

Toronto Food Strategy: Cultivating Food Connections

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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 project, including the results of stakeholder consultation and engagement, and the actions proposed in the attached “Cultivating Food Connections: Toward a Healthy and Sustainable Food System for Toronto” report. Toronto Public Health (TPH) is spearheading the project to build a vision and inspire action toward a health-focused food system for the whole city.

The imperative for action to improve the food system is clear. Toronto faces a range of health, social and environmental problems related to food. Torontonians told us they are ready for a fresh take on food and want governments to champion creative and effective food solutions. Through a broad and inclusive consultation and engagement process, input was received from residents, community organizations, business, agriculture, City staff and other levels of government. The process employed facilitated discussions, workshops, an online discussion forum, digital storytelling and other innovative strategies to capture the voices of communities often underrepresented in consultations.

Some key themes emerged from the consultation process, especially the lack of access to quality food stores, the specific needs of newcomers adjusting to a new food system, and concerns about the lack of basic food skills and the unhealthy diets of children and youth. At the same time, many groups expressed interest in acting on community-based food solutions, including growing and cooking food (for consumption and sale) in their communities, purchasing food from local farmers, starting small food businesses and getting better access to neighbourhood food stores that sell fresh food.

The “Cultivating Food Connections” report urges Toronto to take the next steps to champion a healthy and sustainable food system. In doing so, the city stands to reap multiple benefits – healthier residents, more vibrant and livable neighbourhoods, stronger

and more diverse economic development, better environmental protection, and a growing reputation as a leader in food system renewal.

The report recommends that the City Manager request all City Divisions, Agencies, Board and Commissions, to identify and implement opportunities to embed food system initiatives in City policies and programs. It also provides numerous examples of actions that the City of Toronto can take, in active partnership with residents, community organizations and businesses, categorized according to the following six areas:

- Support food friendly neighbourhoods
- Make food a centerpiece of Toronto's new green economy
- Eliminate hunger in Toronto
- Connect city and countryside through food
- Empower residents with food skills and information
- Urge federal and provincial governments to establish health-focused food policies

The actions are weighted toward those which can leverage existing resources and optimize the use of the City's already-paid-for assets.

The Toronto Food Strategy project is an ongoing process. Toronto Public Health will initially coordinate the Food Strategy, including seeking new opportunities to leverage funding and provide support to City staff and the community to implement the actions identified in this report. The Medical Officer of Health will report periodically on progress to the Board of Health and will report to City Council in early 2011.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. the City Manager be requested to direct all City Divisions, and request Agencies, Boards and Commissions to identify and implement initiatives that support a healthy and sustainable food system, including those identified in the attached report, "Cultivating Food Connections: Toward a Healthy and Sustainable Food System for Toronto";
2. immediate food strategy initiatives focus on leveraging existing resources and that any initiatives requiring new resources be dealt with through the 2011 City budget process;
3. the Medical Officer of Health report to the Board of Health and City Council in early 2011, including progress to date, proposed next steps and a recommended governance model;
4. this report be forwarded for information to the June 14, 2010 Executive Committee meeting; and
5. this report be forwarded to key City Divisions as well as to Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Health Canada, Industry Canada, Environment Canada, Canadian

Food Inspection Agency, the Public Health Agency of Canada; the provincial Ministries of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Children and Youth Services, Community and Social Services, Environment, Health and Long-Term Care, Health Promotion; the Ontario Public Health Association, the Canadian Public Health Association, Association of Local Public Health Agencies, the Ontario Agency of Health Protection and Promotion; the Dietitians of Canada, the United Way of Greater Toronto, Sustain Ontario, the Toronto Food Policy Council, Food Secure Canada Food, Consumer Products of Canada, Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors, Toronto Board of Trade, Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association; and the Directors of the Toronto school boards.

Financial Impact

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. Costs for any food initiatives implemented in the short term will be covered through existing divisional budgets. Any initiatives requiring new resources will be considered through the 2011 City 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 of Health 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.

At its meeting of February 16, 2010, the Board of Health received a report from the Medical Officer of Health entitled “Toronto Food Strategy Update” with an attached consultation report, “Food Connections: Toward a Healthy and Sustainable Food System for Toronto”. The Board endorsed the vision of a health-focused food system for Toronto and the six proposed directions described in the Food Connections report as a basis for broad community stakeholder consultation and engagement. The Board also requested the Medical Officer of Health to report back to the May 3, 2010, Board of Health meeting and the May 17, 2010, Executive Committee meeting on the results of the consultation and engagement process and a proposed Food Strategy for Toronto. Due to the significant amount of feedback received in the process, the Medical Officer of Health proposed that the report be submitted to the Board for its June 1, 2010 meeting.

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 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. Toronto Public Health's 2007 "State of Toronto's Food" report warned of intensifying pressures from a range of food-related problems. At least one Toronto household in ten can not 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 is 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 create 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".

Cities do not have all of the necessary powers or resources to remake a health-focused 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.

However, cities have more formal influence over how food systems operate than many suppose. Toronto serves food in shelters, seniors' homes, recreation centres and childcare centres, carries out food safety inspections, promotes healthy eating, offers breastfeeding support, funds school nutrition programs, provides business licenses for food sales, supports community gardens and provides allotment garden spaces, supports incubators to foster food entrepreneurs, applies zoning rules, and coordinates food festivals and events, including the largest agricultural festival in the world (Royal Agricultural Winter Fair). The City spends millions more on food in less obvious ways when taking into account garbage collection and composting (Toronto picks up the tab

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.

for much of the 20-40 percent of the food that's wasted in the system) and a portion of the millions spent each year to maintain Toronto's roads (it is commonly accepted that 20 percent 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

This section describes the development of the Food Strategy to date, including the "Cultivating Food Connections" report.

Toronto Food Strategy Steering Group

Following the Board of Health's endorsement of a food strategy process in June 2008, the Medical Officer of Health convened a 21 member Food Strategy Steering Group, made up of community food experts and senior City staff. 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 initiatives and actions to move towards the vision.

The Consultation and Engagement Process

In early 2010, staff conducted a Food Strategy consultation and engagement process. The consultation report, "Food Connections: Toward a Healthy and Sustainable Food System for Toronto", formed the basis for discussions with residents, community organizations, business, agriculture, City staff and other levels of government. A more detailed summary of the process and feedback is provided in the "What We Heard" report, available on the Food Strategy website www.toronto.ca/foodconnections.

In total, staff met with, and heard from, more than 60 community organizations across the city. The TFPC also organized discussions on key themes, including urban agriculture, small green business, poverty, hunger, the environment, and coordinated specific sessions for youth, academics and chefs/food artisans. The issues raised in these consultations helped inform the directions proposed by the Steering Group and generally reinforced the approaches in the consultation report.

To seek out populations who are often underrepresented in consultations, TPH partnered with community food organizations, newcomer organizations and resident/tenant groups to support 25 workshops among diverse communities, such as people living with AIDS, women's rights groups, disabled, newcomer, Aboriginal and seniors. A clear language consultation guide was developed to help community facilitators lead discussions to identify food issues specific to their communities, as well as proposed strategies for action. Community groups were encouraged to provide feedback in any appropriate form – in writing, through images or video.

To further reflect community voices, TPH collaborated with the United Way of Greater Toronto and the Centre for Digital Storytelling to develop a number of short videos narrated by residents, entitled "Toronto Food Stories". Through slide shows with voice

over, the videos document a number of innovative food projects across the city. The digital storytelling enabled diverse communities to “see themselves” in the broader Food Strategy efforts, and to inspire people across Toronto to pursue community-based solutions.

Some key themes emerged from the consultation process, especially the affordability of healthy food, lack of access to quality food stores, the specific needs of newcomers adjusting to a new food system, a range of food safety and quality issues, concern about the lack of basic food skills and the unhealthy diets of children and youth, and the poor quality of food available through food banks. At the same time, many groups expressed interest in acting on community-based food solutions, including growing and cooking food (for consumption and sale) in communities, purchasing food from local farmers, starting small food businesses and improving access to neighbourhood food stores that sell fresh food. Many residents expressed frustration with the lack of clear information and resources to create solutions in their own community. Most expect governments to play a role in facilitating solutions.

TPH staff also initiated a number of meetings with Divisions across the City, including City Planning, Economic Development & Culture, Parks, Forestry & Recreation, Social Development, Finance & Administration, Toronto Employment & Social Services, Toronto Environment Office, Toronto Office of Partnerships, as well as with interdivisional committees and the City Manager’s Office. There were also ongoing discussions with Toronto Public Health staff and Local Health Committees. The intent of these City-focused sessions was to share the food strategy approach and to begin to identify opportunities to embed food initiatives into the work of the City. This resulted in a number of new collaborative initiatives, including the development of ward-level maps that show the distribution of food retail, food banks, community gardens and other neighbourhood food assets. Other collaborations that came out of the engagement with City staff are identified in the “Cultivating Food Connections” report. Discussions with staff revealed many links between food system issues and their ongoing work. Many felt that some barriers to progress were beyond their control and welcomed initiatives that linked their efforts to the work of other City divisions and community initiatives.

The Food Strategy project has also embraced other communications mechanisms including a City website www.toronto.ca/foodconnections which allows visitors to post comments, explore food system maps, link to related initiatives and watch digital stories about food innovation in Toronto.

“Cultivating Food Connections” Report

The attached report is the next step in the Toronto Food Strategy project, reflecting the multitude of conversations with City and community partners, as well as many creative initiatives that have been flourishing all across the city for some time.

The report urges Toronto to take the next steps to champion a healthy and sustainable food system. In doing so, the city stands to reap multiple benefits – healthier residents, more vibrant and livable neighbourhoods, stronger and more diverse economic

development, better environmental protection, and a growing reputation as a leader in food system renewal. To achieve this, it's essential to make food system innovation an intentional part of City programs and initiatives. In other words, local government needs to embed food system initiatives, as well as food system thinking, into existing work and priorities. Embedding food system initiatives is not about making food a new priority that competes with other priorities for resources and attention. It is about using food activities to enhance efforts to meet Toronto's ongoing goals. To that end, "Cultivating Food Connections" recommends that the City Manager request all City Divisions, Agencies, Board and Commissions, to identify and implement opportunities to embed food system initiatives in City policies and programs.

The report provides numerous examples of actions that local government can take, in active partnership with residents, community organizations and businesses. The actions are weighted toward those which can leverage existing resources and optimize the use of the City's already-paid-for assets. The report categorizes actions under the following six areas:

- Support food friendly neighbourhoods
- Make food a centerpiece of Toronto's new green economy
- Eliminate hunger in Toronto
- Connect city and countryside through food
- Empower residents with food skills and information
- Urge federal and provincial governments to establish health-focused food policies

Implementation Steps

The Toronto Food Strategy project is an ongoing process. Toronto Public Health staff will initially coordinate the Food Strategy, including seeking new opportunities to leverage existing funding and provide support to City staff and the community to implement the actions in the attached report. Among other supports, TPH will develop tools that will assist City staff and communities to compile inventories of existing assets and identify gaps and opportunities. Part of the ongoing work will be to develop an evaluation framework and indicators to measure the effectiveness of the Food Strategy. The Medical Officer of Health will report to the Board of Health and City Council at the beginning of its new term in early 2011, and will report periodically on progress to the Board of Health thereafter.

CONCLUSIONS

The imperative for action to improve the food system is clear. Toronto faces a range of health, social and environmental problems related to food. Torontonians told us they are ready for a fresh take on food and want governments to champion creative and effective food solutions. This means thinking in food system ways - seeing the food connections in the City's work and implementing food activities that will help Toronto meet its existing objectives, while also building a healthier Toronto. Toronto's numerous advantages make us well poised to take the next steps in championing a healthy and sustainable food system for all.

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SIGNATURE

Dr. David McKeown
Medical Officer of Health

ATTACHMENT

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

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