

Municipalities have role to play in food security

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Healthy food not only builds healthy bodies, but also healthy local economies.

That was the premise behind the second Chatham-Kent Community Development Forum, which took place March 19 in council chambers.

Author and entrepreneur Gord Hume discussed the relationship food has with strong local economies and said of all governments, municipal government has the most direct tie to residents and can do the most to protect and promote locally grown and produced food.

Hume said the world is in the midst of a health crisis never before seen.

“Thirty per cent of kids going into kindergarten are overweight or obese,” he said, as are 61 per cent of adults and 33 per cent of older children.

And, he said, 93 per cent of Canadian children and 85 per cent of adults don’t get enough exercise to maintain good health, prompting the Canadian Heart and Stroke Association to announce in 2009 that, “for the first time in history, the younger generation is going to live a shorter lifespan than their parents.”

He said the problems are particularly acute for native Canadians who are dealing with diabetes rates four or five times that of the general public, which is already seeing rates skyrocket.

“We’re fat, we’re sick, we’re dying,” said Hume.

But, he said, there is hope.

“Municipalities are now the epicentre of the local food revolution,” he said.

In Chatham-Kent, as elsewhere, Hume said access to fresh, healthy food, improved food literacy and ensuring that farmers are fairly compensated are all issues to be grappled with.

He said that the biggest obstacle to good nutrition is poverty, and he said that 18 per cent of Chatham-Kent households are ‘food insecure.’

“If kids don’t get a healthy diet they have fewer opportunities to succeed,” he said, adding that 15 per cent of children in Chatham-Kent live in poverty.

Municipally speaking, Hume said the four pillars of sustainability are economic, cultural, environmental and social, and he said, “food is a huge partner in all of them.”

Locally, Hume said the economic impact of the agricultural industry is \$3 billion and 16,000 jobs.

He said Chatham-Kent is well-positioned to play a leading role in the creative economy that is emerging and said “cities have to offer something distinct and unique,” to succeed in the new economy.

Hume said there is a growing awareness of the importance of fresh, locally grown food and forging a link between local growers and local chefs and restaurants will help stimulate the local economy.

“Every community wants a strong, vibrant downtown core,” he said. “Food is one of the leading ways to encourage, develop and enhance that.”

He said the trend of supermarkets moving away from the areas where people live has had a profound impact on health, as well as accessibility of fresh food.

“People who lived in older neighbourhoods were leaner than people who live in more recent subdivisions,” he said, because shops and services could be reached by foot or bicycle and residents didn’t have to drive to buy groceries.

Hume said municipalities must “stop creating food deserts,” which will move stores selling food closer to where people live.

He said initiatives such as community gardens, ethnic markets and restaurants will also help stimulate the economy.

Hume also said Canadians need to tackle the fact that they waste approximately 40 per cent of the food they buy.

As part of the presentation, Dr. April Rietdyk, Chatham-Kent’s director of public health announced a Let’s Talk Food initiative, which will allow everyone in Chatham-Kent to weigh in on the food discussion through focus groups and a survey in the coming months.

Hume said it’s imperative that municipalities tackle food security and later, Coun. Leon Leclair, who is also a farmer, said many in the industry are predicting that by 2040, a global food crisis will strike.

“We have a highly integrated global system,” said Hume, “but it’s surprisingly fragile.”

Even today, he said, “experts believe cities generally have a three-day supply of food if all supplies were cut off.”

“Communities need to be creating their own food security plans,” he said, adding that in moving forward, the rural/urban divide must disappear.

“It’s a shared issue,” he said.