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Town of Aurora  
**Committee of the Whole Report**  
No. CMS24-009

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**Subject:** Food Insecurity in Aurora

**Prepared by:** Robin McDougall, Director, Community Services

**Department:** Community Services

**Date:** April 2, 2024

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## Recommendation

1. That Report No. CMS24-009 be received; and
2. That Council make a commitment to support the York Region Food Charter; and
3. That Council authorize staff to continue to work with local agencies and York Region in pursuit of food security for Aurora residents.

## Executive Summary

Based on a report from York Region, there are one in seven households experiencing some form of food insecurity affecting their access to food. Finding opportunities to provide and support access to food is important to our community. Even though food insecurity is managed by upper levels of government and the not-for-profit/charitable sector, the local municipality can do its part to support this growing concern. This report provides Council an update on initiatives that the Town of Aurora has taken towards meeting its role within the community.

- Roles and responsibilities at the various levels of government support the efforts of food security.
- There are many programs and local agencies whose work continues to grow and reach those needing support.
- Locally, the Town of Aurora has provided support for Food Security in a few different ways.
- Food Charters guide decisions and programs for food security.

- Local advisory groups and agencies meet to discuss collaborative programming and service delivery.
- Additional staff resources may be needed to support an increase in service level.
- The Town could support the existing agencies through a variety of ways.

## Background

In 2021, Council passed a motion directing staff to report back on how the municipality can better address the issue of food insecurity in Aurora. The direction also included investigating the possibility of creating a Food Charter for Aurora and investigating the creation of a volunteer Food Security Advisory Committee. To better understand the resources that already exist in our community, staff have researched the various governmental roles and responsibilities and engaged with York Region and local agencies to learn more about what services and programs already exist and gauge how the Town can get involved to best serve those in need of food security.

## Analysis

**Roles and responsibilities at the various levels of government support the efforts of food security.**

Generally, the federal government has a lead policy role on matters related to cross-border commerce, farm financial safety nets, agricultural research and technology development, food and phytosanitary safety, food standards, packaging and labeling, and nutritional health (narrowly defined). Provinces (and sometimes Territories) also have supporting roles in these areas and take the lead on matters related to commerce and food safety within their boundary, land use and agricultural land protection, property taxation, many areas of environmental protection, public health, and agricultural extension. The two jurisdictions often negotiate on program design, with the federal government offering guidelines or rules to establish national coherence and equivalency, but the provinces often take a lead role in program delivery.<sup>1</sup>

Municipal level can be delivered differently if the government is single-tier (such as Toronto) versus upper-tier (York Region) and lower-tier (Aurora). In general, the

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<sup>1</sup> York University, Food system governance,  
<https://foodpolicyforcanada.info.yorku.ca/background/problems/food-system-governance/>

municipal level is responsible for public health delivery, some food inspection activities, nutritional health promotion, zoning policies, lead role in household and commercial waste management, water supply, urban and regional planning, housing, recreation, transportation, and social services. As you can see from this list, all have an impact on food security, but given the government structure for Aurora, York Region holds most of the responsibility for the policies that govern each of these areas. Aurora certainly has a responsibility in planning, zoning, waste management, water supply and recreation. Indirectly, Aurora can support the other areas of responsibility (housing, public health, transportation, and social services) but lacks the resources to lead them and Aurora relies on York Region.

York Region is involved in a variety of programs and partnerships to improve food access, strengthen our local food system, improve the environment as well as affect food insecurity which negatively impacts the physical and mental health of children, youth, and adults. York Region established the York Region Food Charter (2013) which has helped guide decisions and programs over the last decade. The Charter is currently under review/renewal.

York Region Council also established priorities for the Community Investment Fund in May 2023 and Food Security System Development was one of the top priorities. This results in exploring opportunities to strengthen York Region's food system in areas such as collaboration, integration, and centralized distribution of food, including culturally appropriate food that meet the diverse needs of our communities. Investments may support enhancements in the local food system, including food access, delivery and storage, and information exchange between providers.

In addition to the government roles, local agencies have established themselves (typically as not-for-profit/charitable organizations) with the goal of delivering direct programming and services to the local communities. Some of these agencies that are local to Aurora include: York Region Food Network, Aurora Food Pantry, Welcoming Arms, Neighbourhood Network, and the Salvation Army.

Aurora has and can continue to support the Region and other local agencies through enhancing programs and promoting existing initiatives. Through discussions with the local agencies and York Region, there may be more that Aurora can do to support food security for its residents.

**There are many programs and local agencies whose work continues to grow and reach those needing support.**

**York Region Food Network (YRFN)** is located at 350 Industrial Pkwy S., Aurora and is a charitable organization that strives for a food secure York Region where everyone's right to food is met. They seek to be an acknowledged and respected centre for the promotion of food security – a healthy, accessible, and sustainable food system in York Region. In support of this vision, YRFN works to raise public awareness on the many issues affecting food security such as affordable housing, adequate employment, education, accessible childcare and social assistance policies through programming, outreach, and advocacy initiatives. YRFN is approaching food insecurity from the wholistic approach, including the support of those suffering from mental health issues and social impacts caused by food insecurity. The YRFN has also established several other focus areas and programs, each with their own responsibility.

**York Region Food Council** – born out of the York Region Food Charter, the Council is made up of representatives from York Region and the municipalities that make up the Region, Public Health, York University, Seneca College, the farming community and more. The Council works towards this vision by building networks across the food system, conducting research on the York Region food system, educating through public events, advocating for policy changes that foster a healthy food system, and supporting the creation and implementation of food system initiatives.

**Youth Food Committee (YFC)** is a working group of the York Region Food Council and an arm of York Region Food Network. The Youth Food Committee offers a platform for youth to connect with one another and insert their voices into food system issues. Through the YFC, youth pursue topics, projects and events that catch their interest, with support from York Region Food Network.

**Good Food Markets** are affordable fresh food market and are currently offered in five municipalities (Markham, Georgina, Stouffville, Richmond Hill and Newmarket. It is a pilot project funded by York Region and is open to everyone and are more than just places to buy veggies and fruits, they are vibrant, inclusive hubs designed for community connection. The goal is to offer quality produce at prices lower than market rate.

**York Region Community Gardens** operate two allotments and three collective community gardens.

- Community Gardens - YRFN operates an allotment garden in the south end of Aurora and one in central Newmarket. Allotment gardens provide

community members with access to a 10 x 20 ft plot of land, offering a chance to grow food, form social networks and connect with the land.

- Collective Gardens - YRFN operates three collective gardens (Newmarket and Vaughan). These gardens are designed to bring the community together by sharing the work and sharing the harvest. Participants have an opportunity to share their skills and learn from others. These gardens are open to all.

Other important and impactful programs that are operated by YRFN include but are not limited to:

- Compost Learning Hub
- Gleaning Program
- Seed Library/Seed Swap
- Good Food Box Program
- Culinary Cooking Programs
- Meal Program

**Aurora Food Pantry** is located at 350 Industrial Pkwy S., Aurora, and is a volunteer based nonprofit organization governed by a volunteer Board of Directors. The Food Pantry began in 1990 and supports the needs of Aurora and Oak Ridges residents. Their purpose is to provide food assistance to individuals and families in need. A group of dedicated volunteers assist with all phases of operation during the pantry's food distribution hours. Food and monetary donations come from many local organizations, churches, schools, businesses, and individuals. The Food Pantry works with other pantries with the goal to feed Aurora. A few additional initiatives include Summer Kits for Kids, Seeds and Soils and Family Giving Event.

Mini-Pantries – in partnership with the Town of Aurora, the Aurora Seniors Centre, Home Hardware, and the Salvation Army, they installed four mini-pantries in the community. These cupboards will ensure those in need can feel comfortable accessing non-perishable food items at any time.

**Welcoming Arms** and other religious institutions have hosted various meal programs that serve those families and individuals in need of food.

**Neighborhood Network (NN)** works to multiply community giving and create caring and vibrant neighbourhoods through promoting volunteerism, linking resources, and supporting local charities and agencies in the northern six municipalities of York Region. Up until last year, NN hosted a monthly committee round table with Aurora Food

Pantry, YRFN, Welcoming Arms, and Salvation Army. Since YRFN hosts a similar monthly round table for all food banks and food service agencies in the Region, NN determined that they would stop their monthly meetings to reduce duplication and in support of the good work being done by YRFN but committed to reconvene the local Committee if needed.

**Locally, the Town of Aurora has provided support for Food Security in a few different ways.**

**Mini Food Pantries**

Mini food pantries have been installed at four locations across Town, including the Town Hall, Aurora Community Centre, Aurora Food Pantry and Northridge Community Church. This initiative was spearheaded by the Aurora Food Pantry and supported by Town staff. The mini food pantries are part of the Food Pantry's efforts to provide food assistance for those in need. The pantries will be filled by Food Pantry volunteers and community members who wish to donate food items. The pantries will operate on a self-serve model for the drop-off and pick-up of items. The Town and Food Pantry have entered into a License Agreement that establishes responsibilities for maintenance, liability, replacement, and related details. The Food Pantry team will oversee the project and monitor the pantries regularly. Additional food pantries may be installed based on need. The Town will continue to support these initiatives.

**Community Gardens**

Community gardens have great benefits. Growing your own food has positive impacts on the personal health and wellbeing of residents by providing an environmentally friendly activity that enables residents to stay active while fostering food security and food literacy. Gardens create a strong sense of community, elevating happiness, providing a sense of accomplishment and more importantly, reducing stress. Horticultural therapy is a new term in the health and wellness industry, describing the benefits of gardening.

Vegetable gardening also has positive impacts on our environment and on climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, fossil fuel use, food waste, food packaging and use of chemical pesticides and fertilizer.

The Town currently has Community Gardens off Industrial Parkway in which residents can grow vegetables that are well utilized and there is a waiting list for plots. The John Abel Park under construction on Hartwell Way will provide Community Gardens once complete. The garden plots will be raised off the ground and fully accessible providing

opportunities for all residents to grow their own food. Garden plots will be available in spring of 2025. These gardens will also provide opportunities for education/workshops to promote the benefits of gardening and even allow for the overflow of bounty to be provided to the Aurora Food Pantry.

#### Food donations

The Town provides special event goers with the opportunity to provide non-perishable food donations in lieu of admissions at four events spread over approximately twelve days. These events include Arctic Adventure, Concerts in the Park, Colours of Fall concert and Family First Night. The Special Events team is hoping to increase the number of events where food donations are accepted in lieu of admissions in 2024.

#### Aurora Community Cares Resources

During the pandemic, and out of a need to pool resources, an ad hoc working group generated resource documents and webpages dedicated to helping the community. These resources were a collection of important details for residents to use to connect with local agencies, acquire supplies or information and most importantly, learn who can help. Part of this resource document included information about Food Pantries, Food Hampers, Community Meal programs, etc. Even though the working group no longer meets, staff will make sure the content of this resource is maintained.

#### **Food Charters guide decisions and programs for food security.**

The Food Charter is a statement of values and principles intended to guide community organizations and individual community members toward a unified vision for a healthy food system – linking community action and policy. Food charters provide a reference for managing food issues on a system-wide basis. York Region Food Charter (YRFC) shown in Attachment 1 was established in 2013 (currently under review and renewal) and aligns with a food movement across Canada, promoting a system from farm to plate that provides access to local, affordable, and nutritious food. Typically, Food Charters are established by upper-level governments, those responsible for social services and public health. The YRFC is a vision of thriving urban and rural communities where residents, businesses and governments are creating a resilient food system.

Considering that food security relies on a healthy food-system, Aurora cannot provide food security alone. Aurora has an integral role; however, it depends on the Region, Provincial and Federal governments to support the local communities. Therefore, if Aurora created its own Charter it would need to engage with the local agencies and York Region, the same organizations that are involved with establishing York Region's Food

Charter. Staff believe it would be a duplication of effort and messages. As an alternative to having Aurora's own Charter, staff would recommend being part of the review/renewal of the Region's Charter that is currently underway. At this time, the Charter review is taking place with representatives from York Region, YRFN, post secondary institutions, Vaughan and Richmond Hill. In speaking with YRFN, they agree that a representative from Aurora would be welcomed.

Also, Aurora could commit to taking action to achieve the Charter's vision in our organization and community we serve. As similar commitment was made for the Inclusion Charter for York Region. The Charter itself was the Region's but Aurora made a commitment to support the values and goals of the Charter.

**Local advisory groups and agencies meet to discuss collaborative programming and service delivery.**

As noted previously, the Neighbourhood Network (NN) had spearheaded a working group during COVID made up of local agencies set to discuss common goals and programming. However, it was observed that a very similar gathering of agencies was already being hosted by the York Region Food Network called the Emergency Food Access Cluster, therefore, the NN working group has been paused until such a time it is needed.

Considering the excellent work already being achieved by the local agencies such as YRFN and Aurora's Food Pantry, staff would recommend getting more engaged with these agencies versus generating Aurora's own advisory committee; this would only duplicate the volunteer commitments from the local agencies.

As shown earlier in this report, staff have engaged with YRFN on the community gardens and with the Food Pantry on the mini food pantry program, but there is potential for more engagement. It is recommended that staff participate in the Region's Charter renewal, YRFN's round table and stay connected with the Food Pantry to learn more about where the Town can be involved or support the existing programs.

However, if Council still wishes to pursue its own Advisory Committee, the following steps will need to be taken by way of engaging local agencies and York Region:

- Establish objectives for the committee
- Establish terms of reference
- Recruit for committee members that have experience on this topic (likely from existing agencies)



- Set meeting schedule

**Additional staff resources may be needed to support an increase in service level.**

Current staff complement is capable of being a liaison or facilitator between organizations, however, if Council is interested in the municipality taking on a leadership role, additional staff supports may be needed to properly support this increase in service level.

Food insecurity and food security as noted above are typically managed through social services and public health (i.e. York Region), both of which the Town currently does not have within its existing staff complement. Therefore, based on a liaison/facilitator model, Community Services Department would assign this to one of its team members, however, if the demand increases beyond this capacity (including planning and delivering programs), additional staff resources may be needed.

**The Town could support the existing agencies through a variety of ways.**

During preliminary discussions with YRFN and the Food Pantry, they shared a few ideas where the Town could help support their initiatives. All of these ideas would require further exploration to obtain detailed information and budget requirements.

- Offset the cost to have YRFN open a Good Food Market in Aurora
- Need for space for programming and storage
- Help promote existing programs
- Support Talks or Education sessions focused on hidden poverty and hidden hunger - occurs when an individual earns above the poverty line, but cannot afford adequate food, hydro bills, childcare, or other basic necessities
- Offer use of certified kitchen at AFLC for cooking programs at a reduced rental rate
- Host Lunch and Learn for municipal staff
- York Region Food Security System Development – Aurora could help encourage participation and information gathering to support the Region's effort

**Advisory Committee Review**

Staff presented the Community Garden design to both the Community Advisory Committee and the Accessibility Advisory Committee. Comments received from both groups were taken into consideration and staff were able to incorporate numerous suggestions into the park design.

## Legal Considerations

None.

## Financial Implications

The financial impact to the Town arising from the three mini food pantries is expected to be minimal, with any associated costs to be absorbed within existing approved funding levels.

The cost of construction for the community garden has already been captured in the Town's capital budget. Any associated incremental operating requirements will be included in the appropriate operating budget.

Any arising future costs that are nominal could be covered through existing approved operating funds, however, if these costs become more extensive, a future budget request would be submitted to Council for its consideration.

If additional staff resources are needed in support of any service level enhancements of this nature, a future budget request would be prepared for Council's consideration.

## Communications Considerations

The Town will continue to work with community partners to share information on and promote the initiatives outlined in this report.

## Climate Change Considerations

The recommendations and actions taken in this report will decrease greenhouse gas emissions and increase the Town's ability to adapt to changing climate by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, fossil fuel use, food waste, food packaging and use of chemical pesticides and fertilizer.

## Link to Strategic Plan

GOAL: Supporting an exceptional quality of life for all

- Objective 2: Invest in sustainable infrastructure
- Objective 5: Strengthening the fabric of our community

GOAL: Supporting environmental stewardship and sustainability

- Objective 1: Encouraging the stewardship of Aurora's natural resources
- Objective 2: Promoting and advancing green initiatives

### **Alternative(s) to the Recommendation**

1. Council may provide further direction.

### **Conclusions**

In support of improving access to food for our local community, staff recommend continuing to work with local community partners and the Region to find ways to support this important cause.

Based on the level of work already being achieved in Aurora and York Region, staff would not recommend establishing Aurora's own Charter, but alternatively Aurora could commit to taking action and supporting the Region's Charter.

Similarly, there is already an established working group that meets including local agencies and York Region, therefore, staff would not recommend establishing Aurora's own Advisory Committee due to the duplication of topics and discussions.

Alternatively, staff recommend being part of YRFN's working group and engaging regularly with the Region and Aurora's Food Pantry to find ways that the Town can support their efforts.

### **Attachments**

Attachment 1 – York Region Food Charter (2013)

### **Previous Reports**

None

### **Pre-submission Review**

Agenda Management Team review on March 14, 2024

## **Approvals**

**Approved by Robin McDougall, Director, Community Services**

**Approved by Doug Nadorozny, Chief Administrative Officer**