

York Region developing Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy to enhance thriving agricultural economy

By Mark Pavilons

Agricultural interests in York and King are being brought to the forefront, thanks to work by York Region officials.

The Regional Municipality of York, with the support of the York Region Agricultural Advisory Liaison Group, is developing an agriculture and agri-food strategy to provide direction for the long-term growth of the agricultural and food production sector in York Region.

Producers, processors and other food production-chain members in York Region are encouraged to participate and provide input through an online survey. The survey will be available until the end of March.

As part of the stakeholder engagement, telephone interviews may also be conducted as needed. All participant comments will give focus to the challenges and opportunities that may be pursued in this strategy.

King Councillor Avia Eek is a member of the advisory group and she's thrilled that York Region has agreed to work with us on this long-overdue strategy as it aligns with the York Region Economic Development Action Plan 2016-2019. As our Region continues to grow, it is becoming more apparent that we need to have a Strategy in place for agriculture, agri-food, agri-business and agri-tourism.

Developing a York Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy is the first priority to enhance a thriving agricultural economy. The objectives of creating a plan are:

- ? Support York Region's agricultural and food production sectors.
- ? Gain an understanding of the economic impact of the agriculture sector in York Region.
- ? Identify agricultural and Agri-food sub-sectors with the greatest potential for creating and sustaining employment and investment in the agricultural industry in York Region.
- ? Identify possible policy and process changes to support agriculture and agri-food in York Region.
- ? Identify gaps, key areas and recommend actions for York Region to make an impact in supporting the growth of the agriculture and agri-food sector.

When developed, the York Region Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy will guide York Region's future efforts to support the agriculture industry.

Eek said from King's perspective, the strategy aligns and addresses the opportunities and action items in our Economic Development Strategy and BR+E (Business Retention and Expansion) project that was undertaken in partnership with Whitchurch Stouffville back in 2012.

Eek urged residents to take part in the survey to identify the challenges and opportunities that should be pursued in York's agriculture and agri-food sector. The survey should take approximately 10 minutes to complete and is targeted at agriculture and food producers, businesses and organizations. To participate in the online survey, visit <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/SGPVP3F> York Region is home to more than 820 working farms and more than 400 food processing companies. The Region also represents 16 per cent of all farming land in the Golden Horseshoe, and the local agriculture and agri-food sector greatly contributes to success of the Region's economic vitality.

The York Region Agricultural Advisory Liaison Group is a volunteer advisory committee created by York Regional Council in 2001 as a means to support the agricultural industry and promote healthy rural communities. The group continues to play an important role in overseeing initiatives that connect residents to local farmers and markets, creating opportunities for engaging the agricultural community in addressing regulatory challenges, and assisting farmers with issues that affect their ability to successfully operate their businesses.