

3

YORK REGION AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY LIAISON GROUP 2013 WORK PLAN

The Planning and Economic Development Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendation contained in the following report dated April 19, 2013 from the Executive Director, Corporate and Strategic Planning.

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Council receive this report for information.

2. PURPOSE

This report highlights the activities of the York Region Agricultural Advisory Liaison Group and their planned 2013 initiatives.

3. BACKGROUND

The York Region Agricultural Advisory Liaison Group (AALG) advises Regional Council on agricultural matters and assists the Region in its efforts to protect and promote agriculture in York Region

The York Region Agricultural Advisory Liaison Group has an important role in assisting York Region in agricultural matters. The Region formed the York Agricultural Advisory Liaison Group in 2001 and is similar to Agricultural Advisory Committees that have been set up in the Regions of Halton, Peel, and Durham. The AALG is supported by two York Region staff – one from the Economic Strategy Branch and one from the Long-Range Planning Branch.

The main goals of the Agricultural Advisory Liaison Group are:

- To assist York Region in its efforts to protect agricultural lands as a natural resource of importance to the economic viability of the Region.
- To support York Region's farmers and agricultural organizations as valuable contributors to the community and the economy of the Region.
- To promote healthy rural communities that contain living, working, and recreational opportunities, and that respect the natural environment and resources.

The Liaison Group may also invite individuals, interest groups, or organizations to appear at any meeting as a delegation or to submit/present information which will assist the Liaison Group in carrying out its mandate.

The Agricultural Advisory Liaison Group works in collaboration with the Greater Toronto Area – Agricultural Action Committee (GTA-AAC), which is a committee established to facilitate cooperation between Durham, Halton, Peel, York and Toronto on agricultural issues. The GTA-AAC leads the development of the Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Action Plan 2021 which was launched in 2012. This Action Plan provides a roadmap for protecting agricultural assets and advancing the economic impact of the agricultural and food processing sectors.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

At its meeting of February 12, 2013 the AALG determined the work plan for 2013. The work plan focuses on a number of issues, including raising awareness with the general public about agriculture in the Region and supporting the agricultural economy within the Region. The group's 2013 work plan includes the following:

- Promoting York Region Farm Fresh
- Integrating Agriculture into the Region's annual employment survey
- Developing business support for the agricultural community
- Identifying opportunities reducing barriers to agricultural economic development

Raising awareness of agriculture in the Region through York Region Farm Fresh

York Region Farm Fresh is an organization that is associated with the York AALG and a representative sits on the committee. The organization is focused on promoting local agricultural produce and encouraging residents to purchase food through on-farm sales and local farmers' markets.

In the past, York Region Farm Fresh has collaborated with the Region on publishing an annual map that highlights local farms and markets where residents can purchase local food. The map is distributed through a partnership with the York Region Media Group and local farmers' markets.

In 2013, the York AALG intends to continue working with York Region Media Group on publishing the annual map. As well a number of additional promotional tools to connect residents to local agriculture will be pursued. This includes the following:

- Online Map Application – an online and mobile map application highlighting local farms and markets with produce for sale will be launched to help residents navigate opportunities to purchase local food.
- York Region Pumpkin Pie Trail Tour – a fall tour will be hosted on Saturday, September 21, 2013 that will encourage residents to visit local farms and rural attractions in order to connect to local produce and learn about local agriculture.

Developing an understanding of the size and scale of the agricultural economy in York Region

One of the challenges facing the agricultural community in York Region is quantifying the size and scale of the sector. To date the Region's annual employment survey has not included farming or farm-based businesses. This has been due to the geographic limits imposed by the time frame of the survey. Census data has been used historically, but is limited to every five years.

Without these numbers, it is hard to quantify the number of people employed by the agricultural community and the scale of the economic impact the sector has within the Region.

In order to better quantify and determine employment levels within the agricultural community, the York AALG will be working with York Region staff in 2013 to develop a methodology for collecting this information in 2014.

Engaging the agricultural community with business support and resources

Historically the York Region Small Business Enterprise Centre has been focused on assisting both new and existing small businesses without an agricultural focus. However, recognizing that agricultural operations are also often small businesses and that increasingly agricultural operations are looking to add value to their existing operations, the York Region Small Business Enterprise Centre is working with the York AALG on engaging this community.

The goal of this collaboration is to promote the resources that are available to the agricultural community through the York Region Small Business Enterprise Centre, as well as identify other important resources that could be made available through other partners, such as the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food.

A number of initial opportunities that leverage existing York Small Business Enterprise Centre's skill sets such as, business planning, cash flow analysis and marketing assistance, have already been identified as resources that some within the agricultural community could benefit from. The goal now is to better engage this community through partnerships with the York Federation of Agriculture and others to promote these services.

Understanding, educating and addressing regulatory challenges faced by the agricultural community

As part of the Greater Toronto Area - Agricultural Action Committee's Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Action Plan 2021, the need to identify and address regulatory challenges that inhibit agricultural economic development was highlighted.

The goal of this recommendation was to not only influence policy at a provincial level in regards to agriculture, but also look to what regional and local municipalities could do from a regulatory standpoint to better meet the needs of the farming community.

This need to better understand regional and local regulatory impediments was also highlighted in the Business Retention and Expansion Strategies of King Township and the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville. In order to assist its municipal partners and leverage the work of the Greater Toronto Area Agricultural Advisory Committee, the York AALG will work with Regional staff, alongside staff from King Township and the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville to better understand these challenges and address, where possible, those regulatory challenges for the agricultural community.

Link to key Council-approved plans

The initiatives highlighted in this report directly supports the *2011 to 2015 Strategic Plan* under the 'Increase the Economic Vitality' section, and directly contributes to success measures around increasing employment opportunities for those living in York Region. They also support the policies identified in Chapter 6 – Agricultural and Rural Areas of the *York Region Official Plan – 2010*.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no budget implications arising from this report.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

The York AALG 2013 work plan identifies a number of initiatives that support and complement the goals and interests of the Region's municipal partners, including East Gwillimbury, Georgina, King Township, Markham and Whitchurch-Stouffville. Given these interests, staff from the Region's municipal partners have been or will be engaged in the various items identified in the work plan.

7. CONCLUSION

Agriculture is an important part of the Region's economy and plays an important role in both rural and urban areas within the Region. Through the York Agricultural Advisory Liaison Group, input and ideas are gathered to help the Region and its municipal partners support the rural economy.

Through a range of initiatives that includes connecting residents to local farmers, assisting farmers with business supports and engaging the agricultural community in addressing potential regulatory challenges, the York AALG aims to help raise awareness about and support the Region's agricultural economy.

For more information on this report, please contact Doug Lindeblom, Director, Economic Strategy at (905) 830-4444, Ext. 1503.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.