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Small co-operative innovating northern Ontario's food distribution system

GUELPH ON, July 4, 2018 – After a short 5 years in business, the Cloverbelt Food Co-op has changed the face of local food distribution in the Northern region of Ontario.

Much of the rural communities in the North are geographically vast, preventing its residents from having access to healthy, fresh and locally-produced products. Cloverbelt, a small co-operative located in Dryden ON, whose mission is to strengthen food security and foster a thriving local food community, has solutions to combat this problem.

“The objective of the food co-op was to make local food more visible and accessible by offering products sourced entirely from this region,” notes Jennifer Springett, Cloverbelt’s president. But it’s much easier said than done. Adds Springett: “We’ve had to become innovative to find ways for food to reach many parts of the region.”

One such innovation is the development of their online farmer’s market and distribution service. The initiative was developed out of a need to provide access to more fresh foods produced by local farmers, and to find a more sustainable way to operate the local food box program in Dryden. By allowing consumers to select what local products they want to buy rather than getting a box of goods with items they may not use, it enables farmers to match their supply with demand.

The program was so well received in Dryden, that residents from other small communities – many of which don’t have access to a full grocery store - requested a similar program in their region. The online market recently expanded their transportation and distribution network to the Fort Francis, Atikokan and Red Lake areas, thanks to a partnership with Loudon Brother Wholesale.

“Rather than reinventing the wheel and replicating what we’re already doing, we found ways to expand and distribute food between communities. This gives consumers access to a greater variety of foods, while serving more communities,” says Springett.

In order to continue innovating, Cloverbelt is developing a Food Charter for the Kenora and Rainy River Districts, with the objective of encouraging community policy and commitment to support local food.

“Such a policy is necessary to align municipal level commitment with provincial objectives for increased Ontario food sales. It is also critical to ensuring continued support for local food in the North, and to overcome key barriers to growth in the agricultural sector,” says Springett.

Using a collaborative approach, consultations were held with the different municipalities in small, rural communities. The draft Charter, completed in March 2018, sets out a vision for local food supply in Northern Ontario, and is currently being circulated for final input.

“Cloverbelt is a prime example of how co-operative businesses address both social and economic challenges within the province, by finding innovative ways to collaboratively solve a need within a community or region,” says Erin Morgan, Executive Director of the Ontario Co-operative Association.

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Learn more about the Cloverbelt Food Co-op online at <https://www.cloverbeltlocalfoodcoop.com>

ABOUT THE ONTARIO CO-OPERATIVE ASSOCIATION (OCA)

Co-operatives are a different kind of business model that are driven by people, planet and profit. OCA supports, develops, educates and advocates for Ontario’s 1,500+ co-operative businesses. We exist to strengthen and unite the co-operative movement and we believe that co-operatives are the solution to creating stronger communities, which help to build a better world.

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