

TORONTO STAFF REPORT

February 9, 2004

To: Board of Health
From: Dr. Sheela V. Basrur, Medical Officer of Health
Subject: Progress Report on the Toronto Food Policy Council

Purpose:

This report provides an update to the Board of Health on the activities of the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) during 2003.

Financial Implications:

There are no financial implications.

Recommendation:

It is recommended that this report be received for information.

Background:

On January 28, 2002, the Board of Health renewed the Toronto Food Policy Council's mandate, and appointed 24 members to the TFPC. The TFPC strives to fulfill the principles of the Toronto Food Charter by linking City staff and community partners to promote research, policy and programs that enhance healthy public policy, social equity, economic renewal and environmental sustainability in the food system. The TFPC membership includes two City Councillors, one citizen representative from the Board of Health, and 21 citizens from a wide range of food-related social agencies, environmental organizations, charitable or community groups, farm or food producer associations, and academic networks. The TFPC is accountable to the Board of Health. The TFPC's Project Co-ordinator is a Toronto Public Health employee.

This report updates the Board of Health on the activities and achievements of the Toronto Food Policy Council during 2003. Minutes detailing specific TFPC meetings are filed with the Secretary to the Board of Health, and are also available from the TFPC Secretary.

Comments:

TFPC staff and members played important roles in a variety of food security initiatives undertaken during 2003. The TFPC supports both the staff implementation team and the citizen reference group associated with the Food and Hunger Action Committee (FAHAC), which has overseen a renaissance of community engagement around food activities. The TFPC has responded energetically to the public thirst for research and information about food policies that can promote economic, environmental and social development, as well as personal and public health. The TFPC's unique and essential role in a comprehensive public health strategy toward food security continues to gain national and international profile, as members are invited to contribute to the development of other organizations and key policies, and as a number of North American cities actively explore the possibility of following Toronto's lead with food charters and food policy councils.

This report will feature activities contributing to public education, research and policy development, as well as activities of the Food Access Committee and the Food Production Committee.

1) Public Education

During 2003, the TFPC gained a reputation as one of the leading groups engaged in raising public awareness about the emerging field of food security.

a) Email Information Services on Local and Global Food Security Issues:

TFPCTidBytes, an e-mail information service launched in 2002, expanded considerably during 2003. The service sends out frequent reports on positive and do-able projects in local food systems, as well as postings on educational and employment opportunities in the food security field. Subscribers to this service doubled in number, to about 750 people, mostly university students and professors, journalists, public health and social agency staff. Thanks to other services that re-post items, TFPCTidBytes has a cost-free electronic reach to about 5,000 people. This wide circulation has enhanced the TFPC's ability to assist community-based food organizations.

Over the past year, the TFPC co-sponsored and helped publicize a number of food-related events held by organizations such as the historic Montgomery's Inn, FoodShare, Coalition for a Green Economy, AfriCan Food Basket, Scadding Court Community Centre, Evergreen, and the Aboriginal employment centre Miziwi Biik. In addition, the TFPC partnered with the University of Toronto Munk Centre, World Hunger Year (WHY) in New York, International Partners for Sustainable Agriculture in Washington, and the Community Food Security Coalition in Los Angeles to launch FoodNews, a twice-weekly email information service on global food security

policy. Managed by a University of Toronto graduate student and funded by the Munk Centre, this service supports the TFPC Project Co-ordinator's role as the North American representative on the International Planning Committee, which links citizen groups to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization. The service has quickly earned respect as a major forum for ongoing policy dialogue on global food issues. FoodNews has over 800 subscribers. Through cross-postings, it regularly reaches about 10,000 people around the world. Basing this e-mail information service in Toronto keeps local food security advocates in touch with best practices around the world. Toronto has already taken advantage of international best practices by borrowing freely from Brazil and Peru in its work on community kitchens and community farmers' markets.

b) Professional Training and University Courses in Food Security:

Despite intense enthusiasm from young people, few Canadian post-secondary or post-graduate schools offer courses, and none offer degrees, in fields of food security, urban agriculture or local food systems. The City's Food and Hunger Action Committee recognized this problem, and in 2001 asked the TFPC to promote programs for the present and next generation of public health professionals. Since then, New College at University of Toronto has responded with a senior undergraduate course on food security. Ryerson University's Continuing Education Division and the Ryerson Centre for Studies in Food Security launched a 6-course certificate program in food security, available through the Internet. The TFPC is represented on the advisory committee for the certificate program. Exploratory talks are also being held with faculty at York University.

c) Multi-Disciplinary Publications:

There seems to be an endless public appetite for reliable and trustworthy information on strategies that cover "the whole nine yards" of a responsible food system: from the protection of irreplaceable farmland and local farmers, to the safeguarding of healthy methods of food production and distribution, to support for vulnerable people who face physical or socio-economic barriers to accessing adequate amounts of culturally acceptable healthy foods, to the need for responsible management of food and packaging waste. This is what food system analysis is all about, and the TFPC is a respected leader in this multi-disciplinary field. In 2003, Alternatives Journal, sponsored by Waterloo University's environmental studies department, published a special "Food For All" issue, which gave high profile to the views and work of the TFPC.

d) Popular Presentations and Public Partnerships:

In 2003, the TFPC hosted public information tables at the Royal Agricultural Fair, the Guelph Organic Conference, and FoodShare's "Eat It, Grow It, Share It" events. By partnering with agencies and NGOs such as FoodShare, Stop Community Food Centre, Everdale Environmental Learning Centre, Oxfam and the Food Justice Coalition (the citizen reference group for the Food and Hunger Action Committee), the TFPC was able to make such opportunities available to groups that could not afford them on their own.

During 2003, the TFPC accepted 30 invitations to deliver lectures at universities, chair workshops at conferences, give addresses at conventions, or provide a keynote at a public event. That is up from 10 invitations the year before. As well, the TFPC receives an average of one request for in-depth information a day – from university researchers, foundation investigators, public health analysts in other cities, post-secondary graduates looking for career advice on professional opportunities in the food security area, and the like. That is up from an average of one information request per week during 2002. TFPC staff also field numerous requests for information, and provide referrals for members of the public with an interest in volunteering in the food security sector. Indeed, as a quick look at the size of the gallery audience at a TFPC meeting will confirm, the TFPC is gaining a reputation for providing one of the best networks in the city to get connected on food issues.

2) Research and Policy Development

During 2003, the TFPC partnered with many individuals and organizations to contribute to food security policy and research. Such partnering is second nature for the TFPC, partly because of its belief in cross-disciplinary and multi-sectoral participatory research, and partly because its limited budget requires a sharing approach.

Electronic communication has helped the TFPC keep policy as its priority. During 2003, meetings were streamlined by handling as many routine information exchanges and decisions as possible over e-mail. That process freed up at least one hour of TFPC meeting time for discussion of new research and policy themes, such as urban sprawl or techniques for teaching sustainable agriculture. These centrepieces of TFPC meetings increasingly attract leading workers in the field, as speakers, participants or observers in policy discussions.

a) Workshop on Brazilian Urban Food Programs:

During the summer of 2003, the TFPC partnered with the Ryerson Centre for Studies in Food Security, the Munk Centre at the University of Toronto, FoodShare, and the International Development Research Centre to invite senior leaders of Brazil's food security movement to hold a Toronto workshop on the inspired municipal food programs sponsored by the city of Belo Horizonte. The TFPC will publish some of the outcomes of that workshop in 2004.

b) Liaison with Urban Planners on Food Security Issues:

As a follow-up to the successful relationship developed with urban planners preparing Toronto's Official Plan in 2002, the TFPC partnered with the University of Toronto graduate department for planners, with a view to influencing the future leaders of that profession. The TFPC Project Co-ordinator acts as an external supervisor for graduate students who undertake a major research project for a food-based agency or community group. The project, completed during 2003, dealt with the planning challenges involved in organizing community-based farmers' markets in municipal parks, such as those at Riverdale Farm and Dufferin Grove Park.

As part of its ongoing dialogue with planners, the TFPC commissioned a research report in 2003 to provide Geographic Information Systems data on areas of the city where residents lack

convenient access to quality food retail outlets. This report will form the basis of a policy paper which the TFPC hopes to prepare during 2004. The policy paper will develop a menu of planning options that will help the City meet commitments in the Toronto Food Charter and Toronto Pedestrian Charter to ensure that all Toronto residents can exercise their right to convenient and walkable access to healthful food retail opportunities. To increase the TFPC's experience with this emerging food security risk facing people in several areas of Toronto, and to prepare for its 2004 report, during 2003 the TFPC Project Co-ordinator served as an advisor to a collaborative project with Stop Community Food Centre and internationally-respected Bain Consulting. The intent of this initiative is to develop a business model for quality food retail outlets in neighbourhoods where many residents live on modest incomes or pensions.

The TFPC's Community Co-chair also played a crucial role at Ontario Municipal Board hearings on Toronto's bylaw prohibiting fast food drive-throughs close to residences. The TFPC Co-chair testified for three hours on the importance of smog-free and pedestrian-friendly retail infrastructure, and on the need to protect residential areas along major roadways from proliferation of fast food strips. The Ontario Municipal Board therefore heard evidence on the importance of healthy exercise and eating habits in healthy neighbourhoods, and decided in favour of the City by-law, an important advance in the regulatory principles governing the fastfood industry.

c) Food and Nutrition Policy Briefs:

During 2003, the TFPC created several food and nutrition briefs in response to requests for input from Health Canada, which seeks out TFPC views as representative of consumer stakeholders. The TFPC partnered with the Centre for Science in the Public Interest and seven other groups to support mandatory nutrition labelling on all food packages, a campaign that won what many consider to be the most advanced package labelling legislation in the world. The TFPC supported Toronto Public Health and the Ontario Public Health Association by writing a brief opposing granting food manufacturers the right to market unhealthy foods as fortified and healthful – soda pop claiming to be calcium-fortified for strong bones, for instance. Another brief explained the need for compulsory labelling of artificial flavours and colours in foods. In addition, TPFC developed a brief responding to a Health Canada consultation on irradiation where the TFPC asked that Health Canada not expand its list of foods eligible for irradiation.

d) Dialogue Within Toronto Public Health on Local Food:

TFPC staff meet regularly with TPH staff working on nutrition and food access issues. In 2003, the TFPC presented at a staff conference on food security for dietitians. Managers of teams that deal with food security issues related to the TFPC's mandate, met with TFPC staff on a quarterly basis during 2003. For the past three years, an annual staff retreat has been hosted by the TFPC to engage on emerging or challenging food security policies. In 2003, the retreat topic was: "What would it mean if Toronto Public Health decided to promote increased purchases of locally-produced food." Several initiatives identified in the retreat will inform the TFPC work plan for 2004.

3) Food Access Committee

The TFPC's newly-formed Food Access Committee (which combines two previous subcommittees) assisted and advised the TFPC Project Co-ordinator with his duties as co-lead of the Food and Hunger Action Committee's (FAHAC) Staff Implementation Team. The TFPC Project Co-ordinator co-authored FAHAC's report for 2003, "Tending the Garden." Both FAHAC staff co-leads assisted with development of criteria to evaluate applications from community groups for some \$800,000 of Food and Hunger Action Fund grants. They also worked to secure about \$300,000 in provincial funding for community animators and community gardening equipment, as initially outlined in the 2001 FAHAC report, "The Growing Season." The animators will be retained early in 2004, and will work to ensure that community groups in all areas of the City can develop their capacity for community food security work.

The TFPC's Food Access Committee also partnered with the Food Justice Coalition (the food-based community groups and social agencies that serve as a reference group for the FAHAC) to co-host a January 19, 2004 "show and tell" for City Council members and the general public. The event featured information displays and displays of community projects made possible by Food and Hunger Action grants. The well-attended event highlighted cooperative efforts by City staff, Councillors and community members for "Making Toronto's Food Charter Work." The Community Co-chair of the TFPC worked for a month as event organizer, thanks to a grant from Access Alliance Multicultural Health Centre.

4) Food Production Committee

The Food Production Committee worked during 2003 to protect farmland in the Greater Toronto Area from sprawl. Since this high-quality land – some of the best farmland in Canada – is a cornerstone of the City's and province's food security, committee members found an opportunity to work with a City of Toronto planner and GTA planners to develop a GTA-wide plan to protect local agriculture. The GTA group held a major conference in the fall of 2003 to bring together planners and farmers. It is expected that these relations will continue to grow. TFPC committee members are contributing to this overall effort by developing policies, plans and partnerships to help immigrants with farm experience to gain access to land in or near the GTA, where they can produce healthy and culturally appropriate food for Toronto's multicultural communities.

Farmland close to Toronto cannot be protected unless farmers close to Toronto are protected; otherwise, farmers have few choices but to sell their family land to developers. The TFPC is working to protect local farmers and local farmland by increasing the production of food for the Toronto market, where such proximity enhances the freshness of the produce and where multiculturalism provides distinctive marketing opportunities that mass production farmers in California cannot take advantage of. To help bring these forces together, the TFPC strives to present itself for what it is – not so much a law-maker or law-enforcer, but an honest broker that can bring differing and even conflicting parties together to resolve problems.

In spring 2003, the TFPC Food Production Committee, assisted by two event organizers retained on a modest contract, hosted a conference at historic Montgomery's Inn in the city's west end. It was Toronto's first working conference to bring together local farmers interested in selling to the

Toronto market with Toronto chefs, retailers and processors interested in buying locally produced food. Nearly 100 interested buyers and sellers attended, and started a spirited and positive dialogue on some of the steps required to remove the barriers to mutual trade in safe, tasty, healthy, job-creating local foods. Two follow-up events will be held during 2004 to grow the relationship between Toronto organizers of community farmers' markets and local farmers prepared to service these markets. Efforts will be made to link local farmers with chefs, processors and retailers during 2005.

Members of the Food Production Committee also promote community gardening. The value of this work has been recognized by the Toronto Regional Conservation Authority, which invited the TFPC to appoint a member to the advisory committee which will oversee an exciting project to launch a six-hectare food-producing garden in the northwest area of the City.

Conclusions:

The Toronto Food Policy Council is making a major contribution to addressing the numerous food security issues in the City of Toronto. It is providing policy leadership to the Food and Hunger Action Committee, and is raising the awareness of City staff and the general public about the range of benefits that come from linking public health, community development, economic development and environmental protection approaches within a food security perspective. It is enhancing Toronto's reputation as a trend-setter in the field of healthy public policy and a leader in innovative social, environmental and public health programming. Thanks in large part to the TFPC, Toronto was the first city in North America to have a Food Charter recognized in its Official Plan. Kamloops, Prince Albert and Saskatoon also have food charters, and other cities are looking into the opportunity. Vancouver, following several meetings with TFPC staff, is fast moving toward its own food policy council based on the Toronto model.

Most important perhaps, social agencies and community groups in Toronto look to the TFPC for support, ideas and help, and see the TFPC as a crucial link to City staff and policy makers on food security issues. The TFPC has thus become an integral part of the forces that make Toronto "the city that works."

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