

The Regional Municipality of York

Committee of the Whole
Planning and Economic Development
June 16, 2022

Report of the Commissioner of Corporate Services and Chief Planner

2021 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 the annual 2021 update on activities, partnerships and achievements for implementing the [Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy](#) (the Strategy).

Key Points:

- The fourth year of the Strategy implementation is on track with more than 90% of the actions either underway, planned or completed
- York Region partnered with Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs to host the 13th Municipal Agriculture Economic Development and Planning Forum (2021 Agri-Food Forum), raising the profile for the sector in the Region
- York Region Food & Beverage Accelerator Program participants achieved more than \$900,000 in total revenue, with nearly 450 new distribution points, over two years
- Agriculture and agri-food programming and stakeholder engagement reached over 6,000 participants since 2018 and generated 800,000+ views in 2021 on social media

3. Background

York Region's agriculture and agri-food sector contributes \$2.7B to York Region's gross domestic product

York Region's agri-food sector includes more than 700 farms and 270 food and beverage manufacturers and distributors that contribute to York 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 \$2.7B in gross domestic product for York Region.

In 2017, Council approved the Strategy to guide long-term growth of the Region's agri-food sector

[The Strategy](#) endorsed by Council in [October 2017](#), sets direction for long-term growth of the sector and guides development of policy and program initiatives. The Strategy articulates a comprehensive set of objectives defined within five strategic goal areas, comprised of 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 Strategy initiatives is reported to Council annually.

The Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee supports York Region in delivery of the 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 Council and staff on agriculture, agri-food and rural matters in York Region. In [September 2019](#), Council appointed [members to the 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.

Advisory Committee members continued to play an integral role in helping advance the objectives of the Strategy throughout the Pandemic.

The Pandemic continued to bring challenges such as labour shortages in the agri-food sector

The Pandemic created significant challenges but also provided some opportunities for the agri-food sector. At the onset of the pandemic, an increase in consumer demand and supply chain disruptions resulted in some depleted store inventories. The pandemic also impacted labour due to outbreaks in the manufacturing industry, food service closures, and delayed

arrival of temporary farm workers. One of the most profound effects of the pandemic was felt through lost wages and massive unemployment, particularly in the foodservice industry.

The labour shortages in the agri-food industry led to Federal and Provincial investments in new [agri-food programming](#), such as the [Ag-Tech Innovation Program](#) with a focus on ag-tech automation and new technology adoption in response to the labour shortage. Industry associations such as the [Ontario Federation of Agriculture](#) and [Food and Beverage Ontario](#) have also responded, establishing career programs to connect job seekers and youth planning their careers with Ontario's agri-food employers, to fill the labour gap. According to the [March 2022 Labour Force Survey](#), employment in the agriculture sector increased for the first time since November 2020.

Overall, the local food system demonstrated innovation, strength, and resiliency during the pandemic. From local distilleries shifting their operations to produce hand sanitizer, to farms pivoting their business models with digital innovation to help communities safely access fresh food, the agriculture and agri-food sector has stepped up in a big way.

4. Analysis

The Strategy implementation is on track with more than 90% of actions underway, planned or completed

The Strategy is ambitious and 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 2021, York Region worked closely with local municipal partners, the Advisory Committee, and agri-food stakeholders to implement actions in the Strategy. As of December 2021, 42 of the 45 action items (93%) were underway, planned or completed. In summary:

- All short-term activities have been completed
- Majority of the ongoing activities have been completed and operationalized
- More than half of the medium and long-term actions have been completed and operationalized as ongoing

Completed and ongoing activities include showcasing agricultural innovators/champions in the Region, continuing local food education campaign, facilitating networking events such as 2021 Agri-Food Forum, and delivery of York Region's Food & Beverage Food Accelerator Program.

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

Advisory Committee members continued to support Strategy implementation

The Advisory Committee continued to provide input and support the implementation of actions from the Strategy. In 2021, five virtual meetings were held. The transition to virtual committee meetings made it easier for members to participate and provide input during the

pandemic. The Region engaged with the Advisory Committee members, through regular presentations at the Committee meetings, to get input and feedback on several initiatives and topics, including:

- The Municipal Comprehensive Review process to update the York Region Official Plan. In December 2021, staff provided an overview of the draft Regional Official Plan (ROP) to the Advisory Committee and requested members provide comments by March 31, 2022.
- Virtual education webinar series for agri-food businesses
- Research on Farm 911 – The Emily Project
- Planning and delivery of 2021 Agri-Food Forum

The Advisory Committee will continue to be engaged in 2022 to deliver remaining actions from the Strategy.

York Region hosted 2021 Agri-Food Forum with Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs to raise the profile for the sector in the Region

In the Fall of 2020, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) selected York Region as its primary partner to deliver the 13th Annual Municipal Agriculture Economic Development and Planning Forum ([2021 Agri-Food Forum](#)). The Forum was delivered as a virtual event on November 3 and 4, 2021, with the theme of enabling “Innovation and Resiliency in the Agri-Food Sector”. The event featured over 60 speakers with panel sessions focused on agri-tech, entrepreneurship, exploring innovative ways of doing business and building a resilient agri-food sector in response to COVID-19 pandemic (the Pandemic).

The event was attended by the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, who provided remarks on the first day. More than 200 attendees from across Ontario attended the two-day event, including regional and local economic development and planning staff, local councillors, and agri-food stakeholders. Staff developed a video as a [virtual tour to showcase York Region’s agriculture and agri-food sector](#) for the participants. The Forum raised the profile for the sector in the Region and received an Ovation Award of Excellence by the Toronto Chapter of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) for its communications management. Through Zoom polling, 99% of the attendees indicated that the event either exceeded or met their expectation.

York Region’s community partners deliver projects that align with the Strategy

York Region’s community partnerships with the Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance and York Farm Fresh for 2021 delivered projects that support the Strategy:

- **Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance (GHFFA):** York Region staff continued to work and collaborate with GHFFA through projects in York Region. In 2021, GHFFA partnered with York Region on a video project as part of [Phase 2 of the Always in Season](#), profiling carrot production in York Region’s Holland Marsh. Other partners for the video include the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, the Holland

Marsh Growers Association, Wilton Consulting and King Township. In addition, GHFFA released its position paper on [Event Barns](#), soliciting input from the Advisory Committee. The paper was presented at the 2021 Agri-food Forum.

- **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 2021. In addition, York Farm Fresh digitized the map into a [multilingual mobile app for 2021](#), with funding support from ventureLAB Entrepreneurship and Innovation Funding. The map is translated in seven different languages including French, Chinese (simplified and traditional), Farsi, Urdu, Russian, and Tamil.

A summary of achievements from the projects delivered with community partners is illustrated in Attachment 2.

York University delivered the second cohort of the York Region Food and Beverage Accelerator Program

The Region worked closely with Yspace, York University's Innovation Hub to deliver the second cohort for [York Region's Food and Beverage Accelerator Program](#). The five-month program helped 10 food and beverage ventures accelerate their sales, scale up and launch new products. The program provided expert mentorship and peer-to-peer circles, with delivery of 32 virtual workshops to give founders the tools, skills, and connections to grow.

Key outcomes achieved by 20 businesses in both cohorts include generating nearly \$900,000 in total revenue, with distribution expansion to 450 new stores in two years. In addition, two companies, [Oat Canada](#) and [Its Souper](#) made a pitch to secure deals on CBC's Dragons' Den of \$100,000 and \$180,000 respectively. Overall, the program participants have leveraged additional \$7.2 M from private and public funding. The program has been highlighted in media outlets including [Food in Canada](#) and the [Toronto Star](#).

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

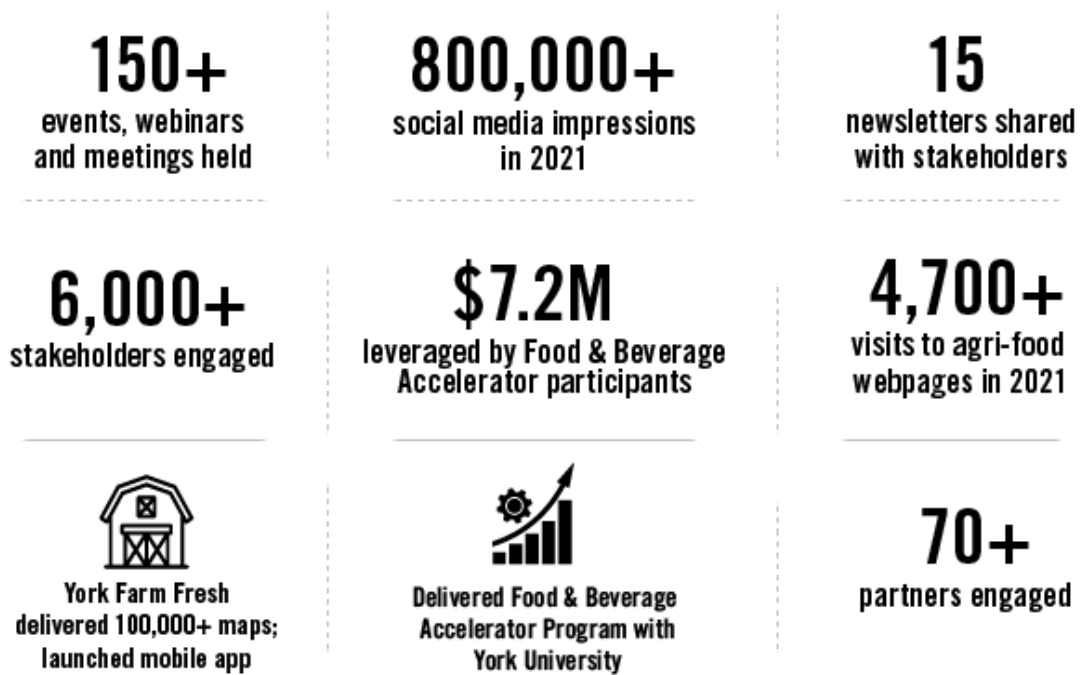
The York Region Business Recovery Support Partnership was created in [April 2020](#) to bring together economic development stakeholders and industry leaders from across York Region. As part of this initiative, an industry-led agri-food sub-group (Group) with members of the Advisory Committee and other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

Facilitated by York Region Economic Strategy, this Group held eight meetings in 2021 as part of an ongoing dialogue to review challenges and opportunities in response to the Pandemic. 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.

Agriculture and Agri-Food Programming and stakeholder engagement reached over 6,000 participants and generated 800,000+ views on social media

Since the Strategy was launched in 2018, agriculture and agri-food programming has engaged more than 6,000 stakeholders and generated 800,000+ views on social media. Figure 1: Agriculture and Agri-food Programming Outcomes illustrates key performance metrics and outcomes from agriculture and agri-food programming over the past four years.

Figure 1
Agriculture and Agri-Food Programming Outcomes



During the pandemic, consumer food trends shifted towards greater demand for locally grown food. This increased demand continued to be accommodated, with staff promoting local food in collaboration with York Farm Fresh Association through the distribution of York Farm Fresh Guide maps and promoting safe visitation.

York Region will continue to deliver on the remaining action items in the Strategy

In 2022, staff will build on work already completed and underway, and continue delivering the remaining actions prioritized as medium to long-term in the Strategy. The 2022 workplan includes a focus on background review and information gathering to set the stage for Strategy 2.0 and position York Region as the agri-food hub for businesses.

The remaining deliverables planned for 2022 include:

- Continued collaboration with the Advisory Committee, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA), and local municipalities
- Conducting a baseline study to review local food-sourcing practices at York Region facilities
- Reviewing census of Agriculture 2021 dataset
- Information gathering to initiate a five-year review of the Strategy
- Supporting the agri-food innovation network in the Region

5. Financial

The Strategy identified a significant number of objectives and actions for consideration as part of implementation. Funds required to support 2022 Agriculture and Agri-Food implementation activities are included in the 2022 Planning and Economic Development approved budget.

6. Local Impact

The 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 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 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, enabled by leveraging technology to deliver virtual events and activities.

In 2022, the Region, local municipalities and Advisory Committee will continue to build on the momentum to deliver remaining action items from the Strategy. In addition, staff will continue to collaborate with agri-food stakeholders to build capacity in the sector in response to the Pandemic. A key focus for 2022 is to deliver the remaining actions and set the stage for Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy 2.0. 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.

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Attachments (2)
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