

Toronto Food Strategy Update

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To:	Board of Health
From:	Medical Officer of Health
Wards:	All
Reference Number:	

SUMMARY

This report provides an update on the Toronto Food Strategy, a project spearheaded by Toronto Public Health (TPH), in collaboration with City and community stakeholders. The goal of the project is to inspire action toward a health-focused food system – one that supports broad social determinants of health. The need for action is clear. Toronto faces numerous health, social and environmental problems related to food. Most notably, at least one household in ten can't afford enough food for a healthy diet, while more than one child in three is overweight or obese. The protection of GTA farmland, the viability of local farmers, and security of the local food economy are also pressing concerns. The average Ontario food producer presently earns a little more than \$8,000 annually from farming operations. It's increasingly recognized that the food system's multiple emissions account for as much as a third of greenhouse gas emissions that are causing climate change.

Torontonians are ready for a fresh take on food and for opportunities to participate in food activities. As well, the city and the surrounding area have numerous advantages, including knowledgeable and engaged residents, abundant natural assets, economic strength, and dynamic leadership. These advantages position the city well to take the next steps in championing a healthy and sustainable food system. The attached consultation report, "Food Connections: Toward a Healthy and Sustainable Food System for Toronto", proposes the following six directions for food system renewal:

- Grow food-friendly neighbourhoods;
- Make food a centerpiece of the new green economy;
- Eliminate hunger;
- Empower residents with food skills and information;
- Connect city and countryside through food; and,
- Embed food system thinking in City government.

To take these next steps, new approaches to dealing with food issues need to be identified. There is a contradiction between Toronto enjoying so many exceptional food-related advantages, while also facing a wide range of food-related problems. This contradiction suggests that comprehensive strategic approaches are required, not just individual actions. The Toronto Food Strategy is intended to inspire actions to help move toward a more healthy and sustainable food system, while facilitating the achievement of existing City objectives. These approaches will benefit from broad-based partnerships to leverage resources from multiple sources.

Following the Board of Health's endorsement of a food strategy process in June 2008, the Medical Officer of Health convened a Food Strategy Steering Group, made up of community food experts and senior City staff, to guide the development of a draft Toronto Food Strategy (attached as Appendix One). The consultation report articulates a bold but practical vision for Toronto, identifying both short-term measures and long-term objectives.

TPH, in collaboration with members of the Steering Group, the Toronto Food Policy Council and community partners, will conduct a broad consultation and engagement process early in 2010. Discussions will be held among a broad range of people and organizations, including farmers, community agencies, gardeners, newcomers, youth, TPH and other City staff, the private sector and other orders of government. The feedback from the process will be incorporated into a revised Toronto Food Strategy report containing more detailed action steps and mechanisms to move towards a health-focused food system for Toronto. The report will be submitted to City Council by summer 2010.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Board of Health endorse the vision of a health-focused food system for Toronto and the six proposed directions described in the attached report, as a basis for broad community stakeholder consultation and engagement.

Financial Impact

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. Any new budget implications emerging from the development of the food strategy will be considered through the 2010/11 Operating Budget process.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting of June 16, 2008, the Board of Health received a report from the Medical Officer of Health entitled “Proposal for Development of a Toronto Food Strategy”. The Board endorsed the development of a food strategy, and:

- requested the Medical Officer of Health to convene a Toronto Food Strategy Steering Group to develop a draft strategy for broad stakeholder consultation and engagement; and,
- requested that the Medical Officer of Health report to the Board of Health on the status of the Toronto Food Strategy.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

The goal of the Toronto Food Strategy is to promote and implement a new vision that connects food and health with the City’s priority environmental, economic and social objectives.

The need for improvements to the food system¹ is clear. Toronto, along with the rest of the industrialized world, faces numerous health, social and environmental problems related to food. At least one Toronto household in ten can’t afford enough food for a healthy diet (Ontario Nutrition and Cancer Prevention Survey, 2004). The rate is much higher among households of recent immigrants and lone parents. There is undeniable research linking hunger and poverty to poor health outcomes and lower life expectancy (Toronto Public Health, 2008). Side by side with hunger, approximately one in three Toronto children (age 2-11) is either overweight or obese (Canadian Community Health Survey, 2004). The average Ontario food producer presently earns a little more than \$8,000 annually from farming operations (Statistics Canada, 2006). It’s increasingly recognized that the food system accounts for as much as a third of greenhouse gas emissions that are causing climate change (Tukker et al., 2006).

The City of Toronto and community organizations have a long history of implementing creative food system solutions. In 1991, Toronto became one of the first cities to sponsor a food policy council. The Toronto Food Policy Council’s (TFPC) research, advocacy and publications are recognized internationally, and Toronto’s leadership role in municipal food policy is widely acknowledged. The Food and Hunger Action Committee was formed in 1999 to study food security in Toronto and recommend ways to reduce hunger, improve the nutritional health of Torontonians, and support food-based initiatives that benefit Toronto's economy, environment and quality of life. In 2001, City Council adopted the Toronto Food Charter, which highlights the City’s commitment to food security and “to champion the right of all residents to adequate amounts of safe, nutritious, culturally-acceptable food without the need to resort to emergency food providers”.

¹ The term “food system” refers to the complex set of activities and relationships connected to every aspect of the food cycle, including production, processing, distribution, retail, preparation, consumption and disposal.

Cities don't have all of the necessary powers or resources to remake a food system. But they are well situated to build partnerships with residents, neighbours, businesses and other levels of government. This is especially important for Toronto, which is home to no less than 140 community agencies and non-governmental organizations working on food issues.

Moreover, cities have more formal influence over how food systems operate than many suppose. Toronto, for example, serves food in shelters, seniors' homes, and childcare centres, carries out food safety inspections, promotes healthy eating, offers breastfeeding support, runs nutrition education programs, funds school nutrition programs, regulates food sales, provides business licenses for food vendors, supports community gardens and provides allotment garden spaces, offers gardening opportunities on Toronto Community Housing sites, supports incubators to foster food entrepreneurs, applies zoning rules, and coordinates food festivals and events, including the largest agricultural festival in the world. The City spends millions more on food in less obvious ways when you consider garbage collection (Toronto picks up the tab for much of the 20-40% of the food that's wasted in the system), composting, the City's share of social assistance payments, and the millions spent each year to maintain Toronto's roads (it is commonly accepted that 20% of all vehicle trips are for food). The City could have even more influence if it started to identify, name and intentionally leverage what government already does in support of a healthy and sustainable food system.

COMMENTS

Torontonians are ready for strategic City leadership on food and new ways to unlock food's potential to help build a great and healthy city to live in. People increasingly understand that food connects health, the environment, the economy and community. A host of citizen-led agencies, non-governmental organizations, university institutes and publications are earning Toronto a reputation as a world leader in food thinking and action. The food sector is becoming as much a signature of Toronto's creative edge as movies, live theatre, music, comedy, publishing, biomedical research and higher education. Toronto shoppers spend about \$7 billion per year (Statistics Canada, 2003) on food and many are using their purchasing power to express their values, especially through local, fair trade, organic and sustainable choices.

Toronto has an opportunity to deal creatively with what are increasingly being called "food system issues". This refers to the fact that seemingly separate, and even contradictory problems, such as obesity and hunger, exist side by side in Toronto. When Toronto enjoys so many exceptional food-related advantages, while also facing a wide range of health, social, economic and environmental problems, that contradiction suggests that new approaches are needed. The Toronto Food Strategy project is intended to inspire action toward developing such approaches.

A food strategy is particularly timely in this period of history when Toronto and other governments face constrained public resources and need to find ways to organize and deliver their services more effectively. Many leading cities around the world are realizing the untapped value of food in meeting a broad range of urban objectives. New York, London, San Francisco, Chicago, Portland and Belo Horizonte, Brazil are among the cities moving in directions similar to Toronto in terms of comprehensive food initiatives.

Development of the Food Strategy Consultation Report

Following the adoption of the June 16, 2008 report by the Board of Health, the Medical Officer of Health convened a Food Strategy Steering Group (a list of members is provided in the attached report). The Group is made up of 21 members, including community food experts and senior City staff. Members agreed to participate as individuals, rather than as representatives of any particular organization or interest group. The Steering Group's mandate was to guide the development of a consultation report which articulates a bold but practical vision for Toronto, identifying both long-term objectives and short-term measures to move towards the vision. Following a year of formal bimonthly meetings, TPH worked with members of the Steering Group to develop the report, "Food Connections: Toward a Healthy and Sustainable Food System for Toronto", which will be the basis of a broad consultation and engagement process this spring.

Food Connections: Toward a Healthy and Sustainable Food System for Toronto

The report proposes six directions toward a healthier, more sustainable food system for Toronto:

- Grow food-friendly neighbourhoods;
- Make food a centerpiece of the new green economy;
- Eliminate hunger;
- Empower residents with food skills and information;
- Connect city and countryside through food; and,
- Embed food system thinking in City government.

In addition to the report, the Food Strategy project has begun the process of reaching out to a wide range of people and organizations in the community. It has also been working with City staff to highlight ways that food can be a strategic tool to build a healthy, prosperous, dynamic and inclusive city. TPH has developed communication tools to engage people in discussions about the future of our food, and has created a website to promote food issues and opportunities, share knowledge and document success stories across Toronto.

In many ways, Toronto has already embraced the idea of using food to help meet other city objectives. For example, staff from Shelter, Support and Housing collaborated with Public Health to make healthier and more culturally appropriate meals available. Toronto Community Housing uses gardens as a pillar of their tenant engagement and green

programs. Economic Development and Culture regularly works with members of the Toronto Food Policy Council, including co-sponsoring a 2009 conference on infrastructure for a local food economy. The Parks and Environment Committee directed staff, led by the Interdivisional Workgroup on Urban Agriculture, to prepare an inventory of City-owned land that could be used for urban agriculture. The Toronto Community Food Animators, funded through the City's Community Partnership and Investment Program, have helped residents in underserved neighbourhoods organize farmers' markets, community kitchens and community gardens.

Consultation and Engagement Process

TPH, in collaboration with members of the Steering Group, Toronto Food Policy Council and community partners, will conduct a broad consultation and engagement process in early 2010. In addition to feedback on the vision and directions described in the consultation report, the process also aims to:

- identify what residents believe are the most pressing food issues for them;
- learn about community-based initiatives and share success stories;
- identify specific barriers and opportunities related to municipal food levers;
- promote new ways of thinking and acting on food issues;
- initiate ongoing networks within local government across the city to facilitate food system improvements; and,
- identify practical actions toward a healthy, sustainable food system.

Discussions will be held among a broad range of people and organizations, including residents, farmers, youth, seniors, newcomers, gardeners, educators, environmentalists, academics, community agencies, the private sector, City of Toronto staff, as well as agencies, boards and commissions, and other orders of government. The discussions will take place in a variety of ways, including public meetings and online.

The feedback from the process will be incorporated into a revised Food Strategy which will be submitted to City Council by summer 2010. The Food Strategy Steering Group will continue to provide direction for the development of the project.

CONCLUSIONS

The need for food system renewal is clear. Toronto faces a range of health, social and environmental problems related to food. Torontonians are ready for a fresh take on food and the city has numerous advantages that position us to take the next steps in championing a healthy and sustainable food system. Comprehensive strategic approaches are needed to address problems and seize overlooked opportunities. Embracing such a strategy will help Toronto meet its existing goals more effectively. The Toronto Food Strategy project hopes to inspire discussions and actions toward this end. The attached consultation report articulates a bold but practical vision, identifying both long-term objectives and short-term measures. It will be the basis for a broad consultation and engagement process in early 2010. The feedback from the process will be incorporated

into a revised Food Strategy report which will be submitted to City Council by summer 2010.

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SIGNATURE

Dr. David McKeown
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ATTACHMENT

Attachment 1: Food Connections: Toward a Healthy and Sustainable Food System for Toronto. A Consultation report

REFERENCES

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