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Food Charter should be ?action oriented?: stakeholders

By Marni Walsh

Headwaters Food and Farming Alliance (HFFA) recently invited the community to participate in their Food Charter consultations at the Shelburne Public Library.

HFFA, a sub-group of Headwaters Communities in Action (HCIA, held four such meetings throughout the region over the last month in the hope of defining a Food Charter with ?a common vision for a healthy, fair, prosperous and sustainable food system in the Headwaters Region.?

HFFA reports several consultations in the past two years, with a repeated message for a need to develop a formal charter that is owned, valued and recognized by the community.

The Alliance met with individuals who represented ?health and wellbeing, social services and food access, economic development, environmental responsibility, food production, or culture.?

Individuals from these sectors were asked ?to share their perspectives and provide valuable insight into what the food charter should include and what strategic actions need to take place for the Headwaters Food System to thrive.?

Shirley Boxem, HCIA Lead, said about 25 participants attending the Shelburne consultations resulted ?in a fulsome and engaging session with all aspects of the food system represented, including a chef, small farmer, conventional farmer, food business owner, environmentalists, reps from social agencies (food access), councillors, and more.?

The response to the Charter was positive, she said, ?as long as it will mean something.? Participants urged it be ?action oriented, and also that it represents the interests and challenges of both types of farmers: small and large scale.?

?Most were highly appreciative of the opportunity to contribute towards a guiding document,? said Ms. Boxem, ?Some expressed desire for aspects to be recommended for policy, such as fewer barriers towards on-farm businesses.?

Goals for the consultations included getting a response from a cross-section of representation from the community, both from an interest perspective as well as geographically.

?We wanted business concerns to be balanced with environmental and wanted that everyone would feel their viewpoints were heard,? said Ms. Boxem. ?We think that everyone who attended felt heard.?

According to HCIA, the next step will be interviews with the only group not represented fully at the consultations: owners of restaurants, food businesses, and some chefs.

?Members of HFFA will be conducting these interviews over the next couple of weeks,? said Ms. Boxem. ?Once the charter is finalized, the HFFA will be taking it to Municipal Councils for endorsement, making it a public document for future decision-making and possible funding.?