



## York Region Food Charter: Backgrounder

### Introduction

The York Region Food Charter (YRFC) aligns with a food movement across Canada, promoting a system from farm to plate that provides access to local, affordable and nutritious food. The YRFC is a vision of thriving urban and rural communities where residents, businesses and governments are creating a resilient food system.

Food is fundamental to every municipality and region. It impacts residents daily through processes that bring food from farm to table, and through its waste management practices.

York Region is fortunate to have many well-established food assets. With a strong agricultural heritage, York Region has infrastructure and opportunities for existing and new agri-food businesses to succeed and for residents to have access to local foods. Maintaining a strong local food system requires a collective and collaborative vision. The YRFC was developed through a series of community consultations and it is a vision for agriculture and food in York Region. The YRFC is a coordinated, systems approach to the food system - connecting existing and emerging policies, projects and programs, while celebrating and promoting our local food system.

### The York Region Food Charter

To provide leadership in the development of a sustainable food system, the York Region Food Charter Working Group formed in September 2011. Representing York Region agencies, municipalities, community organizations and residents, this Group came together with a common vision – that food system thinking can play a crucial role in building healthy communities that extend “beyond individual dietary behavior, and examines the broader context in which food choices occur”<sup>i</sup>.

Rooted in 5 priority areas, economic opportunities, environmental sustainability, health and wellbeing, social justice and equity, and education and skills,

**Food Charter:** 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.

**Local food:** “Food that has been grown or caught, processed and distributed as near to the point of consumption as possible. This can include the community, municipality, bioregion, province or country where the food is consumed” (Jennings, A., & Chislett, T. (2012). *Backgrounder on Institutional Procurement of Local Food*. Toronto: Sustain Ontario).

**Sustainable Food System:** Everything that is required to bring us food and deal with food waste. The food system is sustainable when it is fair and healthy for people and the environment

the YRFC opens the doors for new partnerships and collaborations that will bring economic and environmental gains, while building strong communities.

## **Priority Areas**

### ***Economic Opportunities***

A growing and diversifying province means there is growing demand for different types of foods and cuisines in York Region. This offers opportunities for new and expanding food producers and processors in the agri-food sector where “three jobs exist for every agriculture graduate with a bachelor’s degree”<sup>iii</sup>. Also procurement policies that support local production result in an increase in financial resources remaining in the local economy and “grow through a process known as the multiplier effect – the local economic activity that is triggered by the purchase of an item. Money spent in local businesses generates more wealth and jobs for the local economy. For example, it is estimated that if every household in Ontario spent \$10 a week on local food, there would be an additional \$2.4 billion in the local economy at the end of the year and 10,000 new jobs would be created”<sup>iiii</sup>.

### ***Environmental Sustainability***

With only 10 percent of our income going towards food<sup>iv</sup>, Canadians have a relatively inexpensive food supply. This food supply has come at the cost of environmental degradation, with common food products often traveling thousands of kilometers to reach our grocery stores. Supporting biodiversity and sound agricultural practices ensures the health of the soil and food supply, and contributes significantly to the total economic value of our landscape and economy”<sup>v</sup>. It aligns with York Region’s SM4RT Living Integrated Waste Management Plan advocating for a waste management hierarchy that promotes reducing, reusing, recycling, recovering to ensure minimum landfill disposal.

### ***Health and Wellbeing***

Nutritious food is important to our health. “Poor diet is associated with health problems that include low-weight births, high blood pressure, obesity, arthritis, diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, stroke, and cancer among others”<sup>vi</sup>. This has short-term and long-term repercussions for health and well-being, and health related complications resulting from chronic disease alone, is costing the Ontario health system between \$2.2 and \$2.5 billion annually<sup>vii</sup>. The food system has a role to play in making the healthy choice, the easy choice for residents by ensuring nutritious foods are accessible in private, public and community settings.

### ***Social Justice and Equity***

In 1976, Canada committed to the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger through the endorsement of the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This commitment was reiterated in 1996, when the Government of Canada endorsed the World Food Summit Plan of Action<sup>viii</sup>. Food insecurity is the reality of many, and food banks have stepped in to address hunger in communities, including feeding 52,879 people in 8 of York

Region's food banks in 2012<sup>ix</sup>. Designed to be a temporary emergency measure, food banks have become permanent fixtures in our communities. A healthy food system contributes to long-term solutions that build inclusive, food secure communities.

### ***Education and Skills***

Health and education are interconnected. Research shows that if children and youth are exposed to healthy foods when they are young, they are more likely to value and consume healthy food when they are older<sup>x</sup>. Developing food literacy and healthy eating habits among children and youth in school contributes to decrease in absenteeism, increase likelihood of graduation and improvement of students' concentration in school. Success in school helps children and youth develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to lead healthy lives.

### **How does a Food Charter contribute to a stronger York Region?**

Food issues are deeply entrenched in daily operations of urban, suburban and rural municipalities and regions, impacting everything from how and where people grow and access foods, to public health messaging around food, and waste management practices.

A Food Charter is a vision of a sustainable food system, based on values and principles that promote health and food security for all. Toronto is home to the first Canadian food charter, adopted in 2001. Since then, 64 municipalities and regions across Canada<sup>xi</sup> have been working on food policy initiatives to build civic engagement, facilitate collaboration and catalyze actions to strengthen the local food system.

Examples from Toronto, Vancouver and Winnipeg demonstrate that with collaborative action in forming and implementing a unified vision for a sustainable food system, people start to work together differently to address pressing issues such as ecology and economy, and developing food literacy. These cities also illustrate that a multiplier effect comes from financing of food policy initiatives. For example, between 1991 and 1998, "the Toronto Food Policy Council, funded by the city at the rate of approximately \$220,000 a year, helped raise more than \$7 million dollars from other sources for community food projects"<sup>xii</sup>.

### **Recommendations**

Food Charters have a significant and integral role to play in celebrating, supporting and strengthening sustainable local food systems. Aligning with many municipal strategies and York Region's Vision 2051, the YRFC is a vehicle to assist in the development of inclusive, healthy, accessible and people-first communities, where a resilient natural environment and agriculture system supports biodiversity and healthy living.

It is recommended that York Region's municipalities and the Region of York endorse the York Region Food Charter.

By endorsing the Food Charter, signatories:

- Acknowledge York Region's food system is vital to our community's health, economic development, environmental sustainability, education and social justice;
- Understand the food system is a complex system with interconnected and interrelated priorities, and are committed to strengthening the food system through coordinated action for food-related programming.

---

<sup>i</sup> Xuereb, M., & Desjardins, E. (2005). *Towards a healthy community food system for Waterloo Region*. Waterloo: Region of Waterloo Public Health. (p.4)

<sup>ii</sup> York Region Workforce Planning Board. (2013). *2013 Local Labour Market Update*. York Region Workforce Planning Board.

<sup>iii</sup> Jennings, A., & Chislett, T. (2012). *Backgrounder on Institutional Procurement of Local Food*. Toronto: Sustain Ontario.

<sup>iv</sup> Canada, A. a.-F. (2010). *The Canadian Consumer: behaviour, attitudes and perceptions towards food products*. Retrieved from [http://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/statistics/food/canada\\_consumer\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/statistics/food/canada_consumer_report_en.pdf)

<sup>vv</sup> Jennings, A., & Chislett, T. (2012). *Backgrounder on Ecological Goods and Services*. Toronto: Sustain Ontario.

<sup>vi</sup> Eat Right Ontario. (2011). *Children's health - overweight and obesity*. Retrieved from <http://www.eatrightontario.ca/en/viewdocument.aspx?id=5>

<sup>vii</sup> Winne, M. (2013). *Ontario: the case for a provincial food policy council*. Toronto : Sustain Ontario. (p.2-3)

<sup>viii</sup> Government of Canada. (1998). *Canada's Action Plan for Food Security: in response to the World Food Summit plan of action*. Ottawa: Government of Canada.

<sup>ix</sup> York Region Food Network. (2013). *Food for Change: from charity to dignity*. Aurora: York Region Food Network.

<sup>x</sup> Somerset, S., Ball, R., Geissman, R., & Flett, M. (2005). School-based community gardens: re-establishing healthy relationships with food. *Journal of HEIA*, 25-33.

<sup>xi</sup> MacRae, R., & Donahue, K. (2013). *Municipal Food Policy Entrepreneurs: a preliminary analysis of how Canadian cities and regional districts are involved in food system change*.

\* Experienced representatives on this Committee may include: Farmers, processors, chefs, restaurateurs, community organizations, urban agriculture, municipal/region officials, academics, housing cooperatives, food distributors, school boards, early childhood centres, business leaders, etc.