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The City of Toronto probably can't afford to buy local food for its long-term care homes, shelters and daycare facilities, say some members of the government management committee.

Work on a buy-local policy began under former Mayor David Miller, but supporters of Mayor Rob Ford made it clear they don't like it if it costs more.

"I think we should go out there and get the biggest bang for our buck," said Councillor Doug Ford. "Yes, everyone wants to support Ontario-based food growers, but sometimes it's just not realistic."

The committee split on whether it supports a having a buy-local policy. The 2-2 vote means the issue goes to city council with no recommendation.

The committee's unwillingness to support local agriculture "sends the wrong signal to our farming neighbours and to food processors here in Toronto who use local food," said Franz Hartmann, of the Toronto Environmental Alliance.

The committee was warned by a new member, Councillor John Filion, that dropping the buy-local policy is against the public's wishes.

"Public opinion is very much in favour of local food production, supporting local farmers, supporting local food producers," said Filion, a Miller ally. "This does that. It's a very modest proposal."

The city spends \$11 million a year on food for care homes, shelters and daycares. It contracts with food-service distributors who will buy local if it's cheaper, said Councillor Paul Ainslie, the committee's chair.

That may be difficult, Ainslie conceded, noting that last weekend Ontario strawberries were \$4 a pint versus \$2.50 for California-sourced berries.

Buying local would introduce children to the advantages of locally grown produce, said Betty Jean Crews, president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.

"It would be good for the consumer as well as the farmer," Crews said. "If you have a focus on that, then maybe children in daycare will get various grapes and apples as opposed to oranges and bananas."

It's not always best to go with the cheapest, added Crews, whose federation counts 38,000 Ontario farms in its membership.

"I think we need to look at why something is cheaper. What we produce in Ontario is not only healthy and safe, but we do it with labour standards that are better than any I know and environmental standards that are better than a lot of countries."

The low price advocates need to consider that local purchasing supports jobs on farms and in food processing, said Councillor Mike Layton, who has a large pork processing facility in his ward.

"The fact is it's jobs and it's commercial tax base in our city, and we need that for our city to survive," said Layton, who isn't on the committee but attended to speak to the food issue.

Ainslie suggested there are other ways the city can support farmers, for example by running more farmer's markets and opening more community bake ovens in parks.

Council will tackle the local food issue when it meets July 12 and 13.