

TOWN TOUTS HOMEGROWN EATS

Markham becomes first Canadian municipality to adopt local food procurement practices

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There's an ancient proverb suggesting society is only three meals from anarchy.

We're also reminded by a public health study that suggests a Canadian-United States border closing would leave the GTA with only three days of food.

"That speaks to our need to invest in the local economy and to ensure food security," Markham Councillor Erin Shapero said following an announcement Markham is the first Canadian municipality to adopt Local Food Plus procurement practices.

Ms Shapero was instrumental in the town's partnership with Local Food Plus, a non-profit provincial organization bringing farmers and

consumers to the table to share in the benefits of environmentally and socially responsible food production.

With the assistance of Local Food Plus, Markham will ensure a minimum of 10 per cent of its material and produce comes from Local Food Plus-certified Ontario farmers, she said. The agreement, valid until 2013, has a goal to increase local supplies 5 per cent annually.

The initiative, the Ward 2 councillor said, helps support Ontario's farm economy, addresses climate change, reduces greenhouse gases and pesticide use and promotes environmentally responsible purchasing.

Local Food Plus certification requires farmers to adhere to strict guidelines representing significant progress in the transition to sustainable development practices.

"This is great news for our farmers and residents," she said. "Residents are looking for the municipality for leadership toward keeping our farms viable, to have food security. We've always had plans for housing, schools and hospitals. Now we have a food component."

Mayor Frank Scarpitti said the environment has been identified as one of

Markham's six strategic priorities and a comprehensive Green Print is being developed that will continue efforts to protect air, land, water, vegetation, wildlife and other living species.

"Markham continues to lead the way on environmental sustainability," he said in a statement.

Local Food Plus founder and president Lori Stahlbrand applauds the town's vision. "We're very supportive of

the green belt and Markham's in the green belt," she said.

Ms Stahlbrand, who incorporated the organization in 2005, works expressly with farmers who adhere to certified standards. "Our mandate is to make farming viable and make sure farmers make a living by getting a fair price," she said. "Our certification is all about using environmentally and socially sustainable practices. We invite all farmers to apply."

Ms Stahlbrand concurs there's a food shortage risk. "It's an issue of food security in every sense of the word. We need food now and in the future and it's so important we support and save our agricultural lands."

Ms Shapero said the program will be used in all municipal food services, including those supplying the civic centre and recreation and community centres.

"We're optimistic other municipal jurisdictions and businesses will reduce their environmental footprint through similar programs," she said.

In a related program, Markham has introduced a zero waste initiative across its facilities to reduce the environmental impact and costs associated with waste landfills, Ms Shapero said.

Markham's food and catering services and all special events will introduce bio-degradable cutlery, 100 per cent recycled paper products, water jugs and glasses instead of plastic water bottles, elimination of polystyrene food ware and transfer of all food scraps to an organic recycling program.

Markham's municipal waste diversion level of 70 per cent is the highest in Ontario and third highest in Canada and is targeting 75 per cent in 2008.

