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FOOD: Consumers 'crying for more local produce'



SUN-TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

Whitchurch-Stouffville is now part of a northern York Region Ontario Food Cluster to attract new and expanding international agricultural food businesses to the area.

Towns teaming up to boost farming

BY TERESA LATCHFORD
tlatchford@yrmg.com

Being an Ontario Food Cluster community could mean more jobs and stronger economies in York Region's northern six municipalities.

Aurora, East Gwillimbury, King, Newmarket, Georgina and Whitchurch-Stouffville have become Ontario Food Cluster communities to attract new and expanding international agricultural food businesses under the umbrella of the Greater Toronto Marketing Alliance.

"If we bring in a food-processing company that is packing corn or beets, not only would they hire from the area, but also be seeking the raw materials locally," alliance vice-president of business development Gerry Pisarzowski said.

Having more clients locally would be a dream come true for farmers. Holland Marsh Growers Association executive director Jamie Reaume said, noting the marsh would be able to meet increased demand.

It would mean lower shipping costs for farmers, a benefit considering the rising cost of fuel, as well as a reduced eco footprint.

"We could give Ontario consumers what they are crying for — local products," he said.

The cluster program is a collaborative approach, bringing together communities from the GTA, Guelph, Waterloo as well as the provincial and federal governments through the Ontario Agriculture Ministry and federal Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

The collaborative approach is much like the model used for technology sector initiatives, Mr. Pisarzowski said, adding he hopes it is as successful for the food industry.

He couldn't predict the outcome of the program, but hopes to have a better feel for the potential success after conferences later this year.

While the focus of the alliance is to encourage local investment, the overall goal is to work toward a dominance in the international market as the province already has 32 per cent of Canada's supermarket, convenience and specialty food store market share, more than any other Canadian province.

The province's expanding agricultural food cluster already includes internationally focused companies such as General Mills Canada, Heinz, Maple Leaf, Kellogg, Saputo, Dare Foods and Schneider Foods.

For more information, visit ontariofoodcluster.com