



## **Staff Report for Committee of the Whole Meeting**

**Date of Meeting:** June 18, 2025

**Report Number:** SRPBS.25.051

**Department:** Planning and Building Services

**Division:** Policy Planning

**Subject:** **SRPBS.25.051 – Local Food and Urban Agriculture in Richmond Hill**

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### **Purpose:**

The purpose of this staff report is to provide Council with information about the City's local food and urban agriculture initiatives and recommend Council endorsement of the York Region Food Charter Action Document.

### **Recommendation(s):**

- a) That staff report SRPBS.25.051 regarding Local Food and Urban Agriculture in Richmond Hill, be received;
- b) That the 2024 York Region Food Charter Action Document, attached as Attachment 1 to staff report SRPBS.25.051, be endorsed;
- c) That staff be directed to continue working with York Region Food Network to support local food access and production through the City's existing policy and programming.

### **Contact Person(s):**

- Myles O'Brien, Sustainability Coordinator, ext. 5464
- Ruth Rendon, Manager of Sustainability, ext. 2420
- Maria Flores, Director of Policy Planning, ext. 5438
- Gus Galanis, Commissioner of Planning and Building Services, ext. 2465

### **Report Approval:**

All reports are electronically reviewed and/or approved by the Division Director, Treasurer (as required), City Solicitor (as required), Commissioner, and City Manager. Details of the reports approval are attached.

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### Key Messages:

- Richmond Hill is committed to improving access to local food.
- Growing and consuming local food offers numerous health, environmental, and economic benefits to the Richmond Hill community.
- The City's local food goals align with related initiatives at the regional, provincial, and international scale.
- Richmond Hill can continue to demonstrate leadership and amplify its capacity and impact by continuing to work with partners to pursue shared goals around local food.
- Based on shared sustainability and climate objectives, it is recommended that Richmond Hill endorse the York Region Food Charter Action Document.

### Background:

“Local food” generally refers to food that is grown or produced close to where it is consumed. Local food production and consumption supports the three pillars of sustainability:

- economic (local business opportunities);
- social (improved health outcomes, community connections, affordability of nutritious food), and,
- environmental (soil health, pollinator support, reduced food transport).

By contrast, the global food system uses large-scale production in concentrated zones, often requiring long distance shipping to reach processors and consumer markets. These industrial processes can have negative environmental impacts while remaining disconnected from local communities.

“Urban agriculture” generally refers to methods for growing, producing, and providing local food in urban settings (e.g. community gardens, farmers markets, community-supported agriculture (CSAs), and vertical farming). These methods offer an alternative way for the Richmond Hill community to access local food, in light of continued intensification, challenges around affordability, and climate and environmental disruptions.

Richmond Hill's Environment Strategy (2022) identifies “Local Food and Pollinators” as one of its ten themes. The overall goal of improving access to local food is supported by three objectives:

1. Establish policies and initiatives that encourage urban gardening to enhance pollinator habitat and increase access to local food.
2. Protect, enhance and increase pollinator habitat and promote local food production on City land.
3. Improve access to local food and encourage pollinator protection through community partnerships, education and engagement.

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Improving access to local food supports the City's broader vision for complete, connected, and inclusive communities, and its legacy of environmental stewardship. This goal and related objectives and outcomes not only align with the City's high-level plans and sustainability mandate, but also with broader regional, provincial, and international initiatives. Richmond Hill is actively pursuing and realizing a number of local food and urban agriculture objectives and staff are currently exploring options for increasing public education and engagement around growing and consuming local food.

## **Discussion:**

### **Richmond Hill's Current Local Food Initiatives**

Richmond Hill and its community have supported the goals of Local Food and Urban Agriculture through a variety of actions as outlined below.

#### Community Gardens

Richmond Hill's Community Garden Program, delivered by Public Works Operations, is the most direct example of the City's municipal support for local food access. The Community Garden Policy (2017) establishes a process for residents to grow their own food in allotment-style plots or local groups to set up collective gardens on City land. Since launching, the program has more than doubled the number of community gardeners in Richmond Hill. Six of the eight gardens generate produce that is donated to food banks and families in need; they all offer social and educational opportunities across generations and cultures.

In 2025, staff in PWO will again expand community gardening in Richmond Hill, with three projects underway. In addition, the division is working with partners to create five new Indigenous medicine gardens at prominent City facilities and parks, to provide space for growing native medicinal plants and inspire community dialogue and learning.

#### Community Outreach and Education

Public Works Operations also works with partners such as the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), Richmond Hill Horticultural Society, and Lake Simcoe South Master Gardeners to provide food-growing guidance and education through workshops, webinars, and public events. Educational initiatives are often tied to existing programs, such as Healthy Yards, Richmond Hill Blooms, Pollinator programming and Earth Day/Month. The City supplements these efforts with applicable print, web and social media content throughout the year, as well as social events such as the RH Blooms Garden Social and community garden orientations.

2025 initiatives include educational signage at a community garden, a video series about food gardening (with the Kids Right to Know organization), promotion of Ontario's Local Food Week (June 2-8), and a public engagement session (June 19) as part of the Mayor's Sustainability Speaker Series.

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### Local Food Initiatives Led by Others

Beyond community gardens, the Richmond Hill community can participate in various other local food initiatives, including:

- farmers markets at Hillcrest Mall, Toronto Waldorf School, and Light on the Hill Community Church;
- Fresh Food Markets run by York Region Food Network;
- Circling Hawk Farm (honey and mead) and York Region's Farm Fresh program;
- seed sharing events; and,
- emerging vertical farming operations.

The TRCA is also exploring urban farming opportunities on TRCA-owned lands in Richmond Hill.

### **Richmond Hill's Policy and Program Alignment on Local Food and Urban Agriculture**

Richmond Hill's corporate plans and strategies have consistently supported the goals of local food and urban agriculture. In this regard, Richmond Hill's **Strategic Plan** (2024-2027) prioritizes the health of the City's population and the natural environment through Pillar 1: Growing a Livable, Sustainable Community. Local food provides a common, equitable platform for pursuing this priority. The 2022 **Environment Strategy's** local food objectives build on the City's foundations in sustainable development, with action items that promote urban agriculture, community engagement, food security, and partnerships.

From a land use planning perspective, the City's **Official Plan Update** recognizes the suitability of local food and urban agriculture in Richmond Hill's urban context. The 2021 Key Directions Report includes several related actions in the Built Form, Employment, and Emerging Trends and Innovation sections. Consistent with the Provincial Planning Statement, proposed changes to Official Plan policies expand the City's support for local agriculture by defining "Urban Agriculture", and establishing "Agricultural System" and "Prime Agricultural Area" as protected land uses, permitting on-farm diversified uses, and facilitating urban agriculture in settlement areas. Furthermore, Richmond Hill's **Sustainability Metrics Program** (green development standards) outlines an option for proposed developments to include Dedicated Fruit/Vegetable Garden Space "to promote locally grown food, improve physical and mental wellbeing, and encourage social interaction".

As noted previously, Richmond Hill's initiatives also align with broader global and regional initiatives. In 2024, Richmond Hill entered partnerships with United Nations (UN) University – INWEH and the Urban Economy Forum to pursue **UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** applicable to the City. Richmond Hill's local food and urban agriculture goals and actions are closely aligned with SDG No. 2: "End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture".

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At the regional level, **York Region's Agriculture and Agri-Food Sector Strategy 2024-2027** recognizes the economic importance of food growing and production within the region. It provides a framework for urbanizing municipalities like Richmond Hill to transition from primary agriculture to other forms of food production that leverage community connections and business innovation. Several of its regional actions have relevance for the City's local sustainability focus, and reflect work already underway, as follows:

- explore opportunities to enable urban agriculture in York Region by reviewing existing policies and sharing best practices;
- support and promote locally grown food and agriculture products made in York Region;
- support the York Region Food Council activities for enhanced coordination, alignment and collaboration of the Regional initiatives, including supporting the development of the York Region Food Charter;
- generate awareness and promote climate change and circular economy programs through success stories; and
- coordinate and collaborate on agriculture and agri-food programming across York Region and nine local cities and towns.

### **Richmond Hill's Participation with York Region Food Network**

York Region Food Network (YRFN) is a charitable organization working to ensure people across York Region have access to healthy food. YRFN partners with community groups, organizations, and government to provide services, programs, and education to support local food security.

Richmond Hill staff are currently members of YRFN's Food Council and Community Garden Network. This participation aligns with internal policies and programs, and supports actions in York Region's Agriculture and Agri-Food Sector Strategy. The Food Council is made up of representatives from York Region and its lower tier municipalities, educational institutions, the farming community, and more. The Food Council produced an updated **York Region Food Charter** which provides guidance for food-related policies and action based on the following six values:

1. Equity, Social Justice and Food Security
2. Health and Well-Being
3. Local Agri-Food Sector
4. Environmental Stewardship
5. Knowledge and Sharing
6. Culture and Community

The York Region **Food Charter Action Document** (refer to Attachment 1) proposes actions that the Food Council, working groups, municipalities, businesses, and institutions can take to support each value. The following actions are aligned with

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Richmond Hill's local food, urban agriculture, and sustainability priorities and reflect work that is already underway (such as the Community Garden Program):

- create and support policies that preserve agricultural land, farming, natural harvesting areas, and local food production;
- increase community access to physical spaces for growing and cooking, food training, and connections;
- implement municipal policies, standards, and processes to promote and establish community gardens;
- work with First Nations leadership to bridge western and Indigenous knowledge on food and land through events and initiatives;
- establish lending libraries for kitchen equipment and garden tools and promote existing initiatives;
- promote seed preservation and plant/seed exchanges;
- host events with and for youth to learn about the food system; and
- host events and workshops celebrating cultural food and promoting cross-cultural exchange.

Endorsement of the Food Charter Action Document does not commit Richmond Hill to adopting all of its priorities or to implementing all the actions. Rather, it signals the City's support for and commitment to a region-wide collaborative approach for creating a healthy and just food system. Richmond Hill can continue to work with the York Region Food Council on actions that fall within the City's municipal scope and authority.

### Next Steps

Should Council endorse York Region Food Council's Food Charter Action Document, staff will continue to work with YRFN, York Region Food Council, and other partner organizations to explore ways Richmond Hill can support the actions identified in the previous section.

More broadly, staff will continue research on viable urban agriculture opportunities and discussions with aligned groups and organizations (such as representatives of the Plant-Based Treaty, a global effort to create sustainable, low-carbon food systems) on ways to support local food, urban agriculture, and sustainability goals common to Richmond Hill and related community, regional, provincial, and international initiatives.

Staff will also provide Council with updates on local food initiatives through the the annual Environment Strategy progress report.

### Financial Implications:

There are no direct financial implications resulting from this staff report. As staff work to identify needs and opportunities related to the City's local food goals, new financial

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implications may arise and will be brought forward through the operating and capital budget process as required.

### **Relationship to Strategic Plan 2024-2027:**

Local food and urban agriculture relate to Strategic Plan Pillar 1: Growing a Livable, Sustainable Community, specifically through their impact on quality of life, community connection and resiliency (1.b), complete communities (1.d) climate action (2.a), and environmental protection (2.c).

### **Attachments:**

The following attached documents may include scanned images of appendixes, maps and photographs. All attachments have been reviewed and made accessible. If you require an alternative format please call the contact person listed in this document.

- Attachment 1: York Region Food Charter Action Document

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### Report Approval Details

Document Title:	SRPBS.25.051 - Local Food and Urban Agriculture in Richmond Hill.docx
Attachments:	- SRPBS.25.051 Attachment 1 York Region Food Charter Action Document - AODA.pdf
Final Approval Date:	May 22, 2025

This report and all of its attachments were approved and signed as outlined below:

**Maria Flores - May 22, 2025 - 10:35 AM**

**Gus Galanis - May 22, 2025 - 10:37 AM**

**Darlene Joslin - May 22, 2025 - 1:05 PM**