

Halton's farms not on list of Region's suppliers

By Tim Foran
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Halton Region will bring its food purchases closer to home, but not quite from its own backyard.

The municipality has announced it plans to buy a minimum of 10 per cent of the food for its cafeteria from Ontario farms certified as sustainable, with that percentage scaling up to 25 per cent in future years, if possible.

A non-profit agency in Toronto, Local Food Plus, will provide the sustainably-grown food from its list of certified farmers and processors, the Region stated in a recent press release.

However, none of the suppliers certified by LFP are located in Halton.

Lorenz Eppinger, owner of Greenfields Organic Farm in Campbellville, described it as "a sad state" that suitable local farmers can't be identified by Halton except through an agency like LFP.

He said that's probably due to the fact the Region doesn't buy its own food but out-sources food services to a contractor.

Other local farmers, however, described Halton's decision to purchase provincially-grown food as a step in the right direction.

"It's something the Halton Agricultural Advisory Committee (HAAC) has been asking for for a while, so the fact that it's happening is great," said HAAC member and Campbellville farmer Peter Lambrick.

"Whether or not those farmers are specifically in Halton — it would be nice if they were — but the fact that it is Ontario produce instead of stuff that is coming in from offshore, be that the southern (United) States or Chile or other countries, we feel we're still helping the situation of local farmers."

Paul Bousfield, who grows certified organic apples on his family's farm near Derry Road and Bell School Line, said the Region's decision is a good start. "It does help when you start to have the institutional (sector) look at buying locally grown (food)."

Bousfield said he has been thinking about becoming certified as sustainable by Local Food Plus, which would then open the door to his farm becoming a supplier to Halton.

That's the attitude LFP is hoping for from Halton farmers, said Lori Stahlbrand, LFP's

president. "It's kind of chicken and egg. Halton (Region) starting to work with us is going to, I hope, be a way to get more Halton farmers on board."

LFP certifies Ontario farmers and processors as sustainable based on various criteria, including reduced pesticide use, safe and fair labour conditions, humane care for livestock, biodiversity, and on-farm energy use. After certifying interested farmers, the agency then links them to a market of food service contractors, restaurants and grocery stores interested in buying locally grown, sustainable foods.

The Region said its agreement with LFP would support Ontario's farm economy while reducing greenhouse gas emissions. As part of the agreement, the municipality will require its contractor to buy 10 per cent of the food for the Region's cafeteria from suppliers on LFP's list. The municipality has pledged to increase that minimum to 25 per cent over the next three years, subject to seasonal availability and demand for the food.

The Region won't have to pay its food services contractor, Lewisfoods of Burlington, anything extra due to the requirement it buy food from LFP farmers, said David Trevisani, Halton's director of financial and purchasing services. "This may be reviewed in future reports if economic factors and staff's continued support, through their purchase of their meals in our cafeteria, changes substantially."

Gross sales in Halton's cafeteria average about \$500,000 annually but that includes vending machine and beverage sales, said David Trevisani, the Region's director of financial and purchasing services. The LFP agreement only affects cafeteria food.

The Region doesn't have a buy-local policy, instead focusing on getting the lowest cost. However, one of the goals of its purchasing bylaw is to encourage purchases that preserve the natural environment.

"To this end, suppliers may be selected to supply goods made by methods resulting in the least damage to the environment," states a Regional presentation explaining the municipality's purchasing policies.

If that's the case, the Region could have chosen to buy food from completely organic farmers, said Eppinger.

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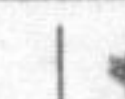
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