



April 2024

Economic and Community Development Committee
City Council and Councillor Alejandro Bravo
Toronto City Hall
100 Queen Street West
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

Expression of Support for Downsview Community Development and Action Plans

To Members of the Economic and Community Development Committee,

I am writing to you today to express **North York Harvest Food Bank's strong support of the Downsview Community Development and Actions Plans**. We have served the Downsview community for almost forty years and have participated in various forums and consultations to inform these plans. We are particularly encouraged to see that access to healthy and affordable food, including the support of food banks; access to affordable and appropriate long-term spaces for not-for-profit organizations; access to employment opportunities; and establishing an inclusive economy have all been prioritized.

We also desire to be a part of the implementation of these plans and have been in discussions with **Northcrest Developments** for several months to relocate our distribution centre and **establish a community hub as part of the redevelopment of the hangar district**. Along with our key partners the **Learning Enrichment Foundation**, a social enterprise that provides childcare and skills development programming and **BuildingUp**, a nonprofit social enterprise that provides people experiencing barriers to employment with pathways to careers in the trades, we envision this hub as a vital community asset with the capacity to support **food distribution for up to one million people across the GTA and beyond while generating up to 500 well-paying jobs in the construction, trades, warehousing and logistics sectors**.

As you are undoubtedly aware the City of Toronto is currently experiencing a crisis of affordability, poverty and food insecurity. In 2023 North York Harvest served over 300,000 people through a network of 38 agencies and programs. That is a record level of usage in our organization's history, and represents a 25% increase from the year prior, 92% since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Almost 76,000 of those food bank visits were in and around Downsview.**

This level of food insecurity should shock us all and is simply unsustainable.

We know that this cannot continue this way and that we must do things differently as an organization and a city. To that end, we have long championed **a holistic approach to supporting individuals** struggling with poverty alongside community-level strategies that **foster our local economy and generate wealth in neighbourhoods that have been historically marginalized**.

In addition to our charitable emergency work, we have built important partnerships in social enterprise and workforce development. We operate **foodreach.ca**, a purchasing portal that serves hundreds of organizations from Hamilton to Markham, allowing them to access wholesale pricing and lower their food purchasing costs.



Over the past year, through this enterprise, over **\$2 million dollars in food and related purchases were fulfilled in our community** rather than being diverted to for-profit companies outside of our local economy.

We have converted our distribution centre into a training platform for individuals looking for employment in warehousing and logistics, one of the only remaining industries in the GTA that is growing and that does not typically require a post-secondary education. We have recently finalized a partnership agreement with a private sector partner that provides our graduates with **full-time employment opportunities at living wages with health, dental and other benefits.**

These programs are tested and **proven interventions** that support people's immediate needs while producing long-term solutions to food insecurity at individual and community levels. But they are at significant risk. An underappreciated challenge for nonprofit organizations like ours is the **lack of affordable spaces** for our programming. The cost of real estate in this city is driving more people to food banks while also driving many food banks to close down or curtail their services. As a distribution hub, North York Harvest is feeling this pressure acutely, as our **current warehouse lease will expire in 2026.** Without a suitable replacement will simply will be unable to continue our operations.

It is with these concerns in mind that we **express support for the Downsview Community Development and Action Plans.**

This is a **once-in-a-lifetime opportunity** to build upon proven programs and partnerships with an innovative, purpose-built community asset at the onset of a major community revitalization project.

We urge the committee and all of City Council to endorse these plans so that we can continue our discussions with Northcrest Developments to bring this vision to fruition and address the priorities outlined in the plan.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ryan Noble', written over a horizontal line.

Ryan Noble
Executive Director