

# Local matchmakers

Distribution system offers locally grown food to public-sector buyers

The missing link in the “food chain” is being connected, thanks to one of the largest food-distributing companies in North America.

After all, why truck in food from hundreds of miles away—leaving a large carbon footprint and not-so-fresh food on our tables—when our own 1.8 million acres of Greenbelt-protected land are sustaining a \$5.4-billion farming and food-processing industry that is shipping many of its products out of province?

“Everybody wants to get in on the romance of the local food movement to support local growers and the local economy,” says Steve Crawford of Gordon Food Service (GFS), whose Ontario headquarters is in Milton. “The food is fresher. And [with] fuel costs being what they are, it makes sense to

distribute locally.” Food security is also an issue, he notes, as consumers appreciate the assurance that what they eat meets Canada’s strict food safety guidelines.

Until now, much of the problem has been in distribution. Smaller growers cannot sell directly to large public-sector buyers—such as hospitals, schools and municipal agencies—because of the need for an efficient delivery system, which is managed through major distributors like GFS. For instance, says Crawford, it’s inefficient to have an endless stream of trucks driving up to a hospital’s delivery dock to drop off individual orders for carrots or potatoes or beans.

The Greenbelt Fund and the Ontario Government have awarded a \$360,000 grant over two years to GFS to increase the amount of local food sales to 500 provincial public-

institution buyers by \$2 million. Led by Crawford, a three-member local product team has put a call out to all its suppliers to identify and document local food.

Already, Crawford’s team has identified some 900 products, which will be tagged as “local food” on their online ordering system. Public-sector buyers will then be able to choose to buy more of such local food and keep a computerized record of such purchases, thus documenting their success in meeting the province’s objective of increasing local food purchases. In turn, it’s initiatives like these that help the Ontario government and the public to fully appreciate the Greenbelt’s contribution to the provincial economy.

As well, GSF is working with The 100 Mile Market, which also receives Greenbelt funding to



KEVIN KELLY

**Steve Crawford heaves bags of carrots up to Josh Taylor to transport to the city. Distribution is the missing link between farmers and consumers.**

distribute the products of more than 160 Ontario farmers and coordinate deliveries to buyers in the public sector.

The provincial government would like to see a percentage of broader public-sector purchases

made locally, notes Crawford, and GFS is doing its part by matching local food suppliers with buyers.

“There’s that push coming,” he says. “We’re doing the legwork. And with our tagline, ‘Local made easy,’ we’re making it easier.”