy identified [45 action items](#) for implementation over five years (2018-2022) to support and grow the agriculture and agri-food sector. The actions are grouped as on-going, short-term, medium and long-term activities.

In 2019, York Region staff worked closely with local municipal partners, the Advisory Committee, and agri-food stakeholders to implement actions in the Strategy. As of December 2019, 40 of the 45 action items (nearly 90 per cent) were underway, planned or completed. These include showcasing agricultural innovators/champions in the Region, implementing a local food education campaign, supporting an agri-food asset mapping project, and launching the first ever York Region Food & Beverage Food Accelerator Program. In summary:

- All short-term activities (5) have been completed

- All on-going activities (18) are either underway, planned or complete
- The majority of medium and long-term actions (17 out of 22) are either underway, planned or completed

A summarized list of action items grouped by status (underway, planned, new and completed) is outlined in Attachment 1.

Nine action items have been completed since adoption of the Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy

Since adoption of the Strategy, nine action items have been completed. This includes all five short-term actions and a review of environmental policies and regulations for food processing operations, completed in 2019.

In addition, four medium-term and on-going actions were completed in 2019. These include conducting an economic impact study for the Holland Marsh, creation of a resource directory of producers in the Region (using Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance database), providing feedback on the province's development of Agricultural Impact Assessment (AIA) guidelines and providing input into review of the Land Evaluation and Area Review (LEAR) Study for York Region.

Agriculture and Agri-Food Programming and stakeholder engagement reached over 3,000 participants

In 2019, Regional staff hosted or supported over 50 agri-food related education and outreach activities, engaging over 3,000 stakeholders. These were delivered in collaboration with more than 20 local partners including Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, York Soil and Crop Improvement Association, York Region Food Network, York Farm Fresh Association, Central Counties Tourism, Holland Marsh Growers Association and Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance among others. Activities included:

- Growing Your Farm Profits, two-day workshop on March 25, 2019 and April 1, 2020 in partnership with Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA) and the Township of King. The workshop supported 16 farm businesses develop improved business goals and review their business plans. It also guided farmers to develop Canadian Agricultural Partnership funding applications to implement their plans.
- Two Food Entrepreneur Series offered for food start-ups with York Region Food Network and York Small Business Enterprise on October 18, 2019 and October 25, 2019
- Participation at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair with Central Counties Tourism and York Farm Fresh on November 4 - 6, 2019 to showcase local food and agri-tourism in the Region
- Business Forum on Reducing Your Environmental Footprint held on December 9, 2019 in partnership with City of Richmond Hill. The forum provided 25 agri-food

businesses with an overview of environmental regulations (water, waste, energy) with opportunities to implement wastewater reduction solutions to reduce costs

- Support for York Region Food Network to establish York Region Food Council with multi-stakeholders addressing access to healthy, affordable, sustainable food.
- Business Retention and Expansion (BR&E) training led by Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) with local municipal economic development staff on December 17, 2019 to determine readiness for agriculture and agri-food BR&E exercise.

York Region continued funding partnerships to deliver projects that align with the Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy

York Region staff collaborate with community partners, York Farm Fresh, Holland Marsh Growers Association and the Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance to establish partnerships for 2019-2020 to deliver projects that support the Strategy.

- **Local Food Promotion:** York Farm Fresh connects York Region communities to locally grown products at farms and farmers markets. The Region funded York Farm Fresh as a service delivery agent for projects that directly align with the Strategy. Deliverables include raising awareness of locally produced agricultural products and the development of the local Farm Fresh Guide Map for 2020.
- **Economic Impact Study for the Holland Marsh:** The Region provided funding to the Holland Marsh Growers Association, leveraging provincial Rural Economic Development funding for an economic impact study of the Marsh. Other project partners include King Township and Simcoe County. The study was completed in December 2019.
- **Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance (GHFFA):** York Region staff refreshed agri-food data with the GHFFA ConnectON program. ConnectON is an economic development tool that supports decision making, growth and emergency preparedness. In 2019, based on York Region employment survey data and OMAFRA data, agri-food business assets were refreshed and added to the ConnectON program. This data represents the agrifood value chain from production to food access (field to fork). Currently there are over 40 municipal partners with data from over 100,000 businesses. ConnectON partners have the ability to upload, update, select, sort and map their own data, and view data regionally from participating municipalities.

Launch of a local food awareness campaign raised the profile for Agriculture and Agri-Food in the Region; generating 140,000+ views in social media

York Region staff began implementation of a strategic communications plan to strengthen communication with stakeholders, raise the profile for the sector and promote local food. A key activity included the launch of a local food education campaign in collaboration with York Farm Fresh Association and internal departments. Staff from Environmental Services, Public

Health and Economic Strategy established a York Region Food Collaborative to work together in promoting and creating awareness about food-related programs in the Region. Highlights of the campaign include:

- A dedicated local food webpage (york.ca/localfood) and communications materials (infographics) to share successes, sector profiles and local food information
- An agri-food spotlight series to celebrate and showcase local farmers and businesses: [ClearWater Farm](#), [Rose Family Farm](#), and [Sharon Creek Farm](#)
- Distribution of over 60,000 York Farm Fresh Guide Maps with York Farm Fresh; installation of 54 directional signage to help identify local farms
- Public outreach at Longo's (Stouffville), East Gwillimbury Farmers Market and Market & Co., engaging over 500 citizens in meaningful discussions about local, healthy food and food waste prevention
- Distribution of local food information with AgScape to engage youth about agriculture and food production in the Region
- Media coverage in YorkRegion.com and [blog posts](#) on industry association websites
- Generated over 140,000 views across all social media channels, reaching over 45,000 individuals with more than 2,300 likes, comments or shares related to agriculture and agri-food

York Region partnered with York University to secure \$106,000 in funding for the first Food & Beverage Accelerator Program

One of the key components in the Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy is to support and build an Agri-Food innovation hub with resources to help food start-up companies grow. Staff worked closely with York University's Innovation Hub (YSpace) with support from the Cities of Markham, Vaughan, and Richmond Hill to secure \$106,000 funding from the Canadian Agricultural Partnership grant. The funding will help establish a first Regional Food and Beverage Accelerator Program based on success from the pilot program run by YSpace in Fall of 2019. The goal of this program is to engage 18 new food and beverage companies over two years with the first session scheduled to start in September, 2020 instead of July, 2020 due to COVID-19 pandemic. The program will be delivered by YSpace and assist food companies to grow nationally. The program delivery will focus on educational streams including business strategy and infrastructure, financial modelling and investments, operational efficiencies, and marketing and sales.

Advisory Committee members provided input on the Municipal Comprehensive Review process and Provincial Agricultural System Mapping

As part the Municipal Comprehensive Review (MCR) to update the Regional Official Plan, agricultural lands are being reviewed including lands identified by the Province as additional potential Prime Agriculture land.

The Advisory Committee has been engaged in the review of the proposed Provincial Agricultural Mapping System and the MCR process. An agricultural system directions report was presented to [Council in June 2019](#) introducing potential changes to the Region's agricultural land base mapping in addition to identifying policy issues for review and analysis. Policy issues relate to assessing Greenbelt river valleys in urban settings currently designated agriculture, addressing potential for modest redevelopment of existing non-agricultural uses in agriculturally designated areas and overall conformity to provincial plans. The Agricultural and Agri-Food Advisory Committee will continue to be engaged in 2020.

Staff will continue to work with the Advisory Committee to deliver action items in the Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy

Staff will continue to work with the Advisory Committee to evaluate and deliver the remaining actions prioritized as medium to long term in the Strategy.

Remaining 2020 deliverables include:

- Continued collaboration with agri-food stakeholders on education and outreach activities to build capacity in the industry for recovery post COVID-19
- Deliver "Selling Food to Ontario" event for primary producers and early stage food companies to determine readiness to sell to new markets and facilitate partnerships between connecting primary producers, processors and retailers
- Explore local food opportunities with local municipalities integrated into business visitation/corporate calling program
- Deliver the first session of the York Region & Beverage Food Accelerator Program and build an agri-food innovation network with York University Innovation Hub (YSpace)

Virtual events and activities will be considered as options for remaining 2020 work plan actions.

Staff have created Agri-food business resources with industry engagement in response to COVID-19

Although this report is geared towards 2019 activities, there is value in noting the agri-food sector's response to the COVID-19 crisis. The business community globally, in Canada, Ontario and York Region is being impacted by COVID-19. York Region staff are committed to supporting the agri-food businesses working tirelessly to produce food during the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff developed a [one-stop COVID-19 resource hub](#) for business with dedicated resources for the agri-food industry from all levels of government, a webinar calendar, business updates and an expert [advisory blog](#). The blog, complemented with a webinar outlined a wide range of funding programs to help business explore strategic growth opportunities for recovery post-COVID.

The York Region Economic Strategy division, in partnership with local municipalities and industry stakeholders have formed the [York Region Business Recovery Support Partnership](#). As part of this initiative, staff developed an Agri-Food industry led sub-group comprised of members of the York Region Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee and other industry experts. The group is looking at challenges and opportunities for the agriculture and food industry in the Region in response to COVID-19.

Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy is supported by approved Regional plans

The goals and objectives of the Agriculture and Agri-food Strategy are supported and integrated within the following Council approved plans:

- **Vision 2051:** Includes “A Resilient Natural Environment and Agricultural System” goal area where the agricultural areas are thriving and provide healthy food and resources to a growing population.
- **York Region Official Plan – 2010:** Chapter 6 is dedicated to Agricultural and Rural Areas which form an important part of the fabric of York Region, supporting a vibrant agricultural community.
- **2019 to 2022 Strategic Plan:** The strategic priority areas focus on “Building sustainable communities and protecting the environment with a resilient natural environment and agricultural system” and “Increasing economic prosperity by fostering an environment that attracts business, grows employment opportunities and attracts people”.
- **Economic Development Action Plan – 2020-2023:** A key theme area in the Action Plan “Supporting Business” includes action to execute the Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy and support the administration of Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee.

5. Financial

The Strategy identified a number of strategic objectives and actions for consideration as part of implementation. Some of these are no cost or low cost, or are already pursued by the Region, while others have potential resource and budget implications. Funds for 2020 Agriculture and Agri-Food implementation activities are included in the approved budget.

6. Local Impact

The Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy supports and complements the goals and interests of the Region’s local municipal partners. Staff from local municipalities participated in development and review of the Strategy and will continue to attend Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee meetings. Regional staff partner with local municipalities to deliver programs and execute the Strategy. The Strategy is shared with local municipalities to be leveraged as they develop their respective agriculture and agri-food plans and initiatives.

7. Conclusion

Through implementation of the Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy, York Region continues to demonstrate a strong commitment to the agriculture and agri-food sector.

The Terms of Reference for the Advisory Committee was updated in 2019 with appointments made to Advisory Committee by Council for 2019-2022 term. Implementation of the Strategy is on track with significant stakeholder outreach and engagement in 2019. A key focus for 2019 was to build partnerships and leverage resources to deliver agri-food programming. This includes leveraging funding for York Region Food & Beverage Accelerator Program.

In 2020, the Region, its local municipalities and Advisory Committee will continue to evaluate and deliver action items from the Strategy. Staff will continue to collaborate with agri-food stakeholders to build capacity in the sector for recovery post COVID-19. The progress on the Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy initiatives and work of the Advisory Committee will be reported as a part of the annual update to Council.

For more information on this report, please contact Jonathan Wheatle, Director, Economic Strategy at 1-877-464-9675 ext. 71503. Accessible formats or communication supports are available upon request.

Recommended by: **Paul Freeman, MCIP, RPP**
Chief Planner

Dino Basso
Commissioner of Corporate Services

Approved for Submission: **Bruce Macgregor**
Chief Administrative Officer

May 29, 2020
Attachment (1)
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