

Food and Agriculture Economic Development Forum: Outcomes and Action Plan



May 2019

A report on the outcomes of the Food and Agriculture Economic Development Forum, prepared for Harvest Haliburton by Melissa Johnston MA, through the generosity of the Haliburton County Development Corporation.

All event photos were generously provided by Stephen Dow.



Together Creating a
Sustainable Food System
for our Community



Executive Summary

On May 5th, 2019, Harvest Haliburton hosted a Food and Agriculture Economic Development Forum. The event was designed to bring together community stakeholders from all corners of the food sector to discuss the local food system and identify strategies to help it thrive. Participants learned about existing food- and agriculture-based businesses, organizations, and initiatives and they discussed how to expand, support, and advance the local food system. Through the development of an action plan, Forum attendees articulated their priorities for how they would like to see Haliburton County's food and agriculture sector flourish.

The event brought together stakeholders from all areas of the food and agriculture sector, including producers, processors, retailers, restaurateurs, as well as local economic development experts and decision-makers. The event featured 19 presenters, 6 facilitators and approximately 75 participants. The day was designed with several broad goals in mind: to facilitate interactive learning and information-sharing regarding past food and agriculture research, to highlight current capacity-building projects, and to strengthen the potential for future action steps. The idea was to provide the opportunity for those working in diverse segments of the food system to learn about each other's work and goals, as well as to glean from these stakeholders a solid plan for continued collaboration to help realize those goals.

The following report provides a look at the outcomes from the afternoon discussion groups, focusing in particular on the opportunities that are unique to Haliburton County's food system, and the prioritized action steps identified by the Forum participants.

1. Introduction

Harvest Haliburton (HH) was formed in 2008, under the name of the Haliburton Highlands Local Food Coalition. This was a grassroots committee dedicated to raising awareness about the local food movement. In 2011, the committee began operating as part of the Haliburton County Community Cooperative, with the mandate to support the creation of a sustainable food system for Haliburton County.

HH is working to create a positive, collaborative environment for local food in a community that does not have a single acre of prime agricultural land, and a sector that has often faced obstacles and fragmentation.

In an effort to move Haliburton County’s local food system development forward, Harvest Haliburton began planning an event that would bring together stakeholders from all areas of the food and agriculture sector, including producers, processors, retailers, restaurateurs, as well as local economic development experts and decision-makers. This event, entitled Food and Agriculture Economic Development Forum, took place on March 5th, 2019 and featured 19 presenters, 6 facilitators and approximately 75 participants.

2. Who Attended?

The Forum was very well-attended and brought together a variety of stakeholders from the food, agriculture and economic development sectors. The attendees included primary producers, politicians, economic development officers, municipal staff and policy-makers, educators, researchers, retailers, market vendors, restaurateurs, concerned citizens, and students.

Many of the attendees represented organizations that had also provided monetary, or in-kind support for the event. The logos of these supporting organizations are shown here.



3. Outcomes of the Breakout Group Discussions

This section will examine the results of the group discussions that took place over the course of the afternoon. The assets, opportunities, and challenges outlined by each

group are compiled and considered under a number of categories. The prioritized goals and action steps are then outlined in turn.



4. Haliburton County Community Opportunities

The opportunities that exist in the County are nearly limitless. The list below is by no means exhaustive, but it represents some of the blue-sky thinking that resulted from the Breakout Sessions at the Forum. From this list, the prioritized goals were identified and will be outlined in detail in sections 5 and 6 below.

- *Branding:*
Haliburton County has the opportunity to develop and enhance the branding around the taste of the region. Because the area is already known for its tourist attractions and outdoor adventure experiences, adding food to the mix is a natural fit. Branding

would include highlighting and showcasing the crops and products that are particularly successful in HC, including garlic, maple syrup, tomatoes, wild leeks, dairy, meat, etc. Branding also means collecting and promoting the food narratives that connect people and place to the food being offered and eaten.

- *Policy Change:*
New developments in food production, distribution, and consumption are leading political leaders to reconsider how outdated policies may be hindering the capacity for local food systems to thrive. Because people are increasingly interested in small- and micro-scale food production on marginal or urban land, and using terms like “homestead” and “market garden” as opposed to “farm”, the language around food in our official plans needs to adjust accordingly. Haliburton County’s decision-makers are particularly open to working with food groups to facilitate greater local food production and access. This means that the time is right to encourage policy review and changes to bylaws that have previously created unnecessary barriers to food production.
- *Infrastructure:*
In order to build community capacity around local food production and availability, Haliburton County could use some new infrastructure. There is great interest in installing a centralized, shared cold storage facility, as temperature control is a significant component in any food business that uses fresh, perishable ingredients or value-added products that require refrigeration or freezing. While there is ample space in the community for food processing in commercial kitchens, the limiting factor on quantity is often the lack of suitable temperature-controlled storage space. Other infrastructure components that could greatly benefit the community’s access to local food include an egg-grading station and a local or mobile abattoir.
- *Education and Research:*
New opportunities to expand education and research on the topics of agriculture and food system sustainability abound in Haliburton County. However, a foundation of prior research already exists. One goal of the Forum was to ensure that community members are aware of the work that has been done so that subsequent research can build upon what is already known. Prior research has explored topics such as food access, production and consumption patterns and gaps, the impacts of policy and planning on local food production, culinary tourism opportunities and barriers, pest control in garlic production, mobile abattoirs and backyard hens, and local food infrastructure status and opportunities. Possible future research topics articulated in the breakout sessions included exploration of zoning bylaws that hinder small-scale food production, comprehensive asset mapping and assessment, research into alternative and progressive agricultural practices suitable for the region, and creation of a land inventory to assess agricultural potential. Forum attendees also highlighted opportunities for school programs to incorporate agriculture, food tourism, processing, and preparation into their curricula and co-ops. As well, some community members would like to see a learning centre dedicated to food and agriculture, which could include a library of resource material and local research.

- Awareness Raising:*

The issues of agriculture and food system sustainability are in constant flux and require ongoing awareness-raising efforts to ensure that community members understand the role they play. Based on the discussions during the breakout session, there is significant interest in developing ongoing access to information on this topic. This could include creating a permanent position for a coordinator and event planner whose role would be to facilitate the promotion and execution of events and initiatives around local food in the County. It could also include the creation of an agricultural advisory committee through which farmers and food business operators could voice their concerns and stay abreast of policies and developments that impact their livelihoods. Harvest Haliburton has taken on some of this work already, and could consider how their advisory role might be solidified going forward. As well, there is ample evidence that Haliburton County would benefit from a user-friendly online food information map or hub. This would allow residents and visitors to easily locate and access locally produced food at the farm gate, in restaurants and retail outlets, or at events and tourist experiences that feature local foods.
- Niche Markets:*

Because Haliburton County is not generally considered an agricultural region, there are opportunities to emphasize the niche products and markets that do thrive in this area. Products like garlic, maple syrup and wild edibles already enjoy the limelight, and there are many other niche markets that could be explored. One such market that has recently introduced its potential is marijuana tourism. The market for cannabis infused edibles is exploding, and Haliburton County may consider getting in on the ground floor.
- Progressive Production Practices:*

With climate change on the minds of many who work on or with the land, the time is right to consider how Haliburton County can contribute to climate justice. Food production in non-agricultural regions is often innovative and progressive by necessity. Producers in the County have the opportunity to explore alternative farming practices that mitigate climate change, increase their productivity, and amplify the narrative around food system sustainability. One such alternative practice that was highlighted during the breakout session was aquaponics. This type of food production combines the raising of aquatic animals with plant production in a closed system whereby the aquatic waste provides nutrients for the plants. This, and other types of agroecological farming are worth exploring as Haliburton County further develops the sustainability of its food system.
- Relationships:*

Haliburton County should take advantage of every opportunity to build relationships between food producers and eaters. Research on farmers' market customers, shows that they value these retail outlets as much for the opportunities to interact with local farmers and ask questions about their food, as for access to the food itself.

Any opportunity to bridge the gap between producers and consumers is a great way to cement these relationships and strengthen the food system. As well, seeking out more opportunities for collaboration and partnership between food-related stakeholders and organizations will help to build the community capacity to make meaningful change and improvements to the food system. Exploring the potential for land “match-making” between land-owners and prospective new farmers is another relationship-building opportunity to consider.

- *Events/Initiatives:*

There are limitless opportunities for the County to expand existing annual and seasonal events, and develop new food experiences and initiatives. There is already significant enthusiasm around the annual Garlic and Maple Festivals and there are opportunities to expand the promotional reach and programming of these events. Prior to the Garlic Festival, local restaurants could help cross-promote by including and showcasing local garlic dishes on their menus. Maple-Fest could expand beyond Wilberforce and become a County-wide event with maple tastings and restaurant partnerships as well. Other suggested events and activities that arose during the breakout session include:

- farm tours culminating in community meals featuring the farms’ products
- food demonstrations at the farmers’ markets
- more artisanal food-making events (e.g. cheese, sausages, bread) featuring local ingredients
- an annual (or seasonal) community meal to help raise awareness about food issues
- expand the annual applesauce project (applesauce made from surplus apples on public and private land and distributed by SIRCH and Meals on Wheels) into a festival celebrating food security and food literacy initiatives
- put a new spin on familiar ingredients (e.g. a tomato-tasting event, featuring local tomatoes)
- research highly successful food events in other communities (e.g. Winterlicious and Summerlicious in Toronto, the Cranberry Festival in Bala) and determine how they can be adapted to Haliburton County

5. Action Plan

The intended outcome from the Forum was to develop a prioritized action plan and series of goals, based on the assets, opportunities and challenges discussed in the breakout sessions. These would take into consideration the feasibility, timing and necessary steps to carry out the goals, the resources required, and the stakeholders who should be involved or, in some cases, take the lead on moving these goals forward. Due to the breadth of the topics and the limited time in which to discuss them, many of the groups did not have the chance to move beyond listing the goals.

The goals align directly with the opportunities outlined above (section 4) and are listed below in association with each group title and topic, along with any relevant stakeholders whose involvement is deemed essential.

Breakout Group #1 – Selling and Branding Local Food

Goal: Create the brand for local food in Haliburton County

- develop a strong social media presence
- a cohesive campaign to promote the Taste of Haliburton County

Goal: Explore co-operative distribution models

- determine the distribution needs within the County
- connect all aspects of the food sector and its activities (events, meet-ups, education, etc.)

Goal: Create an online food hub or similar tool

- to help educate the public and connect them with food producers/entrepreneurs
- to make it easy to find local food anywhere in the County
- to help disseminate important information (e.g. regulatory updates, agricultural resources, economic development initiatives, etc.)

Goal: Explore the feasibility of complimentary infrastructure

- egg-grading station
- mobile abattoir

Stakeholders listed: an Agricultural Economic Development Officer, the Farmers' Association.

Breakout Group #2 – Food Tourism

Goal: Build awareness of food tourism assets

- familiarization tours
- expand promotional efforts
- find opportunities to develop food tourism story-telling
- create the conclusive guide to Haliburton County Food
- secure long-term funding for a County food coordinator

Goal: Incorporate and enhance the role of food and agriculture in existing and new events, festivals and experiences in the County

- look to successful local and provincial events and experiences (e.g. Cranberry Fest, Summerlicious, Winterlicious) for inspiration
- upgrade festival infrastructure (i.e. hydro, shelters, etc.)
- find opportunities to collaborate between existing groups and events (e.g. have farmers' market vendors participate in more events)

Stakeholders listed: the Culinary Tourism Taskforce, Gena Robertson at SIRCH.

The resources and assets listed to help move the above goals forward included: local media, tourism stakeholders, Chamber of Commerce, BIA, Algonquin Gateway Business Association and service clubs.

Breakout Group #3 – Municipal Planning and Policy

Goal: Review and address zoning and land use bylaws that affect local food production

- invite broad public participation in reviewing bylaws
- consider new definitions of permitted land use (e.g. homesteader, market gardener, etc.)
- Harvest Haliburton to conduct a comprehensive review of bylaws
- develop proactive zoning bylaws to enable agricultural infrastructure (i.e. processing, building, etc.)
- follow up with planners after their regular meetings

Goal: Develop a land inventory for the County

- using Municipal Property Assessment Corporation data as a baseline, develop an accurate map of the productive land in the County

Goal: Create an Agricultural Advisory Committee

- decide what this looks like (i.e. municipal or county level?)
- develop a Terms of Reference and mission statement

Stakeholders listed: the Farmers' Association, Harvest Haliburton, Food Tourism representatives, municipal planners, Environment Haliburton, U-Links, the Land Between, Trent University.

Breakout Group #4 – Agricultural Economic Development Committee or Officer

Goal: Foster the continued viability of food and agriculture in the County

- educate the public about local food issues and opportunities whenever possible at community events
- develop a comprehensive asset inventory

Goal: Promote sustainability from field to table

- provide education around soil health and best practices
- promote more green initiatives around food
- consider a County-wide currency for local spending

Goal: Prioritize quality of life and fairness

- prioritize a living wage for all those working in the food sector

Goal: Normalize local agriculture through communication

- tell the County's good-news food stories
- connect food producers to consumers and to a variety of retail outlets

Goal: Enhance community engagement

- develop a 'Buy Close By' initiative
- put local food on the radars of more community groups

The above group did not list any stakeholders during their discussion, but these actions could involve our local OMAFRA representative, members of the Farmers' Association, and local economic development officers.

Breakout Group #5 – Wild Card Topic (Climate Change and Food Security)

This group's topic was determined by Forum attendees themselves by gathering ideas about which issues they felt were important but not covered by the above four breakout groups. This group discussed the issues of climate change and food security as they pertain to Haliburton County's food system.

Goal: Reinforce progressive and conscious agriculture

- hold seasonal (3-4 times per year) community meals
- bring people together to celebrate food and its close ties to the land and the environment

Stakeholders listed: municipal food and agriculture advisory committees, Harvest Haliburton, one person working at the County level with economic development representatives from each of the municipalities.

6. Summary of the Action Plan

The intention of the Food and Agriculture Economic Development Forum was to organize the above goals into an action plan that could be put into motion following the event. The first step in this process will be to gather some of the key stakeholders in the community who are equipped to implement the next steps outlined in this report. With the generous support of the Haliburton County Development Corporation, Harvest Haliburton will be organizing and conducting a roundtable discussion with these stakeholders and will work with the actions and opportunities laid out above.

Based on the prioritized goals listed above, the following six projects and initiatives should be discussed and assessed for feasibility:

1) Develop the Taste of Haliburton County brand

This will include identifying the primary elements of HC's food system (i.e. crops, products, experiences, and businesses) and developing the tools to promote these assets. The discussion should cover:

- expanding the presence of food at existing events and festivals
- creating a "Buy Close By" mentality across the County
- gathering food-related good-news stories to promote,
- creating a consistent image around food in the region, through collaboration and greater communication among stakeholders

2) *Develop an information hub for local food and related resources*

This should allow the resident and visitor populations to easily find and access locally produced food in a number of different outlets (retail, restaurant, farm-gate, events, accommodations, etc.). This could include:

- a dedicated online food mapping tool that is well promoted and widely used
- an information hub that lists food-related resources and events
- a land inventory to help recruit new producers to the region or expand the opportunities for local producers looking for more growing space

3) *Review and adjust policies and regulations around local food production*

This will require that a comprehensive review of the current bylaws be undertaken to determine how local food production is impacted and/or hindered by these policies. Such a review would then identify the areas of policy change that could help support and promote the expansion of the local food system.

This discussion could cover:

- funding a consultant to conduct the aforementioned review
- the development of a land inventory to get a clear picture of how land is currently being used and the potential for expanded food production
- the policy implications of additional food system infrastructure (e.g. community cold-storage, egg-grading, mobile abattoirs, backyard hens, etc.)

4) *Explore the feasibility of a local food distribution model*

This will involve a review of existing models in other communities and determine their applicability to Haliburton County. This may also require developing a fully costed business case for a local food distribution enterprise.

5) *Create an Agricultural Economic Development Advisory Committee*

Some Forum attendees suggested that Harvest Haliburton is already fulfilling some of the roles of such a committee. A stakeholder roundtable could consider how an advisory committee might be formed with a more targeted mandate, or how Harvest Haliburton could take on this role more formally.

6) *Put climate change and food security at the forefront of all food-related initiatives*

As these are issues that touch on every aspect of the food system, it will be essential that climate change and food security remain high priority topics of discussion throughout the process of implementing this action plan.

HH's immediate next steps include contacting those participants and key stakeholders who expressed an interest in helping to carry the plan forward. We aim to bring these community members together to create an effective series of working groups with the intention of putting this plan into action. Readers of this report are also encouraged to

reach out to HH via our website or Facebook page to offer support and to express an interest in helping out.

www.harvesthaliburton.com
www.facebook.com/HarvestHaliburton/

The Food and Agriculture Economic Development Forum and its outcomes have proven that, while there is a great deal of work to be done to improve the local food system, the engagement and enthusiasm of the community is overwhelming. This engagement will be critical to the process of putting the above actions and priorities into motion. There is much work to be done, but we are all up to the challenge.