

The Regional Municipality of York

Committee of the Whole
Planning and Economic Development
June 15, 2023

Report of the Commissioner of Corporate Services and Chief Planner

2022 Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy Update

1. Recommendation

The Regional Clerk circulate this report to the Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee, Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs and the local municipalities.

2. Summary

This report provides Council with the annual 2022 update on activities, partnerships and achievements for implementing the [Agriculture and Agri-Food Sector Strategy](#) (Strategy).

Key Points:

- Strategy implementation has progressed well with all the actions either completed or mobilized
- Agriculture and agri-food programming and stakeholder engagement reached over 6,500 participants with over 200 events, webinars, and industry meetings since 2018
- Members have been appointed for the 2023-2026 term of the Agriculture and Agri-food Advisory Committee
- A new Agriculture and Agri-food Sector Strategy will be developed for Council consideration in 2024

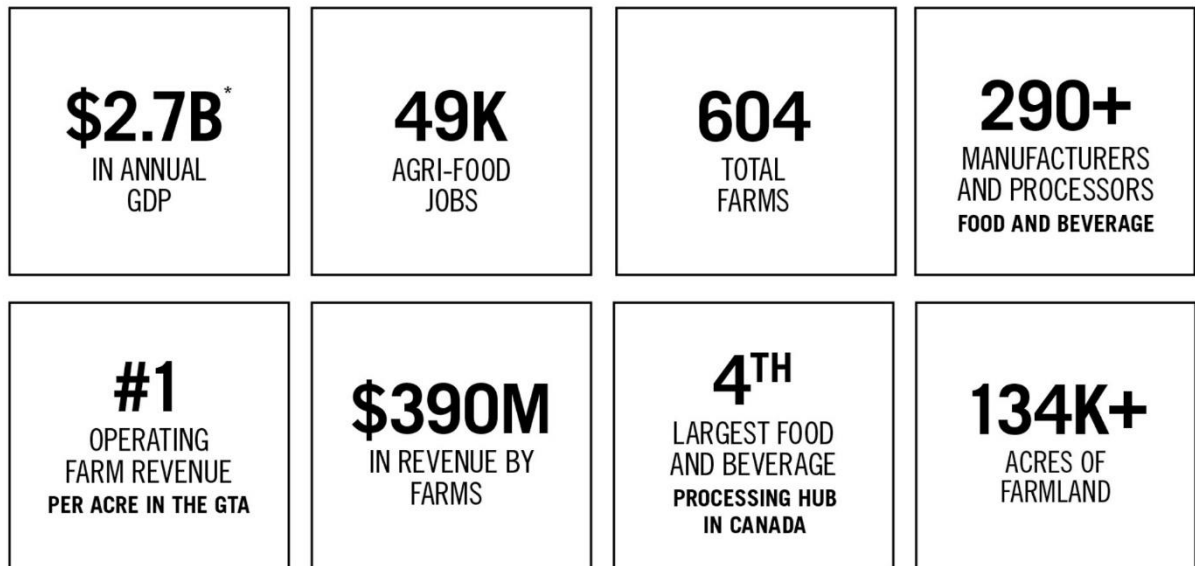
3. Background

York Region's agriculture and agri-food sector is a significant driver of the local economy

York Region's agriculture and agri-food sector includes more than 600 farms and 290 food and beverage manufacturers and distributors that contribute to York Region's economic vitality. Based on the 2021 Census of Agriculture, the agriculture and agri-food sector in York Region, including farms, processors, food retailers and restaurants, provides approximately 49,000 jobs. York Region farms generate over \$390 million in operating revenues. The total

operating farm revenue of \$2,903 per acre ranks first in the Greater Toronto Area, and third highest in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, indicating high productivity levels in agriculture. This may be partially attributed to more than half of the Holland Marsh (a speciality crop area) being in the Region. York Region is also the fourth-largest food and beverage processing hub in Canada. Figure 1 highlights York Region’s agriculture and agri-food sector as a significant driver of the local economy.

Figure 1
York Region Agriculture and Agri-food Sector Highlights



Source: 2021 Census of Agriculture and OMAFRA County Data, Canadian Business Counts 2022, * 2016 Census of Agriculture

A comprehensive summary of York Region data from the 2021 Census of Agriculture is available on the [York Link website](#).

Council approved the Region’s first Strategy in 2017 to guide long-term growth of the agriculture and agri-food sector

Council approved the Region’s first [Strategy](#) in [October 2017](#), to guide long-term growth of the sector and set direction for the development of 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 actions are grouped as on-going, short-term, medium, and long-term activities.

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 is reported to Council annually.

Economic landscape for the agriculture and agri-food sector is experiencing significant changes, presenting both challenges and opportunities

Climate change, labour shortages, and supply chain disruptions pose significant challenges for the agriculture and agri-food sector. The urbanization of the region and resulting loss of farmland also contribute to the challenges for the sector. The sector must navigate the challenges while leveraging these opportunities to remain competitive and sustainable in the long run.

On the positive side, growing demand for local and sustainable food, technological advancements such as precision agriculture, and supportive government funding programs provide opportunities for growth, innovation and diversification. For example, in 2022, the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers of Agriculture agreed to establish a new five-year agricultural policy framework, the [Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership](#). This program will strengthen competitiveness, support innovation, and increase the resiliency of the sector. Eligible farmers, food processors, and other agri-food businesses will benefit from access to funding.

4. Analysis

Implementation of the Strategy has progressed well with all actions mobilized

York Region continued to work closely with local municipal partners, the Advisory Committee, and agri-food stakeholders to implement actions in the Strategy. As of December 2022, all 45 action items were underway, completed or planned to be reviewed as part of the new Strategy. In summary:

- All short-term activities have been completed
- All ongoing activities have been completed and operationalized or are underway
- The majority of medium and long-term actions have been completed and operationalized as ongoing, with three of the actions to be re-prioritized and considered as part of the next iteration of the Strategy

Completed and ongoing activities include conducting a baseline study to review local food-sourcing practices at regional facilities, continuing local food education campaign, facilitating

business networking events such as the vertical farming webinar series and development of on-farm diversification tools for the agri-food businesses.

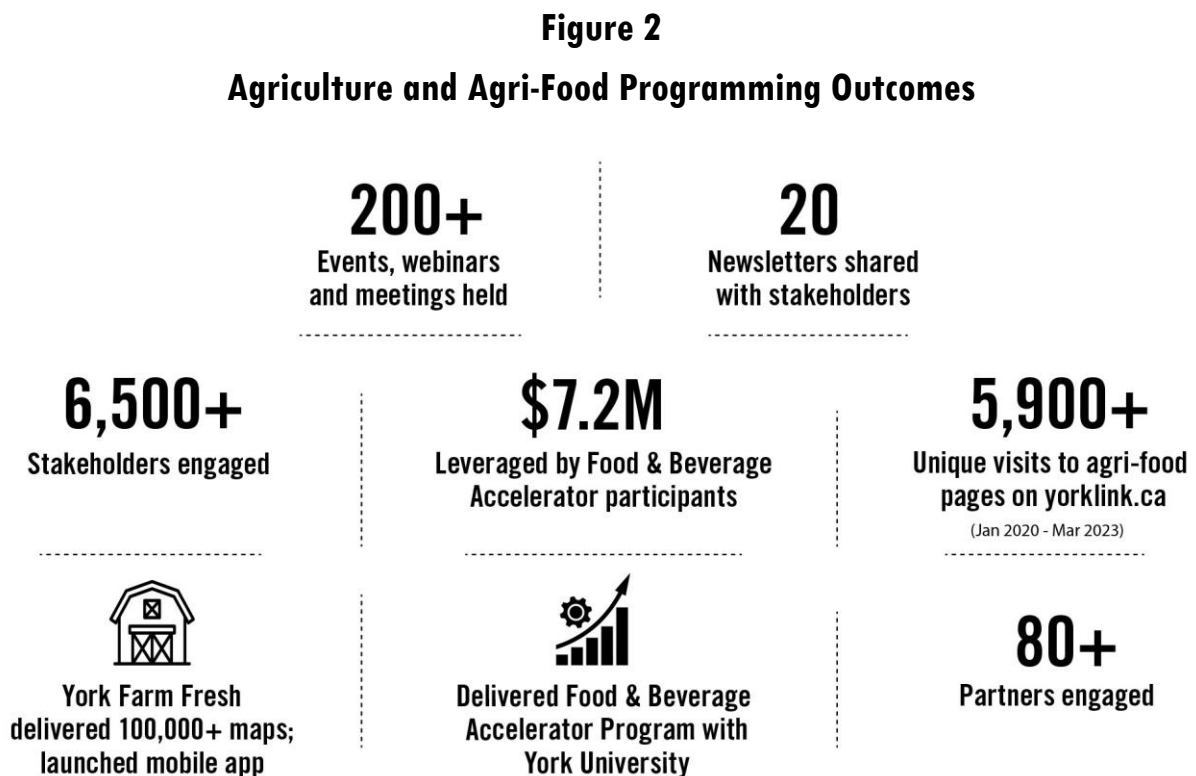
Actions that will be re-prioritized and considered as part of the new Strategy include an Action Plan for food & beverage processing, conducting industry sector analysis for equine sector and agri-food business retention and expansion studies.

A summarized list of action items grouped by status (underway, completed & operationalized as ongoing, and re-prioritized as part of the new Strategy) is outlined in Appendix A.

Agriculture and agri-food programming and stakeholder engagement reached over 6,500 participants with over 200 events, webinars, and industry meetings

Since the Strategy was launched in 2018, a key focus has been to engage with stakeholders to build partnerships and leverage resources for program delivery. Agriculture and agri-food programming has engaged more than 6,500 stakeholders through over 200 events, webinars and industry meetings in partnership with 80 organizations. The region's agri-food sector is actively promoted on York Link social media channels that has generated over 10,000,000 impressions since 2018.

Figure 2: Agriculture and agri-food programming outcomes illustrates key performance metrics over the past four years. It includes outcomes from the projects delivered with the partners including York Farm Fresh Association and York University for the delivery of [Food and Beverage Accelerator Program](#).



York Region partnered with the Province and Regional stakeholders to encourage growth in the agri-food sector

In February 2022, York Region partnered with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) and Durham Region to deliver a four-part webinar series on Vertical Farming 101. The webinars aimed to address the growing interest in vertical farming as an opportunity to support economic recovery and meet consumer demand for domestically grown food. The series attracted more than 400 agri-food businesses and stakeholders from Canadian and international audiences, demonstrating strong interest in the topic. The series was featured in [Greenhouse Canada](#) magazine.

York Region also participated in the five counties agriculture economic development collaborative that developed education tools and resources for the agriculture community. The collaborative consists of the City of Kawartha Lakes, the County of Northumberland, Peterborough and Kawarthas Economic Development, the Region of Durham and York Region. The collaborative planned and delivered two webinar series:

- Webinars: “So You Think You Want to Farm” on March 4, 2022, and March 11, 2022. This two-part series was aimed at individuals exploring farming as a career path. Over 75 participants attended the two webinars.
- Webinars: “Thinking of Diversifying Your Farm” on March 25, 2022, and April 1, 2022. This two-part webinar was targeted for current farm owners interested in diversifying their farm operations to generate additional revenue. Over 65 participants attended the two webinars.

The group developed a collection of resources for businesses looking to start a farm or diversify a farm in Ontario. An On-Farm Diversification Toolkit is underway to help businesses navigate the municipal process for starting agriculture related, on-farm diversification and agri-tourism business opportunities.

Overall, the eight webinars brought together over 500 attendees, and received positive feedback, with a zoom poll showing that 97% of the participants felt that the webinars either exceeded or met their expectations.

York Region continued to fund partnerships to support initiatives that align with the Strategy

York Region continued funding partnerships in 2022 with the Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance (\$30,000) and York Farm Fresh Association (\$35,000) to deliver projects that support the Strategy:

- **Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance (GHFFA):** York Region staff continued to collaborate and share best practices with Alliance members. In 2022, GHFFA conducted a [Scarborough Fresh Food Pilot](#) to increase access to locally produced food in underserved neighbourhoods, support urban and rural farmers, and advance more inclusive public spaces as “nano economies”. Lessons learned from the community development project in addressing food insecurity can be applied to

jurisdictions across the alliance partners. An interactive dashboard is being designed for the ConnectON economic development platform to integrate Workforce and Statistics Canada data for users. ConnectON was refreshed with over 2000 food processing sector data points in collaboration with Food and Beverage Ontario and OMAFRA. GHFFA members also provided a [response to Bill 23](#) with the focus on preservation of agricultural lands in the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

- **York Farm Fresh (YFF):** YFF connects York Region communities to locally grown products at farms and farmers markets. The Region funded YFF as a service delivery partner to raise awareness of locally produced agricultural products and develop the local Farm Fresh Guide Map for 2022. YFF continued to enhance its [multilingual mobile app for 2022](#). The digital Guide Map and the app is translated in seven different languages including French, Chinese (simplified and traditional), Persian, Urdu, Russian, and Tamil. The website received nearly 10,000 visits in 2022.

York Region conducted a baseline study to review local food procurement practices at Regional facilities

A baseline study was initiated to review local food procurement practices as part of an action item from the Strategy (Action 4.7). The project aimed to identify opportunities for integrating local food procurement practices into Regionally operated facilities. The objectives were to understand the definition of “local food” in a York Region context and identify best practices for local food sourcing policies.

The study focused on two Regionally operated long-term care (LTC) homes in Maple and Newmarket. The information was gathered through a review of food purchasing data at LTC homes, virtual focus group sessions with stakeholders, and interviews with LTC staff. One of the key findings of the report is that LTC staff proactively incorporated local Ontario-based food options into their purchasing practices.

The study identified best practices and recommendations for consideration. These include formalizing a definition of local food that is Ontario-wide, identifying product origins with food service providers, setting aspirational local food purchasing targets, supporting LTC staff with local food purchasing and promoting local food procurement through communication campaigns.

Lessons learned from the project can be applied more broadly to other Regional facilities. The report will be shared with stakeholders once finalized.

Efforts continue to promote York Region as an investment destination for the agri-food sector

In 2022, the [Anuga Food Conference](#) was identified as an opportunity to promote York Region as an investment destination for the agri-food sector. Anuga is the world’s largest food and beverage fair, attracting industry professionals from around the globe to showcase the latest trends and innovations in the sector.

As Canada's fourth largest food & beverage processing hub, the agri-food industry will be showcased in collaboration with all levels of governments to enable local companies with opportunities to access additional markets. Planning for the conference, which will take place in Germany, in October 2023, is underway in collaboration with local municipalities.

Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee members completed a successful term supporting implementation of the Strategy

The Advisory Committee completed a successful four-year term (2019-2022) supporting the implementation of the Strategy. During the term, 15 meetings were held including four meetings in 2022. The Committee provided input and feedback on several initiatives in 2022 including:

- The Municipal Comprehensive Review process to update the [2022 York Region Official Plan](#).
- Virtual education webinar series for agri-food businesses, including Vertical Farming 101 and On-farm Diversification series
- Research on Farm 911 – The Emily Project

Advisory Committee members were publicly [recognized](#) for their contribution and commitment in supporting the sector in York Region. A recruitment process was initiated at the end of term to on-board new Committee members. With successful community engagement through the Strategy, applications from several highly qualified candidates were received with interest to participate in the committee.

In 2022, Council appointed new Advisory Committee members for the 2023 - 2026 term

In [December 2022](#), Council appointed members to the Agriculture and Agri-food Advisory Committee for the 2023-2026 term. The members provide balanced representation across the agri-food value chain including producers, urban farmers, retailers and more.

The committee is composed of eleven members from across the Region, including two Council representatives:

- Regional Councillor Naomi Davison, Town of Georgina
- Councillor Avia Eek on behalf of Mayor Steve Pellegrini, King Township

The new Advisory Committee members will continue to support delivery of the Strategy.

New Agriculture and Agri-food Sector Strategy will be developed for Council consideration

The current Agriculture and Agri-Food Sector Strategy expired on December 31, 2022 and the process for new strategy development has been initiated. The new Agriculture and Agri-food Sector Strategy will be developed for consideration by Council in 2024. The new Strategy will consider Council's vision for economic vitality, regional and local Economic Development Action Plans, the York Region Climate Change Action Plan, priorities of senior

levels of government, industry trends, upcoming policies and regulations, and input from the business community. A consultant will be retained to support the project which will include review of the sector and stakeholder consultation.

The 2023 workplan includes a focus on background review and information gathering to set the stage for the new Strategy, including review and analysis of the 2021 Census of Agriculture dataset. Staff will collaborate with the Advisory Committee, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) and local municipalities for the development of the new Strategy. The new Strategy will reflect local realities facing the agri-food business community, explore opportunities to establish an agri-food Innovation network and position York Region as the agri-food hub to do business.

5. Financial

The Strategy identified a number of objectives and actions for consideration as part of implementation. Funds required to support 2023 agriculture and agri-food initiatives are included in the approved 2023 Planning and Economic Development budget. As noted above, York Region continued funding partnerships in 2022 with the Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance (\$30,000) and York Farm Fresh Association (\$35,000) to deliver projects that support the Strategy.

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. The Region partners 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 has progressed well with all the actions mobilized and significant stakeholder outreach and engagement since 2018.

In 2023, the Region, local municipalities and Advisory Committee will collaborate to build on the momentum to develop a new Agriculture and Agri-food Sector Strategy. This will be a key focus along with raising the profile for the agri-food sector with stakeholders.

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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June 2, 2023

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Appendix A – Agriculture & Agri-food Strategy: Status of Action Items

Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy: Status of Action Items

STRATEGIC GOAL	ACTION ITEM	TIMELINE	STATUS
1. Strengthen communication and collaboration with York Region, lower tier municipalities and the agri-food sector	1.1 Create a York Region agri-food specialist role dedicated to supporting growth of existing businesses, attracting new investments and promoting the Agri-food sector in York Region.	Short-term	Complete
	1.2 Build internal staff capacity to provide direction to lower tiers on agri-food issues; coordinate programming and initiatives between planning and economic development and tourism at the Regional level.	On-going	Complete/ On-going
	1.3 Develop a communication roadmap/strategy to ensure open and transparent communication pathways.	Short-term	Complete
	1.4 Create a directory/resource that includes names and contact information of producers in the Region; to be used by the Region for collecting employment data.	Medium-term	Complete
	1.5 Create annual opportunity to collect feedback from the agri-food sector to strengthen York Region staff and Council's understanding of farm and food businesses and their needs by engaging with local farmers and agri-food experts.	Medium-term	Complete/ On-going
	1.6 Continue to support and collaborate with GHFFA through projects.	On-going	Complete/ On-going
	1.7 Continue support for the York Region Agricultural Advisory Liaison Group (YRAALG) by allocating annual budget for special projects and events.	Medium-term	Complete/ On-going
	1.8 Explore and identify ways to celebrate and showcase agricultural innovators/champions in the Region using existing communication efforts.	On-going	Complete/ On-going

STRATEGIC GOAL	ACTION ITEM	TIMELINE	STATUS
	1.9 Seek opportunities to collaborate with partners in York Region and beyond the Region.	On-going	Complete/ On-going
	1.10 Develop York Region agri-food educational materials for general public to share at regional and community events.	On-going	Complete/ On-going
	1.11 Investigate and explore opportunities for teaching youth about agriculture and food production in the Region.	Medium-term	Complete/ On-going
	1.12 Demonstrate a commitment to the agri-food sector by supporting agricultural events and conventions through sponsorship or in-kind support.	On-going	Complete/ On-going
	1.13 Collaborate with organizations such as Rouge National Park, Oak Ridges Moraine Trust, Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA), and Ontario Farmland Trust to conduct study to understand current land stewardship practices used by York producers.	Medium-term	Complete/ On-going
2. Support agri-food sector through integrated land use planning and economic development			
	2.1 At the next review, update York Region's Official Plan to conform and align with recent changes to the Greenbelt Plan, Growth Plan and Oak Ridges Moraine Plan (2017 updates).	Medium-term	Complete
	2.2. Prior to next Official Plan review, conduct a Land Evaluation and Area Review (LEAR) study to collect updated data on quality of soils, fragmentation, conflicting uses and production in York Region.	Medium-term	Complete
	2.3 Through the Municipal Comprehensive Review, review York Region's Official Plan (and lower tier plans) related to overall agricultural strategies, land use policies, acceptable uses, as well as application processes and development fees to ensure they encourage and support investment and employment in the agricultural sector.	On-going	Complete/ On-going
	2.4 Conduct a study that investigates innovative financial mechanisms that	Medium-term	Complete/On-going

STRATEGIC GOAL	ACTION ITEM	TIMELINE	STATUS
	incentivize producers and landowners to keep land in agricultural production.		
	2.5 Conduct a review of policies and regulations related to environmental performance of food processing operations within the Region.	Short-term	Complete
	2.6 Participate in the upcoming consultation and review for the Greater Golden Horseshoe's Agricultural System policies (led by OMAFRA).	Short-term	Complete
	2.7 Recognize and acknowledge the agri-food sector's role as an economic driver in the Region through updates to plans and policies.	Medium-term	Complete/ On-going
	2.8 Conduct a study and review of edge planning practices and identify planning tools the Region can use to resolve conflicts between adjacent urban and agricultural land uses.	Medium-term	Complete/ On-going
	2.9 Monitor the Province's development of Agricultural Impact Assessment (AIA) guidelines and provide feedback through consultation with planning staff and other relevant stakeholders.	On-going	Complete
	2.10 Encourage the lower tier municipalities to develop and implement an Agricultural Community Improvement Plan (CIP) to incentivize on-farm diversification and value-added operations.	On-going	Complete/ On-going
	2.11 Create factsheets and accessible materials to help agri-food stakeholders interpret land use policies.	On-going	Complete
3. Support increased capacity for value added processing and support services			
	3.1 Develop and implement a Food Processing Action Plan that demonstrates York Region is 'open for business' to attract and retain food processing businesses.	Medium-term	Planned to re-prioritize as part of new Strategy
	3.2 Establish an agri-entrepreneur mentor program in conjunction with the York Small Business Enterprise Centre to support existing	Medium-term	Complete/ On-going

STRATEGIC GOAL	ACTION ITEM	TIMELINE	STATUS
	and potential entrepreneurs with mentoring and business guidance.		
	3.3 Investigate and identify opportunities to develop a regional food incubator/hub to support fruit and vegetable value-adding opportunities to increase farm revenue.	Long-term	Complete/ On-going
4. Leverage within the GTA and proximity to customers through direct farm marketing to meet demand for local food production			
	4.1 Facilitate the revitalization of the York Farm Fresh Organization to support the growth of York's agri-food sector and demand for farm-direct production.	On-going	Complete
	4.2 Continue annual production of the York Region Farm Fresh Guide Map and Pumpkin Pie Trail Map to promote and raise awareness of locally produced agricultural products.	Short-term	Complete
	4.3 Continue to support and encourage the provision of community gardens and/or urban agriculture projects that promote agricultural awareness in settlement/urban areas.	On-going	Complete/ On-going
	4.4 Support the development of agri-tourism programming such as "Farm Tour Hikes".	On-going	Complete/ On-going
	4.5 Raise awareness around the diversity of production and processing found in the Region through promotional materials (e.g. Ontario's 'soup and salad bowl' in the Holland Marsh; world crop production).	On-going	Complete/ On-going
	4.6 Revisit York Region's Food Charter and broaden support across the agri-food sector.	On-going	Underway
	4.7 Develop local food-sourcing policies for Regional facilities and encourage other public sector agencies within the Region to adopt similar policies.	Medium-term	Complete / On-going
	4.8 Facilitate relationship building between producer, processors and retail companies that support local food production (e.g. Longos, Metro).	Medium-term	Complete/ On-going

STRATEGIC GOAL	ACTION ITEM	TIMELINE	STATUS
	4.9 Communicate and promote existing online tools to help connect producers with the local market through workshops and seminars.	Medium-term	Complete/ On-going
	4.10 Partner with Rouge National Urban Park and Toronto Region Conservation to increase collaboration and learning amongst agri-businesses and potential new entrants into agri-tourism through hikes, education programs and/or peer-to-peer learning groups.	Medium-term	Underway
5. Provide support for business retention and expansion of primary agriculture production within York Region			
	5.1 Conduct Business Retention and Expansion studies (led by OMAFRA) to assess and evaluate the needs and opportunities in each lower-tier municipality with a focus on agri-food related services and businesses	Medium-term	Planned to re-prioritize as part of new Strategy
	5.2. Conduct a study and develop a long-term sustainability strategy for the Holland Marsh through collaboration with stakeholders and partners (e.g. Simcoe County, Lake Simcoe Regional Conservation Authority, Holland Marsh Growers' Association, OMAFRA, etc.).	Medium-term	Complete
	5.3. Work with industry and government agencies to support the employment of seasonal and foreign agricultural workers, with respect to working conditions, accommodations, cultural services and accessibility to workers.	On-going	Complete/ On-going
	5.4. Undertake an equine industry study and consultation to identify barriers and opportunities for growing the Region's equine industry including research on successes in other regions (e.g. Greater Toronto Area, Caledon, Halton Hills, etc.).	Medium-term	Planned to reprioritize as part of new Strategy
	5.5 Explore opportunities to increase the production of world crops within York Region.	Medium-term	Complete/ On-going
	5.6 Continue support to improve broadband connectivity across the Region through the Region's Broadband Strategy; particularly in rural and agricultural areas to help businesses develop and grow.	On-going	Complete/ On-going

STRATEGIC GOAL	ACTION ITEM	TIMELINE	STATUS
	5.7 Develop template and prepare annual report card to record and evaluate achievements.	On-going	Complete/ On-going
	5.8 Conduct a five-year review of York Region's Agriculture and Agri-Food Sector Strategy.	Long-term	Underway