

How to Stay Local: **G**rowing, **R**aising, **E**ating, **A**ccessible, and **T**hriving Local Food

It is ironic that some people living amongst some of the most productive agricultural land in the world are challenged to access healthy food, especially if they have limited transportation. Perhaps locally produced food is a means of mitigating some of that need.

- Al Lauzon, Gateway Chair of Rural Change & Development

Huron County faces an ironic situation in their local food landscape, and food accessibility: despite being one of the most agriculturally productive parts of Ontario, the issue of food insecurity in Huron County persists. Local food is becoming a growing enterprise across the province and presents a promising potential to meet the food needs of rural residents', thereby simultaneously reducing food insecurity and building vibrant local food systems. Additionally, local food offers benefits specific to the struggles created by the COVID-19 pandemic as it increases our county's food security, assists with economic recovery, and benefits individuals' health.

Gateway Centre of Excellence in Rural Health (CERH) has partnered with Libro Credit Union to explore how we can bolster Huron County's local food systems. Although it bears many benefits, there are numerous challenges associated with local production. This project aims to capture the unique experience of producers and consumers to support our local food economy. The tag-line, GREAT (Growing-, Raising-, Eating-, Accessible-, Thriving- Local Food), represents what we hope to achieve through this project — to promote people who grow local food; to promote people who raise local food; to increase the amount who eat local food; to ensure that we have accessible local food; and ultimately, to end up with thriving local food systems in Huron County.

Through acquisition of data and knowledge translation, this project has the potential to holistically benefit many members of the community. There are four interconnected areas that the project has the potential to impact: health, economy, community, and environment. Every additional dollar put into local food has a trickle down effect, thereby positively impacting the finances of individuals and businesses within our local community. Supporting the local food economy simultaneously contributes to the health and well-being of the individual and the environment. Local food offers access to a diverse collection of produce able to sustain a balanced and healthy diet. The environment is positively impacted by local food through reduced transportation and minimized food waste.

Throughout the project, we have been connecting with individuals directly involved in Huron County's local food systems on a daily basis. We are focusing the first stage of this project on connecting with producers, who are making a meaningful impact in our county. The second stage of the project will be more centered around the general public and their connection with local food. Information has been collected on current strengths and struggles experienced in Huron County's food production, to directly inform the action taken on this project. All of these efforts are being done to support the goals of this project - to create a knowledge translation strategy, promote local produce to consumers, and impact policy to improve the strength of our food systems.

Central to the missions of both Gateway and Libro is the desire to use our work to benefit others. We believe strong local food systems are paramount to improving our county's overall health, economic standing, sense of community, and environment. This shared philosophy of forces for good is what makes our partnership strong and effective. As Marty Rops, Libro Credit Union Regional Manager, Huron Perth, stated "the importance of ensuring access to fresh, healthy food for everyone can't be overstated and the fact that food insecurity continues to increase in our region is a challenge we need to find solutions for. We look forward to seeing the results of this study and new ideas on bridging the gap between our local food producers and those who need it."