

The Regional Municipality of York

Committee of the Whole
Planning and Economic Development
June 10, 2021

Report of the Commissioner of Corporate Services and Chief Planner

2020 Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy Update

1. Recommendation

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 2020 [Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy](#) achievements.

Key Points:

- The third year of Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy implementation is on track with nearly 90% of actions either underway, planned or completed
- Agriculture and agri-food programming and stakeholder engagement reached over 4,500 participants and generated 350,000+ views on social media
- York Region Food & Beverage Accelerator Program participants achieved more than \$500,000 in total revenue, with 148 new distribution points
- An industry led agri-food sub-group was established as part of the Business Recovery Support Partnership to support the sector in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

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 farms 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 annually.

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 to support the agricultural industry and promote healthy rural communities. Advisory Committee members provide advice to Regional Council and staff on agriculture, agri-food and rural matters in York Region. In [September 2019](#), Council appointed [members to the Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee](#) for the 2019-2022 term. Advisory Committee members provide a balanced representation across the agri-food value chain including producers, input suppliers, food processors, distributors, and food retailers.

In 2020, the group held one in-person (January 29, 2020) and two virtual meetings (September 30, 2020 and December 2, 2020) 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant challenges and some opportunities for the agri-food sector

Throughout 2020, the pandemic created significant challenges with opportunities for the agri-food sector. At the onset of the pandemic, an increase in consumer demand with supply

chain disruptions resulted in depleted store inventories. There was a greater impact on labour as the pandemic disproportionately affected marginalized groups, resulted in food service closures, outbreaks in the meat packing industry, and delayed the arrival of temporary farm workers (TFW). One of the most profound effects of the pandemic was felt through lost wages and massive unemployment. According to Restaurants Canada, as of March 2021, an estimated 111,500 foodservice employees in Ontario are still out of work due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, the local agri-food system demonstrated resiliency during the pandemic. In response to COVID-19, York Region farms pivoted to e-commerce digital platforms adapting new business models to safely meet the needs of the community. As outlined in [Arrell Food Institute report](#), there is an opportunity to learn from the experience to address the root causes of food insecurity on a local/regional level, promote the agri-food sector as a driver of green economic growth, and foster collaboration between industry stakeholders and government.

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 2020, 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 2020, 40 of the 45 action items (nearly 90%) were underway, planned or completed. In summary:

- All short-term activities have been completed
- Majority of the on-going activities have been completed and operationalized
- Half of the medium and long-term actions have been completed and operationalized as on-going

On-going items include showcasing agricultural innovators/champions in the Region, continuing local food education campaign, facilitating networking events, and delivering York Region's Food & Beverage Food Accelerator Program.

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

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

Work through the Advisory Committee will continue to evaluate and deliver remaining actions prioritized as medium to long term in the Strategy. Virtual events and activities will be considered as options for 2021 work plan actions. Remaining 2021 deliverables include:

- Continued collaboration with Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA), local municipalities and agri-food sub-group on COVID-19 initiatives
- Planning for the virtual Agri-Food Forum 2021 with OMAFRA
- Program delivery for York Region Food & Beverage Food Accelerator Program in partnership with York University Innovation Hub (YSpace)

Advisory Committee members provided input on Municipal Comprehensive Review policy directions and Agriculture Land Base and Natural Heritage System mapping updates

As part the Municipal Comprehensive Review (MCR) to update the Regional Official Plan, agricultural policies are being reviewed to conform to updated provincial Plans. In addition, agricultural lands are being reviewed including lands identified by the Province as additional potential Prime Agricultural Land.

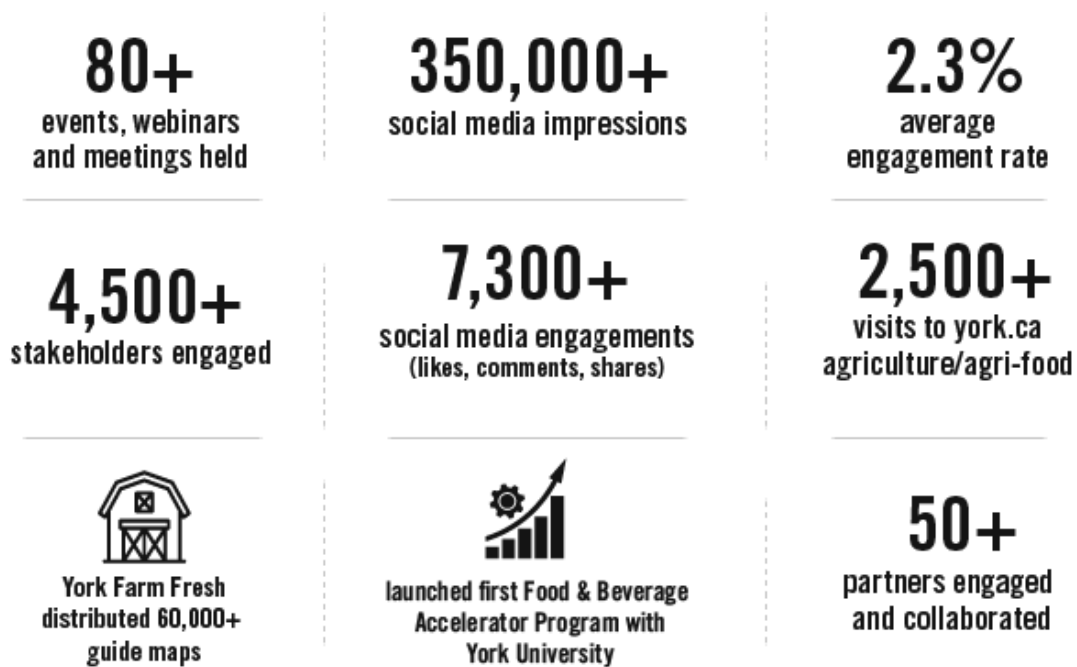
The Advisory Committee has been engaged in the MCR process on policy directions and mapping. A Regional Official Plan Update Policy Directions Report was presented to [Council in December 2020](#) including policy directions to support the agricultural system, agri-food system, local agricultural and food initiatives. Throughout 2020, staff have also engaged with the Advisory Committee members on preliminary policy updates. Areas of input related to potential for redevelopment of existing non-agricultural uses in agricultural areas, potential for new non-agricultural uses in agricultural areas and potential policy approaches regarding how new urban areas develop which supports the ongoing viability of adjacent agricultural uses. The Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee continues to be engaged in 2021.

Agriculture and Agri-Food Programming and stakeholder engagement reached over 4,500 participants and generated 350,000+ views on social media

To date, agriculture and agri-food programming has engaged more than 4,500 stakeholders and generated 350,000+ views on social media. Figure 1 illustrates key performance metrics and outcomes from agriculture and agri-food programming.

Figure 1

Agriculture and Agri-Food Programming Outcomes



During the pandemic, consumer food trends shifted towards greater demand for locally grown food. York Region staff promoted local food in collaboration with York Farm Fresh Association, distributing York Farm Fresh Guide maps and promoting safe visitation. York Region received an award in April 2020 from the International Association of Business Communicators for profiling the agri-food sector, supporting stakeholder communications, and promoting local food.

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

York Region’s community partnerships with York Farm Fresh and the Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance for 2020-2021 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 to raise awareness of locally produced agricultural products and develop the local Farm Fresh Guide Map for 2020. In addition, York Farm Fresh received ventureLAB Entrepreneurship & Innovation Funding to digitize the map into a multilingual mobile app for 2021.
- **Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance (GHFFA):** York Region staff continued to work and collaborate with GHFFA through projects and update of agri-food assets in York Region. In 2020, GHFFA completed the [Carrot Value Chain Analysis Report](#) to examine the flow of Ontario carrots from field to table. In addition, GHFFA released its renewed [5-year Action Plan](#) with goals and activities until 2026. Staff provided input for the renewal of the GHFFA Action plan.

York University delivers the first cohort of the York Region Food & Beverage Accelerator Program

Staff worked closely with York University's Innovation Hub (YSpace) in the delivery of the first cohort for [York Region's Food & Beverage Accelerator Program](#). The five-month program helped eight food and beverage ventures accelerate their sales, scale up and launch new products. The program provided expert mentorship, peer-to-peer circles, with delivery of 18 virtual workshops to give founders the tools, skills and connections to grow. Key outcomes achieved by eight companies include generating \$500,000 in total revenue, with 148 new store presence/distribution points and nine jobs created.

The Honourable Ernie Hardeman, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) attended and provided welcoming remarks at the virtual Spotlight event on January 19, 2021 to celebrate the participant's accomplishments.

York Region established the Agri-Food Sub-Group as part of the Business Recovery Support Partnership to support the Sector

The York Region Business Recovery Support Partnership was created in [April 2020](#) to bring together economic development stakeholders and industry leaders from across York Region. As part of this initiative, an industry-led agri-food sub-group with members of the Advisory Committee and other industry experts was established to support the sector.

Facilitated by York Region Economic Strategy, this group held fifteen meetings as part of an on-going dialogue to review challenges and opportunities in response to COVID-19. Public health representatives participated in the meetings to provide updates and guidance for the agri-food stakeholders. The group collaborated to share best practices and deliver projects in response to the challenges identified. Highlights of activities include:

- Delivery of an [awareness building campaign](#) to highlight the importance of temporary farm workers (TFW) in the community. The campaign was amplified by agri-food stakeholders including the [Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance](#).
- A webinar on [COVID-19 Health and Safety Measures for Farm Operations](#) held on July 22, 2020. York Region Public Health provided guidance for safe farm and food operations and facilitated mobile COVID-19 testing at 17 farm locations throughout York Region.
- Delivery of [Agri-Food Business Webinar Series](#) for small food and beverage processors held in September 2020. The webinars provided businesses with practical solutions and strategies to support their response to COVID-19.

A summary of outcomes from the projects is illustrated in Attachment 2.

5. Financial

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

to support 2021 Agriculture and Agri-Food implementation activities are included in the Planning and Economic Development operating 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 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. Implementation of the Strategy is on track with significant stakeholder outreach and engagement in 2021. A key focus for 2021 is to build partnerships and leverage resources to deliver agri-food programming. This includes collaboration with Agri-Food Sub-Group to deliver projects to support agri-food businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2021, 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 in response to 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 28, 2021
Attachments (2)
12832785